

Japan's Crush Gals Croon Sweet Songs Before Crushing Foes

Women Pro Wrestlers Start Matches With Decorum, But It Doesn't Last Long

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TOKYO—Fans surge forward as the two women wrestlers shove their way into Korakuen Stadium.

The women spring onto the mat and glare at the spectators as the crowd gives an ear-splitting cheer. Spotlights focus on the ring as other lights dim. The women grab microphones. A hush falls.

Then, the wrestlers begin . . . to sing. "Every girl has someone hidden in her heart," they croon, "someone she wants to tell, 'I love you.'" The two women, called the Crush Gals, are Japan's most popular female wrestling team.

So begins another Sunday afternoon of Japanese women's professional wrestling, of sweet-looking young contestants donning cocktail dresses and singing to their fans before pulling each other's hair.

A Golden Age

In most countries, women's wrestling is a sleazy, third-rate sport in which Amazons pound each other to amuse leering, jeering mobs. But in Japan, as the television director for this match says, "This is the golden age of women's pro wrestling." A golden age, indeed, when a Sunday match draws a 12% TV-viewer rating, female champions are sought out by talk-show hosts and advertising executives, and 3,000 schoolgirls apply for the 10 or so wrestling openings each year.

This match, like most others here, is an excuse for a carnival. Fans shower the ring with paper streamers. Party crackers pop, balloons glide through the air, confetti rains down. Members of Crush Gals fan clubs, sporting pompons and satin uniforms, hang banners from balconies.

"The Japanese beauty, she's No. 1," the Crush Gals sing.

Besides singing, they do wrestle, in well-choreographed bouts of kicks, karate chops and chicken-wing arm locks. But that comes later. Just hearing them sing sends the fans into ecstasy. "They're just so good," says Tomoko Takahashi, a 17-year-old. "I'm crazy about them."

A Special Audience

No bloodthirsty macho types are here. Crammed into the stadium is a chattering mob of adolescent girls wearing such apparel as powder-blue skirts and pink T-shirts with a comic-animal pattern. At an age when many Japanese girls dream of becoming pop singers, these teen-agers want to be wrestlers. "They're so strong," Miss Takahashi says with a sigh.

And attractive. "They're such nice girls," gushes 42-year-old Ginko Takasaki, here with her husband and 12-year-old daughter. "They're so pretty, so charming, just like a picture."

The Crush Gals deliver their finale, "The Japanese beauty, the shy beauty . . ." and disappear to change into leotards and wrestling boots. Moments later, one of them, 22-year-old "Lioness" Asuka, makes a triumphant reentry with three petite colleagues. They look about as menacing as cheerleaders.

But then, a ruckus in an aisle sends a shriek through the stands. Plowing toward the ring, scattering fans, comes a barrel-shaped wrestler in studded-leather jacket and black leather police cap.

She is "Dump" Matsumoto, the 220-pound wrestler Japan loves to hate. She has a human skull painted on her cheek, uses bruise-purple makeup and dyes her hair orange. Carrying a big stick, Dump (for Dump Truck) swaggers to the ring, accompanied by three unsavory sidekicks: "Bull" (for Bulldozer) Nakano, whose head is half-shaved; "Condor" Saito, who sports chains and handcuffs, and Lei Lani Kai, an ill-humored Hawaiian who wields

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nunchak sticks (two martial-arts sticks linked by a chain).

The powers of good and evil battle it out here, and there is no question who is which. As the nasties, called the Super Bads, tear off their leather jackets and jump growling to the ring, the crowd chants: "Go home, go home."

The hostility doesn't seem to bother Dump—but, in fact, it does. Despite her thuggish act, the real Kaoru Mutsumoto is a soft-spoken, baby-faced 24-year-old with a shy smile who disguises herself when in town because she says that if she doesn't, she frightens passers-by. "It's not easy being the bad guy," Dump laments.

The Scene Backstage

Her cronies are no boors, either. In a steamy locker hall backstage, they shuffle by, smile demurely and apologize for disrupting a pre-match interview. A half-dozen wrestlers, good and evil, titter happily. An hour later, they will be bitter enemies, at least as far as the public can tell. "I have to make the fans afraid of me," Dump says. "And they really hate me."

And how. Fear-stricken girls sob into pink hankies and grasp their girlfriends' hands as the Super Bads thwack, trample and clobber their idols. The rules allow only one wrestler at a time from each team to fight until one is pinned. But teammates jump into the fray for quick swipes at their foes, and the match degenerates into a classic wrestling free-for-all.

Pandemonium erupts as Dump's snarling crew attacks the nice girls with chains and kerosene cans. "I just wish they wouldn't use weapons," a 15-year-old fan says. "I wish they'd just fight fair." Nonetheless, good triumphs over evil—the bad girls lose.

To the more cynical spectator, the bout is mostly slapstick. A face bobs up streaked with blood that's much too red, and punches appear to stop short of their mark. The wrestlers stage miraculous recoveries from seemingly mortal wounds.

"Of course they're not faking it," says 17-year-old Yuko Minomura, incredulous at the very idea. "This is a serious fight."

Wrestling is very serious for thousands of 15- to 18-year-olds who apply each year for a spot with the All Japan Women's Pro Wrestling Promotion, which manages the wrestlers. Desperate pleas arrive from the rejected. "You'll go broke if you don't take me," writes one. "Please let me in," begs another. "This is my only fate in life."

Why such female mania over a blood-and-guts sport? The wrestlers are "doing something most girls can't do," 17-year-old Hiromi Tonobe says. "Even though they're girls, they're strong. . . . They're more than just girls." Adds thirteen-year-old Maki Ohta, "When the ones I like get beaten up, I hate it a whole bunch. But when I yell, 'Stop it,' then it's good for relieving my stress."

Stress on the Wrestlers

The wrestlers' lives aren't all spotlights and confetti. They live with three noes: no drinking, no smoking and no men. "Those things are a curse to wrestlers," says Takashi Matsunaga, the 50-year-old president of the wrestling promotion. "It ruins their wrestling every time."

Like any Japanese boss, Mr. Matsunaga demands loyalty and sacrifice. He and nine other judges choose girls for their muscle, stamina and fighting spirit. Recruits face a grueling dawn-to-dusk training regimen of weight lifting, judo and karate. They live in cramped dormitories, cook their own meals and subsist on an 80,000-yen (about \$520) monthly allowance. Many drop out. The Crush Gals, however, raked in 30 million yen apiece (\$193,000) last year, thanks to advertising endorsements, record albums and magazine articles.

Last March, four of the wrestlers went to Madison Square Garden and found America's finest to be pushovers. "They're too old and don't have the stamina," says 21-year-old Chigusa Nagayo, the other Crush Gal. No one sang, either.