

Saturday 26th of September 2009

Sumo do, Sumo don't

If I am honest, years of intermittent martial-arts classes have not honed my body into a living weapon, and I've always been much more of a danger to myself than to other people.

Until last week I had no sporting achievements to speak of, beyond "running" two half-marathons - during both of which I was repeatedly overtaken by power walkers - and developing a unique style of shadow-boxing so fearsome that I punched myself in the face. Add to that the ignominy of the black eye I received from a young female publicist at this year's Sydney Writers' Festival, and it seemed unlikely that, aged 45, I would ever win a national fight-sports title.

It was, therefore, with great wonder and a degree of humility that I learned I had become the Australian sumo wrestling masters champion.

To some, sumo is a comic spectacle in which two fat blokes in nappies try to push each other out of the ring, like a pair of overfed babies battling over a biscuit. Many people do not understand the extraordinary rigour of sumo training, the mental as well as physical discipline that the sport demands, and the immense physiological hardships involved in gaining and maintaining the perfect sumo physique.

Among the Australian masses whose ignorance of the finer points of sumo is boundless, I have to number myself. Before I won my title, I had never attended a sumo training session, nor even considered it. And I didn't actually make it to the championships, either. For that matter, I didn't enter. This,

I hope, explains something of my surprise on learning of my glorious victory.

I was staying at a five-star resort in Queensland at the time the titles were held in Sydney. Local sumo identity John Traill informed me a couple of days before the event - for reasons best (and, perhaps, only) known to himself - he had entered my name in the masters division and had a bottle of specially branded "sumo" sake waiting for me. I ignored the information and went back to bed.

Less than a week later, John passed on the amazing news that all the effort I hadn't put into learning sumo had finally paid off. Nobody else had even entered to compete in my division, so the fact that I was a no-show had no effect on the final result - a shoo-in for the journalist from Good Weekend.

My mate Clive, who was planning to fight in the Brazilian ju-jitsu (BJJ) masters division the next weekend, was shamelessly jealous, and asked whether I would be prepared to put my nappy on the line against some of the senior BJJ black belts.

"A true champion always defends his title," said Clive. This was no help to me, as it didn't explain what a false champion might do.

"Pull a sickie," said Clive.

Meanwhile, John Traill was trying to persuade me to acquire a sumo name. Most wrestlers do this before they win a national title, but my sumo career has always been marked by bold, unconventional moves. John's sumo name is Johnfuji, after the great Chiyonofuji (aka "The Wolf") who weighed 127 kilograms but, according to John, could nonetheless run 100 metres in 11 seconds. John confesses he isn't worthy of the name but "it helps to identify junk mail".

I still felt I might be the victim of a cruel hoax, so I asked John for documentary proof of my status. He promptly sent me an official certificate, signed by Australian Sumo

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Federation president Katrina Watts, and Clive also helpfully emailed me a picture of what I might look like in the ring.

It seems I am entitled to a medal, but I'll have to pay for it myself. "I would spot you," said John, "but some cellulite monsters from Queensland just cleared out the sumo account for their own purposes. They held sausage-sizzle fundraisers, then spent all the money, ate all the sausages and left us with their costs."

Saturday 19th of September 2009

Cause for complaint

A woman came up to me in Byron Bay and said she had written to Good Weekend to complain about me. She had asked that I make an apology to the Chinese people. I thought she was joking, so I gave her a scripted sort of laugh. No, she said, I should apologise, because she had enjoyed her holiday in China in the 1970s (whereas I'd had a miserable time there in the 1980s).

"Well, er, thanks," I said. "It's always nice to meet a critic" (although it isn't).

It may surprise readers to learn that I get complaints and make mistakes. Most of my errors - and they are many - never reach the printing press, due to the devoted work of a team of expert sub-editors who spend a large part of every day correcting the misspelled names, misremembered "facts" and misheard quotes that pebbledash my copy like acne on the face of a particularly unattractive teenager. (Boss, I didn't write that! The subbies put it in themselves! Make them take it out! Make them take it out! - M.D.)

If I do get something wrong that makes it into print, I can be secure in the knowledge that somebody will point it out to my editor and raise me even further in her esteem, thus accelerating the process that has seen this column slide from near the front of the mag to the very back page. Now there's nowhere to go but out the door*.

Often, people write in to object to something I have said. I used to get a lot of letters calling me an "IDIOT!!". This hurts less when it comes from somebody who employs random capitalisation and double exclamation marks than it might if the writer was, for instance, Stephen Hawking.

One of my favourite complaints came from someone whose guesthouse I had visited for a 52 Weekends Away edition, who said the place was much nicer than I'd described and suggested we use a different reviewer next time we called. The person he had in mind was ... himself, since he knew the place better than anyone and was therefore the best-qualified judge.

I once wrote a piece that inadvertently offended an ethnic group I won't name here because I'm scared of them. Some of the men inferred from my story that I thought they were gay. They wrote in to assure me they weren't, and warn that if I ever again stepped inside their club I would leave "bleeding from the arse". In other words, they were prepared to rape me to prove they were straight.

Last week, I got an email accusing me of being homophobic and exclusionary (because I said "blokes" had sex with women) and of engaging in a "low level of crude journalism" (okay, so some complaints do have a smidgin of substance).

Most readers who protest about matters of taste are careful to point out that they're as broadminded as the next person, but the journalist has simply gone too far. When I was a magazine editor, I received mail from a perfectly ordinary Queenslander who had been so scandalised by what he had read (a woman talking about sex with men**) that he had taken the magazine outside, tied it to a tree and blasted it to pieces with his shotgun.

I occasionally get the impression that the sub-editors would like to do that to my stories, but luckily they are far too sophisticated, intelligent, well-mannered and boundlessly sexually attractive to do any such thing. (Boss, I didn't write that! The

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subbies put it in themselves! Make them take it out! Make them take it out! - M.D.)

*This is a joke. Actually, the back page of a magazine is pole position for a column, due to the large number of people who apparently read back to front, perhaps because they believe Good Weekend is written in Hebrew or Japanese.

**Which is not to imply that women have to have sex with men, or that they enjoy it.

Saturday 12th of September 2009

The wronged trousers

In Byron Bay for the writers' festival, I combed the town looking for a dry cleaner to clean the pants I imagined I would wear for Geoffrey Robertson QC's opening speech. After about an hour of asking around, I discovered there is no longer a dry cleaner in Byron Bay. The nearest, I was told, is in the town of Ballina, about 35 minutes' drive away.

Ballina is known for two things: (1) it has the immediate area's only remaining dry cleaner; and (2) it is home to the Big Prawn.

The Big Prawn was built by local prawn sympathisers in 1990, at a cost of \$500,000, and stands as a chilling warning of what Australia would look like if we ever allowed prawns to become sufficiently large to take over the world and erect statues of their leaders on the highway.

It squats in all its prawny glory on top of a gift shop and a fish caff beside an ordinary country servo (appropriately, since invading giant prawns would have to wrest control of our roads and fuel supply before marching into our cities and tossing us all on the barbie).

In days gone by, the Big Prawn offered intrepid travellers the unique opportunity to get inside the brain of a prawn. They could climb into its fibreglass head and look out through its bulging eyes at a world full of tiny land-dwelling beings who were constantly trying to put one over each other (known as "coming the raw human" in prawn talk).

Sadly, this invaluable exercise in cross-species understanding is no longer available to curious motorists and people who get lost looking for the bathroom in the Trident Fish Bar below. A sign on the stairs blames the vandalism of "low-life idiots" for the closure of the prawn's mind.

As if this wasn't enough, I read in the local paper that the Big Prawn itself is scheduled to meet the same fate as Byron Bay's dry cleaner: to be demolished by developers in the name of progress.

I met the writers' festival director, Jeni, at the Rails pub in Byron. I was still carrying my trousers, in the forlorn hope that somebody might help me. I told Jeni I was deaf in one ear. Jeni said the festival manager was also deaf in one ear, because he had been hit around the head with a fish.

"Ha-ha," I said. "I heard that as 'fish' when you obviously said 'fist'."

No, she insisted, he had been assaulted with an actual fish. I heard several versions of this story, and the fish became gradually larger, until it was almost the size of the Big Prawn and it was a miracle the festival manager escaped with his life.

At the bar in the Rails, I asked for the locally brewed "all-natural" Stone & Wood beer. "Do you want to try it first?" asked the barman.

I shook my head. I'd had beer before, and I know what it tastes like.

Halfway through the pour, my confidence evaporated.

"Do some people not like it?" I asked.

"They leave half of it in the glass and just walk away," he said.

The next night, I caught the festival bus to the site of Geoffrey Robertson's opening address in Bangalow, where I realised I was as likely to spend an evening listening to a giant of international jurisprudence as I was talking to a giant prawn, so I went to the

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pub instead.

Once again I ordered a Stone & Wood. The barman told me he usually asked people to try before they buy.

"When we first put it on, there were full schooners left all over the bar," he said.

This is very sad indeed. Stone & Wood is the best beer I have tasted all year, and drinking it is the most fun you can have in a pair of hand-washed, cold-pressed pants.