

Book Review

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Book Title: Gaijin Yokozuna: A Biography of Chad Rowan

Author: Mark Panek

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Athlete biographies are seldom expected to leave the reader with a greater sense of culture, history and complex tradition. Where one would anticipate reading about the adrenaline rush of two conditioned athletes colliding with the force of an auto collision, Mark Panek delivers a thoughtful and informative biography of Hawaiian-born sumo wrestling legend Chad Rowan, Akebono. Panek started studying the *yokozuna* in 1998, 8 years before the publication of this biography. By spending extensive periods of time with Rowan and his family and immersing himself in the distinct world of sumo, the author is able to paint the picture of a reluctant young man who becomes the cultural symbol of a foreign land.

Brought up in Waimanalo, Hawaii, Chad Rowan was always a gentle

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giant. In a place where young men are expected to establish their masculinity and gain respect through a never-ending string of scraps and fights, Rowan's physical presence attracted little adversity. At 6 feet 8 inches (2 meters) tall and weighing over 300 pounds (150 kilograms), he was soft-spoken, kindhearted and a talented basketball player. At 18 years old, Rowan's size and athleticism were noticed by fellow Hawaiian Jesse Kuhaulua, a professional sumo wrestler, and Chad was recruited to train at his *sumo beya* in Japan.

The author does well to illustrate Rowan's rude awakening and difficult transition to the contrasting culture of Japan and the strict hierarchy of sumo life. Strained hours spent training in the sand of the *dohyo* (wrestling circle) and performing custodial work for the Azumazeki stable of wrestlers cause Chad to long for the warm breezes of his tropical home. However, being thrown around by wrestlers half his size and scrubbing the toilets of the stable eventually strengthen Rowan's desire to chase glory in this foreign sport and culture. The more time he spends in Japan the more he understands and respects the rituals and traditions of both the country and its national sport. Eventually, he foresees his *shikona* (sumo name), 'Akebono,' written large atop the *banzuke* listing the full hierarchy of sumo wrestlers.

Panek's description of the incredible strength and athleticism of sumo athletes and the sweltering environment of the training stable puts the reader in the middle of the *dohyo*, covered in clay and sand, gasping for breath. Through tireless hours of suffering in the *dohyo*, perfecting sumo techniques and utilizing western weight training to strengthen his long legs (traditionally seen as a physical disadvantage in sumo), Rowan becomes the first *gaijin* (foreign) wrestler to hold the title of *yokozuna* (the highest rank in sumo). The biography

explains that it was only through this combination of Eastern and Western training that Rowan was able to accomplish his ultimate goal and elevate his name over hundreds of others to the pinnacle of the *banzuke*.

The 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano set the stage for the most significant moment in the biography. As Japan presented itself to a world audience during the opening ceremony of the games, each country was designated a sumo wrestler to lead them into the stadium. Japan chose Chad Rowan, 'Ake-bono,' as its representative. Designated to represent the values of hard work, strength, patience and *hinkaku* (dignity), Rowan, an American, led Japan into its own stadium. Ten years after flying halfway across the Pacific Ocean in search of success in a foreign country, in a foreign sport that represented the most coveted values of the people, Chad Rowan had found more than just success. He had found a new identity. *Gaijin Yokozuna: A Biography of Chad Rowan* explains that Akebono was and is more than just a sports superstar; he exemplifies the possibilities when people put aside cultural differences and embrace the positive qualities and values which can make all of us great.