

# Sumo wrestler's tears make waves in shock win

**Zero to hero:** Starting with the lowest ranking, Tokushoryu won all but one of his games. © Kyodo

Are tears good for sport? A sumo wrestler has thrown tradition out of the ring. His tears of joy delighted his fans, but raised doubts about whether it is ever acceptable for athletes to cry.

Would you step into the ring to face Tokushoryu?

The 33-year-old weighs 188kg and has trained in the Japanese martial art of sumo since he was 10. Let's face it, you don't stand a chance.

But Tokushoryu didn't fancy his chances either against the top-ranked wrestlers in Tokyo.

An underdog from the lowest division, he caused the biggest upset in two decades, beating the greatest living wrestlers to lift the **Emperor's Cup**.

"I feel like I'm walking on clouds," he said. The tears rolled down his face and Japan fell in love with its new champion.

What enchants the Japanese most is his openness. "He was so emotional," a fan said. "One moment he was laughing, the next he was crying."

According to **research**, the Japanese are among the least likely to cry. Hiding your emotions is a virtue, especially in traditional society. And you don't get much more traditional than sumo wrestling.

The martial art developed over a thousand years and is an important part of national identity. Immersed in **ritual**, the game resists change.

Salt is still scattered to purify the ground from evil, and women are not allowed to enter the ring.

So, crying is new to sumo wrestling. But it's not just in sumo where crying raises eyebrows.

The Brazilian footballer Neymar was ridiculed for crying during the World Cup in 2018, and tennis champion **Serena Williams**'s tear-filled outbursts cause controversy.

For some, crying and sport should never mix.

Sports psychologists warn athletes that they need to control their emotions. If they let their joy, anger and fear overwhelm them, they will make mistakes and not perform their best.

Professional athletes are skilled at managing their feelings, but under stress this **stoicism** can shatter.

"I might have cried too much, but at that moment I felt relieved from all the pressure," Tokushoryu said after the match. His emotions clearly mixed with grieving the recent death of his trainer, he said, "I thought I should do it for him."

Which reminds fans and spectators that athletes are not gods or machines but humans, carrying the heavy expectations of themselves and their fans.

So, are tears good for sport?

## The crying game

You leave the weight of the world behind when you enter the ring, say some. Fans watch sport to escape everyday life, not to be reminded of it. They want to be entertained by courage, honour and endurance – not by whining, blubbing and whinging. Professional athletes control their emotions and are rewarded with trophies, huge salaries, and the worship of their fans.

Others say, how boring sport would be if no one ever showed emotion! We love sport because we share in the journey and trials of the athletes. We follow their exploits, their failures and successes. We feel their tragedy and their joy. And given the colossal amount of pressure they are under, we should encourage them not to bottle it up. Repressing their emotions can lead to depression, addiction, and their early retirement.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Is crying in sport a sign of strength or weakness?
2. Is sport just a form of entertainment?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a picture showing your favourite sports star in the act of celebrating a victory.

2. On one side of paper, describe a time when you achieved something difficult. Use descriptive language to explain how you felt before, during and after the event.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it’s much more serious than that.”

Bill Shankly (1913-1981), Scottish footballer and former manager of Liverpool FC  
What do you think?

## Q & A

### What do we know?

High-performing athletes push themselves to the edge of what is possible. During these feats of endurance, chemicals are released into the blood to give them the energy and strength to push harder, run faster and jump higher. But this “fight or flight” mechanism also heightens their emotions, making them cry. When you watch an athlete, your body copies this “fight or flight” response, as though you were taking part. Your heart races and if they cry, you might also.

### What do we not know?

Obviously, an athlete wants to “fight” rather than run away! And whether to bottle up those emotions or let them out, depends on the person. Crying can help some and not others. But how crying is viewed also depends so much on the culture, the sport and the situation. Tokushoryu’s outburst was unusual for sumo wrestling and may help change attitudes about crying in Japan. But most sports are controlled by associations that set the rules and the standards, and often they aren’t big fans of change.

## WORD WATCH

### Emperor’s Cup

The appropriately enormous 30kg silver trophy was given to the Japan Sumo Association by Emperor Hirohito in 1926.

### Research

International Study on Adult Crying looked at the opinions of people from 37 countries and found that Americans were the most prone to crying.

### Ritual

Sumo wrestling is influenced by Shinto and Buddhist philosophy.

### Serena Williams

She was heavily criticised for her angry exchange with officials at the 2018 US Open.

**Stoicism**

The ability to endure pain or hardship without the display of emotions and without complaint.

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