

# UKRAINIAN SUMO WRESTLER IN ACTION: THE STRENGTH OF TWO FAMILIES IN UKRAINE AND JAPAN

*Ukrainian sumo wrestler SHISHI Masaru has carved out a place for himself in Japan's professional sumo world, overcoming language barriers and homesickness as he continues to improve. Behind his journey lies the unwavering support of a "new family" he has found in Japan.*

Sumo is a traditional Japanese sport practiced by approximately 600 professional wrestlers across the country. Each wrestler belongs to one of 45 training stables, known as *heya*, where they eat, sleep, and train diligently under the guidance of their stablemaster, or *oyakata*, alongside their fellow wrestlers.

SHISHI Masaru, a wrestler belonging to the Ikazuchi stable in Tokyo's Sumida City, hails from Melitopol in Ukraine's

Zaporizhzhia Oblast, currently under Russian occupation. His real name is Serhii Sokolovskiy; his ring name "Shishi" means "lion" in Japanese, which reflects the expectation that he will become "king of all beasts." Born in 1997, he grew up playing various sports, with a particular focus on wrestling.

Why sumo, a sport not particularly mainstream in Ukraine? "Because I was big," Shishi explained. At just 10 years

old, he already weighed 120 kg, exceeding the weight limit for wrestling competitions. Instead, he entered sumo tournaments, quickly making a name for himself as a European junior champion and placing third in the World Championships. His success led him to Japan in 2018, where he joined a sumo stable.

However, life in Japan came with challenges, such as the language barrier. Thrust into a

new life abroad without time to learn the language beforehand, Shishi struggled to communicate. He also felt homesick, and would often sneak out between training sessions or meals to call his mother back home.

It was the "mother" of the Ikazuchi stable—KAKIZOE Emi, the *oyakata's* wife (*okamisan*)—who extended a helping hand to Shishi and who has played a pivotal role in his life and career. "She would talk to me a lot in Japanese, and at first, I couldn't understand a word," Shishi recalled. "But she patiently explained everything until I gradually started to grasp it."

He added, "*Okamisan* and *oyakata* are like a mom and dad to me. I don't have my real parents nearby, so they've filled that role. They taught me not just the language, but also familiarized me with elements of the Japanese spirit like *omotenashi* (hospitality) and thoughtfulness, as well as sumo

traditions. I feel they've raised me as if I were their own child. *Okamisan* has even made Ukrainian dishes for me from time to time."

With the support of his newfound "family," Shishi steadily improved his skills and began climbing the ranks. He made his professional debut in March 2020 and, in July 2023, became the first-ever Ukrainian wrestler to reach the *juryo* division—the rank at which a sumo wrestler is considered fully professional. In September 2024, he was promoted further to the rank of *maegashira*, but after one tournament, he faced demotion. He has since been training hard to regain his standing, and soon after set an excellent record of 13 wins and 2 losses in the 2025 January Grand Sumo Tournament.

Since his first days in Japan, Shishi has never forgotten his family in Ukraine, regularly sending financial support to his parents. "I still call them often,"



Shishi (center) wearing a decorative lion-themed *mawashi* (sumo apron) during the ring-entry ceremony on November 12, 2024. TOKYO SPORTS/AFLD

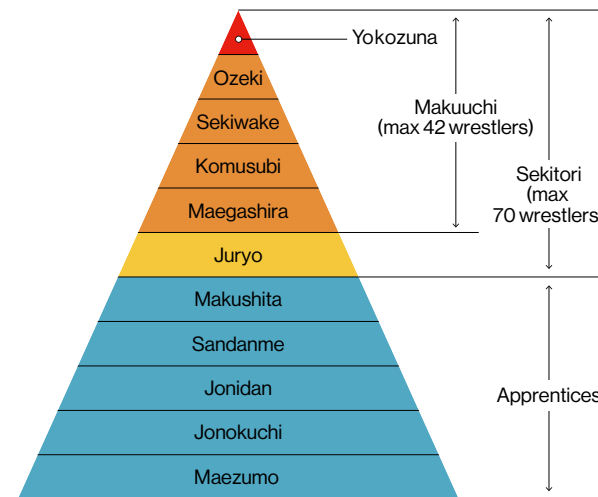
he said. "I just want them to stay safe and healthy." His younger brother also moved to Japan in 2022 to escape the ongoing instability in his hometown caused by the war, attending a Japanese language school and preparing for employment.

*Okamisan* Kakizoe Emi remarked, "We don't know what will happen to Shishi's hometown in the future. If he decides to naturalize as a Japanese citizen, we'll support him in that decision."

Shishi's journey has been shaped by two families—one in Ukraine and one in Japan—both of whom are vital sources of support and motivation, fueling his lion-like spirit and passion for sumo. ●



SHISHI Masaru (real name: Serhii Sokolovskiy) honing his skills at the Ikazuchi stable. At a formidable 193 cm and 170 kg, he commands attention with his powerful sumo style.



Based on the results of each tournament, wrestlers are assigned rankings known as *banzuke*.



Shishi was champion of the *juryo* division in the 2025 January Grand Sumo Tournament. NIKKAN SPORTS/AFLD