

One Man, Two Stories: The Differing Legacies of Rikidozan

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The surrender of the Japanese Empire to the United States following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 led to a massive change in identity for the former empire. The once powerful army that was able to defeat and control large sections of China was stripped away. The supposed “God Emperor” Hirohito (April 29th, 1901-January 7th, 1989) was towered over by the imposing American General Douglas MacArthur (January 26th, 1880-April 5th, 1964) in the media, representing American control over Japan. The Japanese no longer had an idol or hero to look up to, and national morale was low.

This is where Rikidozan (November 14, 1924-December 15, 1963) appeared on the scene. His birth name was Kim Sin-rak, a man born in the Northern part of Korea. Kim immigrated to Japan to be a sumo wrestler. Mitsuhiro Rikidozan was Kim’s stage name as a sumo wrestler, before later shortening it to just Rikidozan. Rikidozan retired from sumo wrestling with a win-loss record of 135-82 and was even close to being promoted to Ozeki¹ Rikidozan had a difficult start to his career, as he was outed as Korean on the beginner sumo rankings list. To circumvent potential harassment due to his race, he changed his name to Mitsuhiro Momota, and he was billed as being from Omura, Japan. His financial disputes with his stable-master Tamanoumi Daitaro (January 2nd, 1923-September 27th, 1987) would lead to Rikidozan retiring from sumo. Rikidozan was improving and moving up the rankings and had asked for more financial support from Tamanoumi. His request was refused, when his stable-master saw Rikidozan as being selfish, and the two got into a heated argument. Later that night, Rikidozan cut off his chonmage, formally marking the end of Rikidozan’s sumo career on September 10th, 1950. The sumo stable would officially claim

¹ Ozeki is the second highest rank a sumo wrestler can achieve, right beneath Yokozuna.

that Rikidozan retired due to paragonimiasis, or lung fluke. Following his retirement from the world of sumo he would begin training to be a professional wrestler in 1951, after being invited by Bobby Bruns² on a tour of Hawaii, and then later the Continental United States. He founded Japan Pro Wrestling Alliance in 1953, the first³. To further push puroresu, which was a form of wrestling for which he was the foundation, to be a legitimate sport, the wrestlers who performed under this style would not pull punches, and land strong strikes such as kicks and slaps. These strikes served to make puroresu look more realistic, in comparison to the weaker and more fake looking punches that pro wrestling would adopt in the future. Rikidozan later trained some of the most important names in puroresu, including two wrestlers who would go on to further define the hard-hitting and more realistic style of professional wrestling, such as Kanji “Antonio” Inoki (February 20th, 1943-October 1st, 2022) and Shohei “Giant” Baba (January 23rd, 1938-January 31st, 1999). Kanji would go on to form New Japan Pro Wrestling on January 13th, 1972. Shohei would go on to form All Japan Pro Wrestling on October 21st, 1972. Both companies are still in business to this day.

Rikidozan was one of the first post-war Japanese heroes, as he would constantly defeat the “evil” foreigners for the glory of Japan. The foreigners specifically wrestled as villains, as Rikidozan’s matches were meant to be a symbol of Japanese strength and virtue, akin to many propaganda pieces used by Japan during World War 2. The popularity of these displays of good versus evil led to the highest watched event in Japanese television, as 70 million people tuned in to watch Rikidozan fight American champion Lou Thesz (April 24, 1916-April 28, 2002) on July

² This was the San Francisco branch of the National Wrestling Alliance, one of the oldest wrestling promotions in the United States.

³ In Wrestling terminology, a clean finish refers to a match being scripted to end in a fair way, where one wrestler defeats another wrestler without resorting to cheating or outside interference.

10th, 1957, at the Korakuen Stadium in Tokyo, Japan. Kim Sin Rak went from being a North Korean that was shunned out of sumo to being a Japanese hero as a pro wrestler.

Rikidozan is a hero both to North Korea and Japan, however his legacy differs depending on the country. In Japan, his identity as a *zainichi*⁴ was essentially erased. Kim Sin-rak was either Rikidozan or Mitsuhiro Momota, a proud Japanese patriot who fought the insurmountable Americans in the postwar. His identity was erased for the sake of uplifting the nation's spirit. In contrast, North Korea's interpretation of Rikidozan's legacy overemphasizes his Korean identity, and ultimately erases the Japanese identity he had taken during his career. In the North Korean interpretation, Rikidozan did not fight for Japan, but instead defeated Japanese and American wrestlers on behalf of the North Korean regime. Both countries hold Rikidozan in high regard as a hero, but the reasons why are manipulated depend on the agenda being pushed. Ultimately, Rikidozan only had one wrestling career, and the events that occurred during that career are twisted to fit either a Japanese or North Korean narrative.

Igarashi's chapter, "Performing the Nation," provides a summary of Rikidozan's career through an academic lens. Rikidozan, like many other pro wrestlers, lived their lives as if professional wrestling were real. This was common practice, and wrestlers made sure to hide the performative nature of the business from the fans, even while some sports journalists have debunked wrestling to be a performative art instead of the legitimate competition it was billed to be. Regardless of how phony and fake the fights seemed to appear, the effects were very real. Through his matches fighting American heels,⁵Rikidozan gave hope to the Japanese people, and at one point was considered, "The second most famous person in Japan, next only to the emperor."⁶

⁴ *Zainichi* is a term referring to ethnic Koreans who reside in Japan.

⁵ In Professional Wrestling Terminology, a Heel is a wrestler who portrays a villain, meant to be booed by the audience.

⁶ Igarashi Yoshikuni, *Bodies of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 122

The Japanese were glued to their television screens as two Japanese wrestlers were fighting and winning against two huge American heels, a complete role reversal from the unconditional surrender less than ten years ago. The formula for telling a story in these matches was simple. Rikidozan and his tag team partner Kimura Masahiko would fight according to the rules, fighting in a pure and honorable way. The Americans, particularly Ben and “Iron” Mike Sharpe, would break the rules by hopping in the ring when not allowed to⁷, and ganging up on Kimura in the corner leaving him defenseless. Rikidozan would then retaliate with violent karate chops, which were based on a sumo strike called the harite. He would be given the moral high ground to defend himself and Kimura from the dishonorable Americans. This in-ring storytelling mirrored Japanese propaganda from World War 2, including the tropes of, “The sincere self, and the evil other,” in which the purest of intentions of Japan would lead to victory against evil forces.⁸ This theory is like the Sir Galahad Theory of Politics, “I will win in the end because my heart is pure.”

One cannot discuss the memory and legacy of Rikidozan as a staple of post-war propaganda without examining the treatment of other ethnic Koreans who lived in Japan, known as the *zainichi*. In *Diaspora Without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*, Ryang and Lie cover the experience of being Korean in post-war Japan. While Rikidozan enjoyed the cheers and admiration of Japanese fans across the nation, other Koreans did not receive the same treatment. Koreans had lived in both Japan-occupied Korea, and in mainland Japan during World War 2. Japan’s surrender in World War 2 meant that Korea would no longer be occupied by Japan, and the Koreans who lived in Japan could express loyalty and love for their home country without fear of retaliation from the Japanese government or other Japanese citizens. Many Koreans saw the end of the war

⁷ Traditional Tag Team Match rules stipulate that only one wrestler from each team is allowed to be in the ring at any given time, and the only way to swap places is to “Tag” your partner in the proper corner.

⁸ Yoshikuni, *Bodies of Memory*, 122.

as a chance to return home to Korea, and many did. Statistics estimate that, “The population of southern Korea increased by an estimated 22 percent, or Just under 3.5 million, a figure that included repatriated Koreans, 510,000 refugees from the North, and 70,000 births over this period.”⁹ Unfortunately, the Koreans returned to a split country, both geographically, and then later politically. Division encouraged many Koreans to stay in Japan, for fear of retaliation from either North or South Korea. The troubles in Japan would only continue against the zainichi however, with the 9/17 incident. On September 17th, 2002, Japanese news media reported that North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens throughout the 1970s and 1980s for use as Japanese tutors. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il (February 16th, 1941-December 17th, 2011) did not help matters by practically telling Japanese Premier Koizumi Junichiro that the reports were true. The news sparked anti-Korean sentiment, and Korean schools and Chongryun¹⁰ offices received death threats. Korean female students were attacked both verbally and physically on public transportation. North Korea did not help the zainichi, having made zero comments about Chongryun’s role in the kidnappings, leading many Japanese nationalists to believe anyone associated with Chongryun were North Korean supporters. In reality, few Koreans in Japan supported North Korea, and most of the people who attend Chongryun schools simply want to stay in-tune with their home culture, and to have a safe space in a land with a differing culture. Nevertheless, the DPRK’s admission that the nation kidnapped Japanese nationals over several decades incited widespread anti-Korean backlash, with Zainichi facing discriminatory treatment at both the governmental and social levels.

⁹ Sonia, Ryang, and John Lie, *Diaspora Without Homeland Being Korean in Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Chongryun is the Korean name of the General Association of Korean Residents of Japan, an NGO dedicated to helping the Zainichi. Also serves as a de-facto embassy to North Korea.

Knowing what we know of Rikidozan's career and the treatment of the zainichi, something doesn't add up. Kim Sin Rak was zainichi, and it even played a role in his retirement from sumo. But Kim took on a Japanese name and for all intents and purposes, was considered a proud Japanese national. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano's article helps illuminate how zainichi used sanctioned martial arts as a means of entering the mainstream in Japanese culture. The founder of Kyokushin karate was Choi Bae-Dai (July 27th, 1923 – April 26th, 1994), a zainichi who would later adopt the Japanese name of Masutatsu Oyama. Both Oyama and Rikidozan were able to integrate into Japanese society through their mastery of sanctioned violence. Despite their fame, the treatment of Oyama and Rikidozan reflects a larger trend in Japanese views of the zainichi, which sees ethnic Koreans as brutal or threatening. The zainichi were portrayed as senselessly violent, as "It is equally hard to ignore the numerous mythic discourses of angry Koreans destroying Japanese property and raping women especially after major social crises, such as the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake and World War II."¹¹ This stereotype led to the Kanto Massacre, in which police and lynch mobs attacked and murdered at least six thousand Koreans, with the total amount of injury being unknown. These myths provided the Japanese with a reason to go out and kill Koreans based on speculation. The violence that was traditionally seen as an inherent trait of the zainichi was not present in the cases of both Rikidozan and Oyama. Professional wrestling's entire presentation depends on rules, and Rikidozan played a character who followed the rules, but was not afraid to get overwhelmingly violent to exact justice on a heel who broke the rules. Oyama founded Kyokushin karate, a more violent style of karate compared to its predecessors such as Shotokan karate. Kyokushin karate featured full-body contact fights, with the goal being to strike

¹¹ Mitsuyo, Wada-Marciano, "Ethnically Marked 'Heroes': From Rikidozan to Shunpei in Blood and Bones." *Postscript* 28, no. 2 (2009): 101.

your opponent as hard as possible, with exceptions made for face strikes. The only way to win when sparring in Kyokushin is by knocking your opponent down. In comparison, Shotokan karate only allows weaker strikes on certain points of the body, and you gain points by landing strikes rather than knocking down your opponent. Despite the more violent style of martial art, Kyokushin is still rooted in the values of self-improvement and discipline. With their mastery of their respective martial art, the two ethnic Koreans were effectively rebranded as Japanese.

Rikidozan's career in professional wrestling and his status as the first post-war Japanese hero begins with the end of a sumo career. Kim Sin-rak immigrated from North Korea to Japan with Minosuke Momota, a North Korean policeman to join a sumo stable. It was during this time that he took the stage name of Rikidozan and had a decent sumo career. Ultimately, Rikidozan retired due to monetary issues. After his retirement, he spent time as a black marketeer and worked construction, most likely fated to a rather mediocre and uneventful life. He was brought into the world of professional wrestling due to a charity tour done on behalf of the Torii Oasis Shrine Club, which was arranged by Honolulu businessman Moe Lipton. The National Wrestling Association, Mid-Pacific Promotions and Moe Lipton came together to host 12 dates of wrestling from September to December. After a month of training, Rikidozan made his debut against American wrestler and promoter Bobby Bruns, wrestling to a 10-minute draw. Rikidozan would then travel to the United States in 1952 to get more wrestling experience under Mid-Pacific Promotions. Initially in the United States, Rikidozan was booked¹² as a heel, primarily due to a cliché in old school wrestling booking that portrayed foreigners as the "evil other." Ironically enough, when wrestling in Japan, Rikidozan was the babyface¹³ hero defeating the "evil other" represented as

¹² In wrestling terminology, "booking" refers to the decisions made by the managers. For example, one person will be "booked" to beat another person.

¹³ In wrestling terminology, a "babyface" or simply a "face" refers to the good guy, or the hero. Face wrestlers are often booked to be honorable heroes the audience is supposed to cheer for.

American wrestlers. He would use the success he had found in America and established the first Japanese professional wrestling company, the Japan Pro Wrestling Alliance, or the JWA in 1953. The JWA was formed to represent the American NWA in Japan. In just a few short years after, he found himself wrestling against one of the greatest wrestlers in the history of the sport, NWA World Heavyweight Champion Lou Thesz. Like a true professional of the business, Lou Thesz put Rikidozan over in Los Angeles, and Rikidozan defeated him by disqualification. Normally due to the “champions advantage”¹⁴Lou Thesz should still be champion, however Rikidozan came home to declare that he had won the world title, and simply didn’t bring the belt back because Lou Thesz owned it and he couldn’t buy it.¹⁵ Ultimately, whether or not Rikidozan had the physical title with him, the only thing that mattered to the Japanese population was to see their newspapers report that Rikidozan had defeated Lou Thesz, the quintessential American wrestler. Japan had gone from General Douglas MacArthur towering over emperor Hirohito, to having a champion who had defeated one of the greatest American wrestlers of all time. In the ring, Rikidozan conquered his enemy, but behind the scenes, both men became friends, Rikidozan being forever grateful to Lou Thesz for being willing to put his reputation on the line to put him over, which many of the industry’s greatest wrestlers would often fail to do. Thesz had the reputation that Hulk Hogan had in the 1980s-1990s, and easily could have refused to lose like Hulk Hogan did. Rikidozan was a successful wrestler, capturing singles titles and tag team titles as well. Rikidozan would continue to run the JWA and be booked as the top star until being stabbed in 1963 at the hands of a Yakuza member, and later dying of his wounds after going against doctor's orders and going right back to drinking alcohol. Rikidozan’s legacy is that of toughness and resilience against foreign enemies.

¹⁴ In wrestling terminology, the champion's advantage is defined as: A rule stating that a championship title cannot exchange hands if the challenger wins via disqualification, or by count-out.

¹⁵ Haruo, Yamaguchi, Scott Teal, and Koji Miyamoto. *The Great Pro Wrestling Venues, Volume 4: Japan: The Rikidozan Years* (version Kindle Edition), 128.

His two major disciples, Antonio Inoki, and Shohei “Giant” Baba (January 23, 1938-January 31st, 1999) founded the two longest running Japanese wrestling companies with AJPW and NJPW. Both companies, especially NJPW, are known for their high work rate, being known as some of the hardest hitting companies. NJPW still features foreign wrestlers in prominent spots as villains in Japan, such as Zack Sabre Jr, Will Ospreay, and David Finlay as they are often the enemies to Japanese heroes like “The Ace of New Japan” Hiroshi Tanahashi, “The Dragon” Shingo Takagi and “The Rainmaker” Kazuchika Okada.

After Rikidozan’s death, the North Korean government attempted to reclaim Rikidozan as an idol for propaganda purposes. While the Japanese revered Rikidozan in the way that a wrestler like Hulk Hogan would be admired, North Koreans admired Rikidozan because he was portrayed as a symbol of North Korean patriotism by the government. The North Korean government made many pieces of propaganda including both a “biography” entitled, *I Am a Korean* (1989), and a documentary called “*I’m a Korean! Rikidozan, World Wrestling Champion*” The retelling of the career of Rikidozan in North Korea was the exact opposite of his story being told in Japan. Instead of willingly going to Japan against his family's wishes, the documentary claims he was tricked into going to Japan by Momota Inosuke, and giving him a Japanese name against his will while competing in sumo events, comparing him to Roman slave warriors.¹⁶ When he was not promoted to higher ranks in sumo, he refused to deny his heritage, and grew frustrated at the discrimination he faced as a Korean declaring that “Mr. Tamanoumi, I’m Kim Sin Rak. While I’ve been engaged in sumo for ten years, I’ve never once thought myself to be Momota. This’ll be the same in future, too. If I had thought myself that way, I would have been the loser in my sumo bouts. I think you know this, Mr. Tamanoumi. My father is not Momota Inosuke but Kim Sok Thae. I’m not double-

¹⁶ Phuong DPRK Daily, “*I’m a Korean!*” *Rikidozan, World Wrestling Champion*, 4:04

tongued. Good-bye.”¹⁷ The theme of Rikidozan’s career wasn’t about defeating the enemies of Japan to give hope to the weary Japanese, but instead to defeat the enemies of North Korea. The North Korean government turned Rikidozan into the manifestation of Juche, North Korea’s state ideology of self-reliance, independence, and political self-determination. According to the documentary *“I’m a Korean!”* Rikidozan was born and raised in North Korea, in which his parents and brothers helped him grow strong. His elders taught him how to wrestle, he drank clear air and water, and because of his North Korean upbringing, he developed both physical strength and willpower. Rikidozan was discriminated against, beaten up, and yet he did not fall because of the strength he had built up being raised as a North Korean. Even his famous karate chop finisher was said to be powered by his Korean temperament, as he “overcame all hardships and difficulties with blood and sweat to master the tiger’s special technique, where an instant swipe of his paw generates a ton of power.”¹⁸ The ultimate accomplishment for Rikidozan however, was to defeat Lou Thesz for the NWA World Heavyweight Championship. All these matches are presented as what many people thought they were at the time, legitimate matches where the winner is the person who is the superior combatant. This framing made Rikidozan look like a true hero, enduring pain and fighting against villainous Americans such as The Destroyer and “Classy” Freddie Blassie. But no matter the challenge, Rikidozan fought all opponents, and defeated them all due to his tenacious Korean spirit, and by the blows of his powerful karate chop. Harkening back to the characterization of Rikidozan’s position as a “slave,” the North Korean government claimed that Japan had used his matches of life and death to revitalize their economy and nation. The Japanese are portrayed as dishonest, conniving, and villainous, who only wish to either defeat Rikidozan in combat, or to

¹⁷ Ri Ho In, *I Am a Korean: The Story of World Professional Wrestling Champion Rikidozan*, Pyongyang, North Korea, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1989

¹⁸ Phuong DPRK Daily, *“I’m a Korean!” Rikidozan, World Wrestling Champion*, 5:00

exploit him. Rikidozan had an infamous match with Masahiko Kimura, where both men were supposed to wrestle to a draw and generate interest in a rematch like most old-school wrestling companies. Rikidozan hit Kimura with legitimate strikes to the neck and head, eventually hitting a neck artery and knocking Kimura out legitimately. No one is actually sure why Rikidozan broke the script and started assaulting Kimura, with theories ranging from jealousy, to anger over Kimura insinuating that “professional wrestling wasn’t real”, which has never yielded good results for anyone who has said it to a professional wrestler.¹⁹ But while these theories seem much more grounded in legitimate reasons, the documentary states that Kimura resorted to foul play in their match, which does have a hint of truth to it. During the match Kimura hits Rikidozan in the groin, a painful occurrence, but also potentially an accidental one. The benefit of the doubt is not given, and Kimura’s beating is seen as a justified punishment because he was delivering righteous punishment to a man who “had neither the elementary morality nor righteousness of a human being.” Rikidozan returned home to North Korea, being delighted that Kim Il-sung had seen his victories over the American wrestlers, and that he would continue to fight for North Korea, specifically for the Kim regime.

Juche is at its core, the foundation of North Korea. Political, economic, and military self-reliance were preached by Kim Il-sung as the goals for his country, working towards total independence. Rikidozan was the perfect man to embody these ideals for the North Korean public. Rikidozan was packaged as a homegrown talent. He was only able to grow strong because of his North Korean brothers and elders teaching him the ways of Korean wrestling. Rikidozan used the lessons taught to him by his North Korean family and became self-sufficient. He was strong enough to fight and compete in tournaments, and by winning those tournaments he had also

¹⁹ See: Big Van Vader on Good Morning Kuwait.

become economically self-sufficient due to the prize money. The overarching idea of self-reliance and not relying on the outside world was what made Rikidozan the perfect embodiment of Juche. His only interactions with the outside world were through his enemies. Rikidozan was exploited by a Japanese man to immigrate to Japan, and he had fought American wrestlers as enemies. Rikidozan was the ideal standard that North Koreans should strive for. To be fully independent from the outside world, and able to fight the enemies of North Korea.

Ultimately, Rikidozan was the only identity Kim Sin-rak had in the public eye. For the uninitiated, it might seem weird, as if an actor would pretend to be their character outside of the movie or tv show they were a part of. Wrestlers who stay in the industry for long enough tend to adopt their character's names whenever they make public appearances. In my youth many of my classmates remembered the classic tag team D-Generation X. We fondly remember Triple H and Shawn Michaels, not Paul Michael Levesque and Michael Shawn Hickenbottom. To this day, both men work within the WWE, running the show both on screen and off screen, and are still referred to as their wrestler names.

Rikidozan could be seen as just another wrestler taking on a different name, however the racial aspects of this new identity make that explanation a bit shaky. An example I can draw from happened only a few years ago in the most mainstream wrestling company, the WWE. Salvador Guerrero Jr is better known under the gimmick of Chavo Guerrero Jr, wrestling alongside his uncle Eddie Guerrero as Los Guerreros. The Guerreros are a legendary family, often known for playing the heels. Eddie was the second generation, and Chavo Jr was the third generation. The team played on the hate towards them by being comical villains, with their theme song stating the team's philosophy, "We Lie, We Cheat, We Steal." In 2004, Chavo went from representing his heritage to being named Kerwin White. He denounced his heritage and took on the appearance and

character of a white, conservative country club goer, who would go on to make disparaging remarks about anyone who wasn't white. The once goofy and distinctly Latin-American music was replaced by a Frank Sinatra parody about white picket fences and golfing. This character also included the so-bad-it's-good catchphrase, "If it's not white, it's not right."²⁰ The gimmick would be dropped after the sudden and tragic passing of Eddie, where he would return to Chavo Guerrero.

Wrestling and racial politics have never had a good relationship, just like the former Japanese Empire. During Japan's control of Korea, the empire sought to ultimately erase the Korean identity and replace it with a Japanese one. The policy was known as *Sōshi-kaimei*, which targeted Korean families and put pressure on them to assume Japanese names and learn to read and write Japanese. Although the empire was dead and Koreans could feel more comfortable expressing love for their heritage in Japan, some notable *zainichi* took Japanese names to fit in with Japanese society. The stories of both Masutatsu Oyama and Rikidozan could have been seen as an empowering story of foreigners coming to Japan, embracing their new culture, and championing their values. These identities, however, were earned through the mastery of violence in accordance with Japanese ideals. Only through their proven domination in martial arts and combat were these two Koreans able to be considered on the same level as the Japanese. The Japanese wartime propaganda that Rikidozan called upon in his matches were values that could be considered universal, but for the Japanese the values were tied exclusively to their race. The Japanese were strong, honorable warriors, and their enemies were all dishonorable and evil foreigners. Thus there was no way that Rikidozan could continue to spread Japanese values under a Korean name. To win over fans and give hope to the Japanese nation, Kim Sin-rak was effectively erased, going under Rikidozan in public up until his death. His investments outside of

²⁰ Kerwin White Fan Club, *Kerwin White talks about Shelton Benjamin on Raw*, 1:40

the ring were all connected to Rikidozan, not Kim Sin-rak. His iconic apartment mansion is known as the “Riki Mansion,” with a giant R on the top of the building. He owned a nine-story venue known as the “Riki Sports Palace,” which included a bar and restaurant that both had “Riki” in the name, alongside being the venue for many of the JWA’s matches. Kim Sin-rak was no longer just playing the role of Rikidozan, he was living it, effectively erasing his North Korean identity, just as the Japanese had done to the Koreans only 20 years earlier.

A light that burns twice as bright, burns half as long. Rikidozan the wrestler will forever live on in the hearts of the Japanese citizens who got to see them defend their downtrodden country. Rikidozan’s reputation outside of the ring was less than positive. Due to Rikidozan’s massive success in Japan, he invested his money in different areas. The mansion and sports palace were just two of these. He invested money into land near Sagami Lake, to build a golf course and a yacht harbor. His cash flow became strained. His issues outside of the ring began to affect his work inside of the ring, as he was getting older and couldn’t wrestle with the same showmanship and athleticism he used to. He would wrestle in six-man tag-team matches to do his signature chops and hype up the audience, but he no longer had to wrestle full matches and put more wear and tear on his worn-down body.

Rikidozan’s death came after a scuffle with Katsushi Murata, a member of the Yakuza. Murata stepped on Rikidozan’s shoe, and Rikidozan demanded an apology. The two argued, with Murata pulling a knife and stabbing him. Rikidozan then went to a private gynecology hospital near his apartment to be patched up, but the doctors had to get a surgeon from a hospital to perform abdominal surgery. Why Rikidozan died has been argued by different journalists, with some saying he was drinking carbonated beverages against doctors’ orders, however this story has been denied by Rikidozan’s wife. A doctor in 1993 published a book stating that Rikidozan’s muscles were

injected with muscle relaxant, but they were too big to find an oxygen airway, and ultimately the lack of oxygen killed Rikidozan. This is the best guess anyone has regarding the actual dying moments of Rikidozan. His internal organs were also in awful condition due to the amount of drinking Rikidozan had indulged in over the years.

Professional wrestlers dying before retiring is a tragic, yet unsurprising occurrence. The Eddie Guerrero died at 38, just one year younger than Rikidozan was at his death. The three youngest brothers of the legendary Texas-based Von Erich family all died before 25 via suicide. The wrestling industry is a brutal one, and many sacrifices are made to entertain the audience. Chavo Guerrero had to wrestle a match just one day after his uncle Eddie's death. Cody Rhodes wrestled a major match on pay-per-view with a torn pectoral muscle. Rikidozan put his body on the line for the Japanese public and left a big impact on Japan in doing so. Without him going to Hawaii with Bobby Bruns to try his hand at professional wrestling, Japan might not have been able to recover from the deep pain and trauma from surrendering to the United States. Professional wrestling in Japan might not have been as popular without the innovation brought by Rikidozan. Without the JWA, there would have been no AJPW, or NJPW.

Japan was in mourning, as Rikidozan's funeral drew 12,000 people at Ikegami Honmonji Temple in Tokyo. A bronze sculpture has been left in the Ota-Ward, right in front of Rikidozan's tomb, to memorialize him. The JWA hosted a Rikidozan Memorial card at the Riki Sports Palace, with Rikidozan protege Antonio Inoki wrestling on the card. Katsushi Murata was arrested and convicted of murder, serving a 7-year prison sentence. After he was released, he visited Rikidozan's grave in December every year until his death in 2013. Even though he moved up the ranks and became a mob boss, he still paid his respects at Rikidozans grave.

Ultimately the legacy of Rikidozan in Japan is a North Korean man who had lost his birth

identity and became a Japanese megastar. His matches were meant to be uplifting for the Japanese public, who really needed heroes after having surrendered in World War 2. He established the first Japanese professional wrestling company in the JWA, paving the way for puroresu to grow into a mainstay in Japan. Even with the positives, he's still remembered for his mistakes. His rampant alcoholism, the debts he acquired, and the downfall of his career are still a part of Rikidozan's legacy, in theme with how depressing the latter half of his life turned out. Kim Sin-rak failed to break out in the sumo business and was destined to just be another zainichi working in the construction industry for the rest of his life, not being accepted by the Japanese public because of his origin. Though he lost his Korean identity in the process, Rikidozan became a hero, and will be remembered as such even with his failings.

Rikidozan's legacy as a North Korean hero is very conditional and connected to history and politics. North Korea was established in 1945 after Japan had to give up their conquests after surrendering. North Korea was controlled by the Soviet Union, while the United States took control of South Korea. The Soviet government had controlled politics in North Korea until Kim Il-Sung had gotten enough support to establish the Korean Workers Party. After Kim Il-Sung took control of North Korea, he declared war on the South, kickstarting the Korean War in 1950. North Korea almost lost the war after American intervention, however China got involved and pushed the South back, ultimately resulting in a stalemate. China's involvement in the Korean War proved to be important, as the Soviet influence waned away, and North Korea began to be ruled in full by the Workers Party of Korea. In the late stages of Kim Il-Sung's presidency, Rikidozan was made as a state idol through the publishing of propaganda pieces. When Kim Il-Sung died in 1994, his son Kim Jong-Il had taken over as president of North Korea, and to establish a cult of personality like his father had, Kim Jong-Il used Rikidozan's legacy as a North Korean patriot to promote

Collision in Korea, a crossover between New Japan Pro Wrestling, World Championship Wrestling that had taken place in North Korea. Antonio Inoki main evented the show after having paid homage to his mentor Rikidozan, and the popularity and success of the event in North Korea helped establish Kim Jong-Il as a Supreme Leader.

Rikidozan's career in the lens of the Japanese public is about a hero who came and uplifts the country, before slowly and surely declining and dying relatively young at 39. North Korea's telling of Rikidozan's career is completely different unlike Japan, his identity as a North Korean man named Kim Sin-rak is ultimately scrubbed and erased from memory. In North Korea's telling where it is promoted to a ridiculous extent. He had reached the peak of his life as a world-class professional wrestling champion, yet after Rikidozan's death, Lou Thesz admitted he had to carry the load in their iconic matches together, many of which went to one-hour draws. The narrative established early on in North Korean propaganda was that Rikidozan reached the peak of pro wrestling through his sheer toughness and tenacity. The reality of the wrestling business is best described by Bully Ray in his interview with Chris Van Vilet, "Nobody gets themselves over in this business. You need someone else to get you over."²¹ Rikidozan had plenty of help getting over with the Sharpe Brothers, The Destroyer, and Lou Thesz, just to name a few. Those wrestlers all played villainous roles to be Rikidozan's foil. These were dishonorable villains who needed to be defeated by a powerful Japanese hero, who embraced Japanese cultures and values to win and triumph over the evil other. In the North Korean narrative however, the values he displayed were portrayed as distinctly North Korean, fitting in with the state ideology of *juche*.

Rikidozan took on many opponents, with his goal being to become the strongest wrestler in Japan. He fought Singapore's King Kong, who weighed 190 kg, but with the "strong paw kick

²¹ Chris Van Vilet, *Bully Ray on Why a Dudley Boyz Reunion Is Unlikely*, *Mae Young, Roman Reigns*, *MJF*, 28:10

of the Korean tiger,”²² he knocked down and defeated King Kong. Rikidozan’s fighting style was that of someone who, “doesn’t give opponents time to breathe and continues to attack strongly”²³ His power and style were so overwhelming that American wrestlers resorted to cheating when fighting Rikidozan, refusing to fight with honor. Despite the dirty tactics of Rikidozan’s opponents, he held an undefeated record and earned the Pacific Coast Championship, being awarded with a trophy to recognize his achievements. He would continue to wrestle even more fearsome opponents, who are characterized as being superhuman in strength. Leo Romeri is said to have had fists of stone that made his opponents tremble in fear. Bobo Brazil once used his headbutt to break open a cow’s skull. The men who fought Rikidozan were not simple wrestlers who put on their wrestling trunks and fought fairly. Rikidozan’s greatest rival was legendary American wrestler Lou Thesz. Lou Thesz had recorded 936 victories, many championships, and had called himself the King of the Wrestling World. Many had fought him and failed to defeat him. This included Rikidozan, whose first fight with Lou ended with Rikidozan losing after being defeated twice in a 2 out of 3 falls match. Rikidozan would not give up however, as he fought Lou again and defeated him to win the World Wrestling Heavyweight Championship becoming the first Asian wrestler to win the title. Now at the top of the mountain, several of the wrestlers came to challenge him for the title. The Destroyer was a masked wrestler who made the audience uneasy, appearing to be a devil. Rikidozan outsmarted his Figure-Four Leglock and delivered a back suplex on the outside to win by countout. “Classy” Freddie Blassie, the human vampire, had filed his teeth down to bite and draw blood from his opponents. He bit Rikidozan and caused him to bleed. Rikidozan, however, stayed resilient, using his chops to defeat the vampire through sheer tenacity.

²² Phuong DPRK Daily, “I’m a Korean!” Rikidozan, *World Wrestling Champion*, 7:23

²³ Phuong DPRK Daily, “I’m a Korean!” Rikidozan, *World Wrestling Champion*, 7:35

“The Human Aircraft Carrier ” Calhoun was a giant wrestler who weighed in at 237 kg, a massive man who required a lift to be boarded onto planes. He ate giant meals and had to use special transportation. Though it seemed improbable, Rikidozan’s chops began to slowly wear the giant wrestler down, ultimately winning with a shoulder block that knocked Calhoun to the outside. Rikidozan wasn’t simply just a strong North Korean asserting his dominance, but instead a mythic hero who fought the strongest Western and Japanese wrestlers, defeating them each time with the use of his Korean tiger inspired chop. Just as King Arthur had the legendary sword Excalibur to defeat his enemies, Rikidozan had the chop as his legendary weapon.

With the continued success Rikidozan saw, he started to grow in popularity. The Japanese public was infatuated with him, causing great commotion whenever Rikidozan was booked to wrestle. This popularity had blinded him to the reality that he was being used as a political tool to promote Japanese pride, and that his identity as a proud North Korean had slowly, yet surely been erased from him. Yasuo Sakurai, editor in chief of Tokyo Sports Newspaper had even gone on television to claim that “I think Rikidozan’s success has greatly helped revive the Japanese economy.”²⁴ The television was widespread because of people wanting to watch Rikidozan’s matches, which further encouraged economic growth and a morale boost for Japan. Rikidozan put his life on the line in these matches against foreign and domestic enemies, and Japan exploited his actions for their own gain. His matches were all under a Japanese name, but he held out belief that his fellow North Korean countrymen knew the truth of his identity. He received many fan letters, but not even one was from a North Korean.²⁵ When he went out in public, he was met with disgust by the Japanese public. He raised the Japanese flag unwillingly, put his life on the line for Japan, only to come back and be rejected by the people who enjoyed the fruits of his hard work and labor.

²⁴ Phuong DPRK Daily, “I’m a Korean!” Rikidozan, *World Wrestling Champion*, 15:15

²⁵ Phuong DPRK Daily, “I’m a Korean!” Rikidozan, *World Wrestling Champion*, 16:50

He longed to return to North Korea, even sneaking out from Tokyo to Niigata to watch the ships that were headed back to his homeland, weeping. He began to watch documentaries about North Korea's success to heal his broken heart.

All the sorrow Rikidozan had experienced had gone away on November 5th, 1961, as Rikidozan left Japan to visit North Korea, being reunited with his daughter. General Kim Il-Sung gave high praise to Rikidozan for his wrestling victories. The documentary claims that Rikidozan stated, "Now that I have decided to follow General Kim Il-Sung to the end, I have nothing to fear." Rikidozan proclaimed love and passion for North Korea, telling his daughter to stay home and study. Rikidozan even wrote a letter to General Kim Il-Sung, declaring love and adoration for the leader. General Kim Jong-Il would later find his father's letter, and posthumously recognized Rikidozan as a true North Korean patriot.

According to "*I Am a Korean*" (1989), Rikidozan died at 9:50 pm on the 15th of December. On the day of the funeral, the skies were overcast, and a violent gust of wind blew as the hearse made its way to the funeral site. Rikidozan was buried on the 20th of December at the Ikegami Buddhist Temple, with huge numbers of people coming out to the funeral. The actions of these people, however, made Rikidozan's secretary Natsuko disgusted. She claimed that "I cannot raise my head for shame at my being a Japanese. How could they ever behave so infamously?" After the burial, fellow wrestlers gathered on the eighth floor of the Riki Sports Palace. None of them appeared to be sad or be in mourning but were instead there to indulge in bottles of high-quality alcohol that Rikidozan had so dearly loved and collected. Rikidozan's protege Azumafuji was the first to open a bottle and began drinking. He had left the JWA in the past, declaring that "I don't want to see Rikidozan's face again." He called Rikidozan stingy for not sharing his high-quality drinks, and because Rikidozan never drank the beverages. The wrestlers all followed Azumafuji's

example, and opened these expensive bottles and began drinking them straight from the bottle, in a shameful and undistinguished way. Many of the bottles present were given to Rikidozan as gifts for his accomplishments as a wrestler, and now they were all being wasted. Wrestler Toyonobori proposed an important question, which was, “what to do with the Japan Professional Wrestling Association of Mr. Rikidozan from now.” Fellow wrestler Endo replied loudly exclaiming, “We have been exploited by Rikidozan until now. Now let’s form a new professional wrestling company!” According to the book, the wrestlers all agreed, and even began to disregard Rikidozan’s accomplishments now that he had died. The wealth and land that Rikidozan worked so hard to attain through blood and sweat, was now in the hands of ungrateful Japanese wrestlers who sought to move on from Rikidozan and form their own company. Ultimately, the JWA crumbled without Rikidozan, and one of the promoters, Oki Shikina had left Japan for Hawaii, stating that, “There is no need for me to stay any longer in Japan minus Rikidozan’s Professional Wrestling Association.” Shikina kept good on his word, moving to Hawaii, transferred his property to his wife, and lived with his sister. He died at 70 years old, living a sad and lonely life away from professional wrestling after the loss of Rikidozan. Rikidozan’s grave was swarmed with Japanese swearing to rob the tomb and offering insincere prayers. The Japanese visited Rikidozan’s grave as an excuse to indulge in drinking alcohol. There were only three visitors to Rikidozan’s grave who came there with a sense of grief and sadness. These three consisted of Korean baseball players Kaneda and Harimoto, and singer Kasuga Hachiro. The men did not drink alcohol, and instead declared anger for the mistreatment of Rikidozan by the Japanese, their hearts in grief for a hero who had sacrificed so much, only to be disregarded because he was Korean.

The life and times of Rikidozan were a popular North Korean subject for the purposes of propaganda. The two “biographical” sources previously mentioned are the only ones that have

leaked out of North Korea and can be publicly accessed online. These two sources have given great insight into the North Korean version of Rikidozan's career. These sources, however, are also filled with embellishments, unverifiable statements, and flat-out lies at times. When cross referencing the book *"I Am a Korean"* (1989) and the documentary *"I'm a Korean! Rikidozan, World Wrestling Champion"* with the fandom book *"Japan: The Rikidozan Years, 1951-1963 (The Great Wrestling Venues Book 4)"*, the inconsistencies become clear. Haruo Yamaguchi, Scott Teal, and Koji Miyamoto are all wrestling historians, who have dedicated their lives to researching and writing about professional wrestling and archiving the past. These historians had a simple goal in mind, to record the history of the matches having taken place, alongside some supplementary work to give context to the events that had occurred. The biggest contradiction is with Rikidozan's feud with Lou Thesz. North Korea built up Rikidozan's career to defeat Lou Thesz in close bouts, when both wrestlers worked many matches together, most of which either ended in a draw or with Thesz winning. Some of the matches Thesz won were by 2 straight falls, with Rikidozan failing to even score one. Rikidozan is characterized as being a hard fighter who would have won if, "it was decided according to the ways of professional boxing, Rikidozan would have won by the score of 23 to 21." Even Rikidozan's dominant win over Lou Thesz was actually a win via disqualification. In the North Korean version, Lou Thesz was defeated because he could not withstand the power of the many chops that Rikidozan hit him with, with the referee stopping the match like a technical knockout in boxing. There isn't any footage of the event, or any records I could find that reveals the finish of the match, but the newspapers the day after Rikidozan vs Lou Thesz in Los Angeles reported that this match was both a non-title match, and that Rikidozan had won it.

The depressing, yet very real ending of Rikidozan's career is about a beloved hero becoming washed up, unable to perform in the ring like he used to, and having money troubles

that would go on to affect his family long after his death. In the North Korean version of events, none of that was mentioned. While Rikidozan's death was a mystery, the best guess was Rikidozan's relaxed muscles didn't allow oxygen to travel through his body. North Korea's version of events is the irresponsibility of Japanese doctors giving him an unnecessary surgery, alongside someone sneaking in a carbonated drink that would ultimately kill Rikidozan. Rikidozan also did not trust his personal doctor, as his "sixth sense" told him not to trust the doctor. The doctor was also portrayed as an uncaring man who had shown zero emotion to Rikidozan's death. The doctor only cared about making money off Rikidozan's beat up body. There's zero evidence to support this view, as the doctors simply did their job to save Rikidozan's life and unfortunately failed.

The funeral in the North Korean interpretation of Rikidozan's career was a shameful act where all Rikidozan's wrestlers and supposed friends expressed their hatred for Rikidozan and indulged in gluttony and constantly disgraced his grave and tomb. Rikidozan's death shook the JWA, with a memorial show being made to remember Rikidozan's legacy. Even Katsushi Murata, who had been responsible for Rikidozan's death, had continued to visit the gravesite as a form of penance for his actions.

Professional wrestling is the furthest thing away from being political or historical in nature. It is all about athletic men putting on a show, telling stories through headlocks, body slams, and top rope elbow drops. It is a more physical form of the stage play, which leaves the option open to tell rich stories about sensitive topics, but most of the time the stories are about chasing a championship or defeating an enemy. Rikidozan's career, however, was especially tied to the current political climate and the history of the Japanese Empire. The reason Rikidozan left Korea for Japan, for example, related to Japan's former control of Korea. The man who brought

Rikidozan to Japan to be a sumo wrestler was Minosuke Momota, a Japanese man who had moved to Korea to become a policeman. The propaganda Rikidozan extolled through his matches had originated during the Pacific Theater of World War 2, where the Japanese believed that it was more noble to die than to be captured and dishonored. Even with the brutal tactics of war such as kamikaze suicide attacks, all of it was justified under the belief that these actions were necessary to exact justice on the evil other.

It is hard to say that Rikidozan would have had the career if he had been born and brought up in a different time. The Japanese Empire collapsed after the end of World War 2 and the dropping of the atomic bomb, creating a situation in which the Japanese people desperately needed a hero. Kim Sin-rak, a Korean by birth, was embraced by the Japanese public as the first post-war hero under the mantle of Rikidozan. Rikidozan's status as a great professional wrestler was also embraced by North Korea, who had branded him as the embodiment of Juche, a hero that the North Korean citizens live up to. Professional wrestling in Japan is filled with many companies that make up the market, but all of them are tied back to Rikidozan's JWA. Without JWA, Antonio Inoki would not have founded NJPW, Shohei Baba would not have founded AJPW. Without Rikidozan, there simply would be no place for domestic Japanese professional wrestling. Rikidozan became a massive star through a combination of hard work and dedication, but also receiving a huge boost by the historical situation he found himself in. Rikidozan died in 1963, but he leaves behind one of the greatest legacies a professional wrestler could have. He was in the right place and right time to both pioneer the wrestling industry and Japan, while also serving as a national hero in two countries with differing ideologies. Rikidozan might not have been a perfectly upstanding man behind the scenes, but when he was in the ring, he was the hero Japan and North Korea needed to uplift their countries.