

Rehabili

Category: Across Borders and Cultures
written by Ruth Harimoto | March 7, 2017

I live in Tokyo Japan.

I have a knee injury that necessitates frequent visits to my orthopedic surgeon, and the physical therapy department, which is called "Rehabili," of the same hospital.

A few weeks ago, as I sat in the waiting area in front of my doctor's door, waiting for my name to be called, a tall man in a ukata (a cotton kimono-style garment) slowly and regally walked by me. He had his obi tight and low around his hips, and his hair was long, and styled in a shiny chonmage, a topknot, on top of his head. This man was instantly recognizable as a sumo wrestler.

The hospital where I am treated seems to specialize in sports injuries. I have watched baseball pitchers working on their throw, runners returning to form, and other serious athletes recovering from various surgeries or accidents. This is part of the fascination that the rehabili room holds for me, watching these athletes whose muscles and gritty determination bear absolutely no likeness to mine, regain their performing condition.

If I were at a similar hospital in, for example, Milwaukee Wisconsin, I would not be surprised to see a football player in physical therapy. This is Japan. My co-patient was a sumo wrestler.

As it happened, later on, down in the actual rehabili room, there was another sumo wrestler. This man was younger, scarcely out of his teens, but the respectable length of his hair in the proper top-knot suggested that he was no novice to the sport. This young wrestler, however, was wearing shorts and a T-shirt from Hawaii. His therapist was a girl just out of college, of average size for a Japanese young woman, meaning that she was approximately one-sixth to one-fifth of his weight. Still, she handled his bulging thighs and calves with skill, sympathized with him over the pain of walking on an injured leg, especially when one weighs 250 kilograms, and confidently instructed him in a regime of exercises.

Sometimes I am asked why I live in Japan. Depending on my mood and the extent of interest of the person asking, my answer varies. "It's safe here," I might say. "The food," is my most frequent answer. Or, I might take a bit longer to explain how I love that I do not need to own a car here; public transportation is safe, dependable and affordable. But if you ask me today, this is my answer: Because, when I am lying on the physical therapy mat, waiting for my turn with the therapist, the patient next to me is a sumo wrestler.

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