



Kaori Icho's gold medals at the last three Olympic Games all came in the 63 kg weight class. At Rio 2016, Icho won gold in the 58 kg class.  
Photo: Yohei Osada/Afillo Sports

# Cultural Exchange on the Wrestling Mat

**Four-time Olympic gold medalist Kaori Icho is promoting international exchange through her sport, freestyle wrestling.**

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**OSAMU SAWAJI**

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**O**N June 28, the award ceremony of the Commendation for Sports was held at a hotel in Tokyo. About 480 athletes, coaches, supporting organizations and referees received awards, among them three-time Olympic gold medalist Kaori Icho, who would shortly compete – and win her fourth gold – in the 58-kg weight class of women's freestyle wrestling at the 2016 Summer Olympics. As one of Japan's biggest medal hopes at Rio 2016, Icho was surrounded by journalists after the ceremony.

“The attraction of wrestling is to be able to apply strategy to counter another player's moves. The

sport requires only your body when competing and nothing else,” says Icho. “It's a very fun sport.”

At 166 cm, Icho is tall for a Japanese woman, though she does not look out of the ordinary dressed in civilian clothes. In her singlet on the wrestling mat however, Icho has achieved extraordinary results.

Icho began wrestling around the age of three, when she started going to the wrestling club in Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture with her brother and sister, who are seven and three years her senior, respectively. The Icho sisters Kaori and Chiharu progressed in the sport through school and university, winning national competitions along the way. They both participated in the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, the year when women's wrestling became an official Olympic event, with Kaori winning gold in the 63 kg weight class and Chiharu winning silver in the 48 kg class. Again at the Beijing



Kaori Icho at the venue for the Commendation for Sports awards ceremony.  
Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

Olympics in 2008, Kaori won a gold medal and Chiharu, silver. Chiharu subsequently retired, but Kaori continued to compete, and again won gold at the 2012 London Games. She also participated in the World Championships ten times between 2002 and 2015 and won the title on each occasion.

“In Japan there are not many opportunities to compete with wrestlers from overseas,” says Icho. “When participating in overseas competitions, you can see that the style of wrestling differs completely from one nation to another, or between

Asians and Westerners. That’s an extremely interesting experience.”

Almost every year for about fifteen years, Icho has competed in international competitions outside of Japan. In addition to wrestling, she has a great interest in the culture of her opponents. Whenever she participates in a competition overseas, she enjoys talking to her fellow athletes before and after the competition or practice sessions.

In recognition of her experience and contributions, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology requested that Icho become an ambassador of the World Forum on Sport and Culture, which is scheduled to be held in Kyoto and Tokyo in October. Icho readily agreed to this request, and is an ambassador who also acts as a messenger when promoting the forum to the world.

“As an ambassador, I would like to contribute to the development of sports, because it is meaningful to me,” says Icho. “I need to take responsibility to educate many people so that they can learn the techniques and training methods that I learned from various coaches. I intend to develop my communication skills in the future so that I can interact with anyone, wherever I am in the world.”

## World Forum on Sport and Culture

The World Forum on Sport and Culture will discuss and transmit information about the international contributions of sport, culture, economics, and their tangible and intangible legacy while coordinating with tourism to hold an international meeting in Tokyo and Kyoto that will serve as a kick-off event to enhance the Olympic/Paralympic movement after the 2016 games in Rio, working toward the 2019 Rugby World Cup, 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games and 2021 Kansai World Masters Games, etc.

The World Forum on Sport and Culture will be held in Kyoto and Tokyo this autumn supported by the World Economic Forum, known for the Davos Forum. Ministers who are in charge of local and international sports, prominent figures who work for global firms, researchers, athletes, and artists have been invited to attend the forum. Events that are scheduled to take place include lectures, workshops, and cultural activities. As of August 3, ten ambassadors including Kaori Icho, Mayumi Narita, who is featured on the next page, and other notable people in the world of sports, culture, and business have been appointed to raise public awareness about the forum.

**Schedule:** October 19 and 20 (Kyoto), October 20 to 22 (Tokyo)

**Venue:** ROHM Theatre Kyoto, Roppongi Hills, and others

**URL:** <http://wfsc2016.mext.go.jp/en/>

