For combat sports fans who enjoy their action outside of the Zuffa-owned world last night was a big deal in Japan. FEG's Dynamite!! events have been long-running staples in Japan, featuring a mixture of Kickboxing and MMA but being distinctly Japanese. Last night Glory Sports International helped to infuse money and strength into the Japanese kakutougi scene by sponsoring DREAM.18 and using it as a launching platform for their own, K-1-style Kickboxing tournament. There were times last night when I found myself thinking that kakutougi in Japan was really back, while there were other times when I found myself groaning and wishing for the past. I think that it is fair to say that the DREAM event was exactly what the MMA world needed, while the GLORY Grand Slam might not have been on that level just yet.

It is hard to explain the magic behind a big MMA event in Japan and just how it looks and feels, but if you were unclear on how those shows feel, go ahead and watch DREAM.18. To me, it was one of the best MMA events of the year, even if some of the fights were not exactly "UFC-caliber." In Japan, it doesn't matter if every fight is between top contenders or if a fighter is coming off of a loss or even two, what matters is their fighting spirit and performance, and the fighters without a doubt performed last night. On top of that, the production was that of a classic, big Japanese event, with the epic VTRs, the big entrances, the lighting, the video boards and the announcers. Fans were enjoying the event and it felt like a special show from beginning to end.

Then GLORY 4 Tokyo hit the stage and things took a drastic change. It became quickly apparent that there was an entirely different crew handling the production of the event as it felt distinctly “Dutch” and not Japanese. There is nothing wrong with that -- save for the fact that it was in Japan with a Japanese audience. Leading up to GLORY 4 Tokyo there was speculation as to why the GLORY 4 event wasn’t going over well with fans, and the only way to look at it was that Japanese fans were not looking forward to a Dutch event, even if it was the same people funding the DREAM.18 event. As GLORY 4 Tokyo unfolded with the rapping Swedish announcer, videos that lacked the Japanese charm and polish and lack of entrances it became clear why Japanese audiences were not interested in a standalone Glory Kickboxing event.

The fighters all did their jobs at GLORY 4 Tokyo and it was without a doubt the best Heavyweight Kickboxing card of the year, but the response in the arena was tepid, at best, and the production felt nowhere near as polished as the DREAM event. DREAM.18 conjured up images of past K-1 events in Japan, stuff like former K-1 MAX or K-1 WGP events with the slick production on top of the great fights, and sadly, there was no way for this event to live up to that past glory without a similar production staff. The show lacked any sense of it being in Japan, as fans sat politely and even clapped here and there, but were mostly confused by the lack of announcements, the awkward reffing -- even some fights didn’t have a bell at the end -- all led to the crowd’s confusion and a rather flat showing on television.

So in a way, it felt like Japanese MMA came back in a year where we’ve seen fans of Japanese MMA holding onto threads and embracing One FC’s emulation of Japanese glory, while this show was exactly what the doctor ordered. As for K-1 fans, this was one step closer to the past glories of K-1, but was still missing some of that magic and spark that made K-1 such a rousing success.