

The European Sumo Championships An Ozumo nursery or a den of confusion?

Francois Wahl interviewed by Mark Buckton

Early June saw the European Sumo Championships take place in Budapest, Hungary.

Not much leaked out about the goings on in the capital of a land known more for its 1950s football team and goulash than sumo, which could have been down to the appearance of an unofficial Israeli delegation presumably being invited to attend when the IFS and even ESU recognised team that appeared at the 2006 World Championships remained at home.

Results appeared on the ESU's new homepage soon after but no full participant lists, nothing on nations present or even individual results was offered to the sumo following media.

Whatever the reason for the lack of a full on report, there was some cause to celebrate as increasing numbers are apparently being drawn to the sport, the potential for refereeing errors or bias is being addressed and at least one ESU official is willing to let the rest of the fans of sumo around the world know what went on.

ESU Treasurer and head of the Swiss Sumo Society, Mr Francois Wahl is that official and SFM hereby publicly thanks him for answering a few questions and shedding light on some interesting events and beliefs.

Here is what he had to say:

SFM: Francois, how were the latest European Championships over there in Budapest? Well attended?

FW: Very nice to be honest. A record number of countries made the journey – 23 in all and enjoyed three full days of competition. It was a truly remarkable effort by

the Hungarian Association President Mr Kolarik (an ESU Vice President) and his staff.

SFM: And what of the level of competition at this year's event?

FW: It is improving all the time. At present our top athletes are still (as a result of a ban in effect since late 2006 on rikishi and ESU officials attending the Big Boy Sumo event in the USA in mid-2006) not permitted to take part in IFS sponsored events but they can compete in European events. That said, a lot of new faces are also coming through and I think Europe is definitely going to be competitive at the world level this year - with or without our top athletes.

SFM: I understand the IFS sent no Japanese advisers or referees. Do you think this apparent lack of interest by the world body had any consequences?

FW: The event itself was honored by the presence of the Japanese Ambassador to Hungary but you are correct in saying that there was no official Japanese representation at the organisational level. We did attract a record number of referees with 32 attending and the organisers were particularly mindful of preventing referees from adjudicating in a bout containing one of their own countrymen. This is a subject of debate between the ESU directors and the IFS so hopefully this will be a step on the road to finding a solution.

As video evidence has clearly shown in the past, it is obvious that Japanese referees do not stop

Japanese rikishi if they 'go early'. In Japan this is an acceptable form of tachiai but not according to IFS rules. However, you cannot remove habits built up over years of competition in Japan so this issue should be resolved on good will.

Personally, I am convinced that, contrary to the opinions of certain Europeans, Japanese referees are not intentionally biased. Only 'habit' is to blame here and knowing some of the referees, I can say they are completely above board and 100% neutral - doing the best they can. Of course, not having a Russian referee take charge of a fight in which a Russian competes would be preferable and the existence of this sort of rule in most sports should also work its way into sumo in the future – it is just a matter of time.

SFM: What can you tell us about the 'Israeli' rikishi present – if there were any?

FW: It was actually the first time I had seen these people but what happened when I did is actually something of an embarrassing story.

In amateur sumo a European nation joining the ESU must first be recognised by the IFS. Only then can the ESU officially 'recognise' that country – thereby allowing them voting and competition rights. In our (ESU) statutes we claim adherence to IFS rules.

However, in the case of the recent championships in Budapest, as treasurer, I was responsible for ESU accounting of course and

when the event(s) started, the competing nations must first register for a hotel and meals. A picture is taken of each individual and a card / pass is made detailing access levels afforded.

They then come to my own desk so I can confirm if a given nation has paid their annual dues and ESU membership in addition to event entry fee. Thereafter, at the end of the event, they can ask our president or any of our vice presidents for a certificate of attendance.

This year an Israeli representative did appear with a card and, when asked to do so, paid his dues and thus validated his participation. He did thereafter take part in the events.

Upon my return to Geneva the following Monday though, I saw that a 'different' Israeli association had made a wire transfer to the ESU - but it was not the same association.

How one unofficial association managed to present themselves at the actual championships is a mystery to me but the ESU obviously has a loophole in its organisation and in its statutes as the recognised association was not actually there.

I believe it would be simpler if the respective continental unions agree on their own rules of admission prior to ratification by the IFS but I can say that this mistake will carry no consequence and will not repeat itself.

SFM: Any final words on the World Championships being moved to northern Thailand – given your position as head of things sumo in Switzerland (the original location for the event)?

FW: I am truly sorry that I could not manage to get past the change of date which had a negative knock on effect on our sponsors being willing to support the event as I realise just how difficult it will be for the European nations to attend the event in Thailand during peak season!

Had I been offered the opportunity to organise these championships from a financial and accounting perspective I most certainly would have but now we'll have to wait and see what happens.