

World Championship Attendance To Suffer After Move To Chiang Mai

by Mark Buckton

If early rumblings in Europe and Asia are anything to go by, the upcoming 2007 Sumo World Championships scheduled for mid-November in the Thai city of Chiang Mai could well find itself lacking the numbers needed to impress the International Olympic Committee ahead of a possible 2008 reappraisal of the amateur branch of the sport.

Although amateur sumo failed to even make it onto the agenda at the annual IOC meet earlier this year, the International Sumo Federation continues to push for full IOC recognition.

Achieving this goal on the back of the Lausanne – Chiang Mai SWC move, however, looks less than plain sailing in the weeks ahead irrespective of at least one northern Thailand news source now announcing 35 nations as having registered for the event; a number supposedly originating from Thai sumo authorities and a figure not seen since 37 nations took part in the 1997 event. Nothing has been officially announced thus far in Japan.

If confirmed, it will prove to be the 5th highest number of participating nations in the fifteen year history of the championships.

On a less optimistic note, the sole Frenchman known to be in amateur sumo, Mr. Sebastien Iniesta, an attendee at the World Games in Hungary earlier in the year, will not be attending; financial reasons blocking participation in a second event this year.

Israel too has recently confirmed a lack of attendance of the registered* national team while

the British heavyweight at last year's Osaka version of the event, Mr. Mark Kent of SFM, is another confirming he will not be traveling out to the Far East.

The German presence will be down on recent years according to a report out of Germany last week. Mr. Gunther Romenath, President of the European Sumo Union, and a German national has indicated that just 5 adult rikishi will be attending compared to the 7 listed in the 06 program. It is further understood that at present, no German juniors are scheduled to make the journey for the junior's event.

At the western extreme of Europe meanwhile, although Ireland's president Colin Carrol promised much after their first ever appearance - at the 2006 championships - little has come to fruition. The Sumo Ireland homepage has still not re-emerged from the online wilderness but Sumo Ireland's president has hinted that a Tokyo based amateur rikishi from the Taito-ku, Komatsuryu Dojo, in Japan, John Gunning - former SFM Photo Editor - will be their (sole?) competitor heading south. Medals are not on John's horizon but if any man competing is doing so with experience of what it means to be a 'sand worn' rikishi tried and tested in Japan, Gunning is that man.

In another blow for the tournament, renowned Czech rikishi Peter Matous will be sitting out the 2007 event, not having had the time to escape his studies at The University of Tokyo to return to the Czech Republic to qualify for his national team. Matous is by far the most experienced Czech

rikishi out there but has fallen foul of national rules of team selection that will likely keep the national team all but a family affair once more – the Poriz family dominating Czech amateur sumo.

In the women's game, little is leaking out so it remains to be seen if national financial constraints end up reducing female participation as members aim to get the men over to Chiang Mai.

The 2006 UK women's contingent will be one to look out for to see if last year's stars of a (UK TV) Channel Four show aimed to make fighting women out of regular English lasses are really serious about sumo or if it was a one-off.

Results at the Milan Open in late September might point to the latter given the podium absence of 2006 Shinsumo World Championships medalist Adele Jones in what was a relatively easy field, but the 150 kg, 183 cm, Sharran Alexander has certainly signaled her own interest in taking the UK heavyweight women's slot from her 140 kg senior, the 51-year-old Jackie Bates, by walking away with the bronze medal at the event. This is believed to have guaranteed her a seat on the flight to Thailand although nothing has yet been heard of the Jones, Williams or Hathaway trio – Britain's other female participants in 2006 – and darlings of Channel Four.

** a team supposedly representing Israel did appear at a recent European event although this was not the IFS registered team and confusion remains as to why they were permitted to attend.*