

The 'Little Frenchie' – Standing up and Being Counted

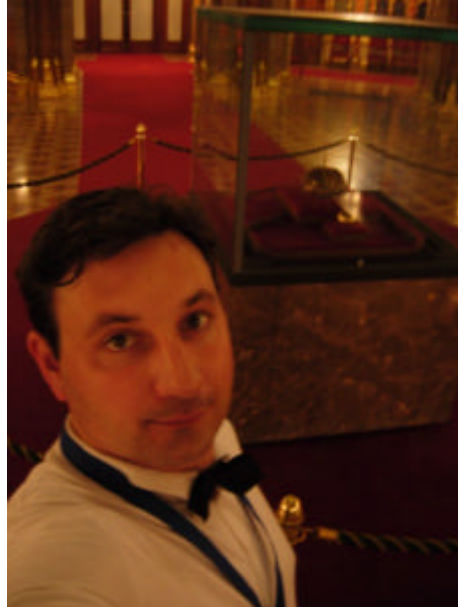
One man's battle to represent his nation (Part 2 of 2)

by Sébastien Iniesta

Early awakening on Friday morning. The day would be long, I was to be among the first to referee! Good thing, I would just be a bench judge acting from the side of the dohyo... we went through a fast training and recapitulation of the rules, of our rights and duties, and then on we went. Several teams of referees would rotate throughout the day, because refereeing requires a lot of focus, and it is impossible to hold it for long. I was totally fascinated by this part of sumo which I was just discovering, and was really satisfied and happy with it. The experience was really exciting! Moreover, it was a dohyo made of clay - the organization team had a young guy come especially from Japan to build it - that was excellent and really classy.

Apart from that, during that day, I had to juggle the short minutes available during the breaks to grab a sandwich and venture out to seek a bank to get some cash. Funny one: at the police station, no one spoke a single word of English, and when I finally resolved, after having walked and hesitated for a long time, to ask my way in the street, I ran into a French girl from Lille who was spending a few days here, and who was able to show me a cash machine just a few minutes away from the gymnasium. Life is sometimes quite funny, don't you think?

Later in the afternoon, I learnt that the Japanese ambassador would be there during the opening ceremony, and that each delegation representative was invited, by the mayor of the town



and the speaker of the Hungarian parliament, within the walls of the parliament itself in the very center of town. Roughly speaking, I had turned from a mere competitor to a flag-bearer in no more than a day...my friend Richard Neal and I thus left a bit earlier than the rest of the referees to reach the buses transporting the VIPs of European sumo to the parliament, at top speed through the town, escorted by two motorbikes and a police car.

I saw there one of the most beautiful buildings I'd ever seen in my whole life, that we could briefly visit, a truly magnificent place, before reaching a more intimate place where an award ceremony had been organized for the prominent members of the organization... and after that, the sweetest petits fours. Big show, indeed.

The meeting of the European Sumo Union was scheduled for

Saturday evening, with several details to be discussed and voted on. Were the schedule to be respected, I would just have time to eat and get ready for my first trial: the tournament of the under-115 kgs, which should take place during the afternoon. But then I discovered that, even if amateur sumo is not really under the media spotlight, the political stakes are very important and can lead to hard discussions and ferocious struggles for influence... so much so that in a very tight vote, a member of the delegation, quite suspicious of my identity and nationality, asked to check my passport!

The organization though, was once again impressive: a fully equipped conference room, recording the debates and burning CDs to give to each delegation, and interpreters in Hungarian, Russian and English; there was no room for amateurism. The meeting was long and ultimately chaotic when the subject of the adhesion of new countries to the ESU was put on the table. The number of requests is strangely high this year, and the imminent election of a new president raises some questions about the new votes they will get, if I understood correctly. But, at the same time, it is hard to wish for amateur sumo to expand without greeting the countries wishing to participate...

Together with the secretary general and a number of other participants, I finally left the room, urged by the necessity to grab something to eat before competing. Inside, the debate was

still raging... strange experience.

After lunch, I quickly went to the gymnasium and asked Richard to help me with my mawashi, which I was wearing for the first time, before going to the "warm-up" room. There, a television was broadcasting the bouts live, and the wrestlers, men and women, were preparing themselves, some quite gently, others in a more physical way. As for me, I spotted my opponent, a Dutch guy, and evaluated him for a long moment. He did not make a move and pretended not to see me. But – as I would discover later – he quickly made up his mind about me and chose his strategy according to this opinion.

I took the time to warm up physically, but it was mentally that I intended to make a difference. I strengthened my resolve, and searched for every shred of energy and temper I could find in me. Having found a pillar, I worked my arm/leg coordination. That was most certainly my only advantage, keeping in mind that I know next to nothing about hand-to-hand fighting. Waiting was becoming quite protracted, the senior categories were progressing slowly. I sat down and tried my best to keep the best focus possible, though I could feel that the lack of sleep in the last restless nights was taking its toll on me. I just hoped that it would vanish when the bout started.

At last, my bout came. I felt that I was mentally swimming under water, between calm and extreme tension. I bowed quite mechanically, while avoiding looking directly at my opponent, as I had been told. That was my first mistake. I could have spotted something in the expression of my opponent, and could have been more on my guard. The tachiai moment approached, and I

focused all my energies: fast start at the referee's call, I will come at him like a bull and push straight ahead until he goes out. That sounds nice, huh ?

Fists on the ground, I felt the referee going backwards before hearing him. I literally exploded from my crouch, lifting my head up in the same movement and... no one was in front of me! I felt two hands grabbing my left arm, and I was stunned that I hadn't seen anything coming, awed by the swiftness and strength of the grip on my arm, I stood on the brakes, but my movement was hastened by perfect leverage, just like a discus thrower, I couldn't help it at all... and went out. Sumo: 1, me: 0...

I went back to my position and bowed to my opponent. I was a bit frustrated by the henka because I couldn't evaluate what I'm worth in a frontal push, but honestly, I was amazed by such technical and timing skill! I had been stunned by my opponent but admired him, and as Richard had told me moments before, I suddenly became his biggest fan: if he were to win his next bout, I would be given the chance of another bout! Unfortunately for me, he fought Atsama Kaziev, who was to finish as the bronze medalist, and lost his bout. The day was over for me, and I now had to assess this experience and refocus on the open weight category the following day.

I spent the rest of the day hanging out in the gymnasium to take some shots of the event and some videos of the fights, admired the ceremonies and the magnificent trophies handed to the winners, and at last enjoyed the championships without any kind of pressure. Overall, I had a strange feeling bugging me as I observed those wrestlers. There

was practically never a frontal collision. The wrestlers just went forward while standing up and grabbing their opponent. For me, who only knew Ozumo before coming here, that was kind of weird... the men's finals for under 85 kg was one of the best examples: neither of the wrestlers started before the other, the two men just waited and evaluated each other until one went straight forward and won without virtually any opposition...

I was told that most of the amasumo wrestlers have a background in free wrestling or Greco-Roman wrestling, where there is no frontal confrontation; they often fight in these sports parallel to sumo. Against the heaviest wrestlers, less dynamic than the under-115 kg, I had the feeling that a good tachiai could be devastating... was I just fooling myself ? I hoped to have the opportunity to see if I was right the next day in the Open category competition.

The last day started quite badly. As I had just spent another bad night, I was feeling that I would pay the price. For such a nightbird, my morning bout wasn't heading in a good direction. Today were the open weight and team competitions. With three wrestlers needed in each team, France wouldn't be represented. Too bad...

In the gym, I met the Swiss team, very good guys who greatly welcomed me, which was comforting. I warmed up again, but it was impossible to recover the guts I had had the previous day, and physically, I felt a little weak. I was way too tired, and in doubt. I was to fight against an Italian weighing under 115 kg, and that worried me a lot, I would have preferred taking on a big guy. First, as he was under 115, I could

surely guess he was a technician, more than me at least. Then, maybe he had seen my bout the previous day, and was planning a henka. I just couldn't go all out then. But if I didn't, what could I do? I couldn't really rely on greater strength or vision, especially this morning, and certainly not on better technical skill. I chose then to rely on a solid but cautious tachiai, as low as I could, we would see then where that would lead me. But I was clearly not in my best shape...

One of the Swiss guys suggested that I warm up with him with a short series of free fights. I'd have preferred to focus myself a bit more, keeping all my strength for the fight to come, but I accepted, though a bit reluctantly. But how could I refuse, those Swiss are so nice! I just thought I was gonna play it soft. But he didn't seem eager to play it zen-like! He crashed into me like a truck, and I felt at that very moment that he was way stronger than me in his upper body. That just finished crushing my spirits. In what could be defined as a burst of self-respect, I then tried for several bouts to give him a real opponent, but he literally swept me away. My mind was quite blurred, caught between the desire to resist and the need to retain my strength.

Suddenly, while pushing him away smoothly with my left hand, I felt my thumb dislocate from its axis; I stopped and put it back into place. Then I felt the pain, and I was so pissed off to have hurt myself so stupidly while warming up! I really should have refused... but would this have changed anything? I walked for a few seconds and sat while trying to ease the pain with a massage. Some seconds later, Richard burst into the warm-up room to tell me that it was my turn to compete! Yes, really, that wasn't a good day for me...

I ran to the dohyo and messed up a

little, hesitating on the bowing. The Italian guy had a dark stare, very focused and aggressive. I thought he could be handled, but then... I decided to stick to the plan: this time I wouldn't go all out, and we would see what happened. I had been told that my opponent wasn't eager on head-on confrontations; that could do it...

My fists were on the ground, but I felt that I wasn't in it mentally. I heard the referee shouting and I started, but way too late. The tachiai was hard, I stumbled against a wall that stopped me clean. At the last minute, my opponent had decided to go all out and I felt that he had a lower stance than mine; that sucked. A split second later his right hand locked onto my mawashi, while I still hadn't any grip. I tried to move my hips backwards to unlock him, but the grip was just too perfect. Taking opportunity of the movement, I threw my left hand towards his belly and took his mawashi with the tip of my fingers, but my thumb wouldn't hold anything and that was my weakest arm. Locked as I was, I felt his chest enclosing me like a bench vice, and I couldn't move at all.

Then, in a superb neck move, my opponent put his head under my chest and lifted me up more, and then pushed brutally. I only had seconds. I knew it, but I resisted as much as I could and for now, it was working. My right hand was fighting hard to get a grip on the back of his mawashi, which would have helped. But, surely seeing the danger, or just considering that he couldn't succeed in head-on sumo, my opponent diverted suddenly and the pressure with the movement of his hips sent me flying away with a superb throw. I stumbled in the sand, got to my feet with a slight smile. It was all over but it was fair, and that was ok. At least I had the opportunity

to do some sumo this time...

In the next round, my opponent was crushed by a heavy guy, Vasil Margiev, who ended as the silver medallist in the open weight category. No extra fight once again, and I just had to gather my stuff... that's sumo. I spent the rest of the day enjoying the competition and the team event. I talked a bit with some of the referees and members of the organizing team; everyone was really nice. Meanwhile, I started to work on the balance sheet, already...

What is sure, is that Russia was far superior in terms of medals. I don't even know if one single podium was free of Russian wrestlers. From a more global approach, Eastern Europe was very strong. I was told that the European level is high globally and not far from world level, because there is no, or virtually no, weak nation, so the level is equally strong. Also, I was impressed by the strength of some delegations; their "political" representative, coach, masseur, referees, and teams for men, women, and youngsters, when compared with the French situation, for example. I wondered how a country such as ours could be that inferior, that's just sad... I hope that this will change in the future.

From a more personal viewpoint, it's hard to say anything. First, the financial situation is hard to handle, and that's why I won't be going to the World Championships in Thailand. Then, it's very hard to be the sole representative of your country, because you have to do everything: political representation, administrative stuff, registration and waiting for the draw, refereeing, preparation, bouts; I spent four days running everywhere, from 8 to 1am, and the bad nights finished me. Also, these championships were to be

the first experience before the World Championships in Lausanne, after just five months of physical and mental preparation. Now that the championships in Lausanne have been cancelled, everything is in jeopardy, and that's a hard blow to my spirits...

However, the experience was very nice and enriching; I have no

regrets about being there. I discovered a circle of friends and some very nice people, an impression strengthened by the Sayonara Party on Sunday night. A freaking great atmosphere, music, food, beer and fun, I settled with the Swiss team and we had a great night. And the most important: I LOVE SUMO! I don't know if my international experience will

continue, but for me there's one thing I'm sure of; I already want to do it again...

