



SFM Interview

Gunter Romenath – President of the European Sumo Union

by Mark Buckton

Since the inception of the International Sumo Federation (IFS), Mr. Gunter Romenath has served as President of the European Sumo Union (ESU).

German by birth and a person with a keen interest in judo since the age of 14, Mr. Romenath (GR), was once the oldest ever German champion level judoka, and competed at the 1967 Salt Lake City World Championships before serving as Coach of the German Judo Team for 10 years and Managing Director of the German Judo Federation for 21 years - attending five consecutive Olympic Games in the post. Sumo was never far away, even for the German national (judo) team, often serving as a form of training for those under his supervision.

Kind enough to keep a couple of hours clear for SFM earlier this month during a fortnight in Japan as head of the German judo delegation, Mr. Romenath changed hats and sat down on a blustery, overcast day in the Japanese capital with Editor-in-Chief, Mark Buckton (MB).

MB: Mr. Romenath, please tell us something about yourself, for those perhaps not so familiar with your name or with amateur sumo in Europe.

GR: I first came to Japan in 1962 as a member of the German National Team (Judo). I was preparing for the 1964 (Tokyo) Olympics because '64 was the first time judo appeared in the

Olympics. At the time I wanted to stay here for just a year but then I got a job in a German company and I decided to stay in Japan because East and West Germany at that time were just one team with only three athletes and it was very expensive for us. Also, German TV hired me and I got a job in a German chemical company connected to my background in printing and in the end I stayed here for 10 years.

MB: When did you first discover sumo?

GR: The first time I saw sumo was in about '64 or '65 and I sometimes went (to the Kokugikan) with customers of the chemical company. I was a great admirer of Taiho and when I returned to Germany in 1972, I got a big poster from him and I had this in my house for many years. He was tremendous. He was always beating everybody – all the time. He was also good-looking.

MB: How did you get involved in amateur sumo?

GR: I already spoke some Japanese and people knew of my love for Japan and for its culture – especially judo. I also liked sumo very much and some Japanese knew this and that I attended sumo events but at this time there was no organization for amateur sumo – in Germany or at the world level. Then one day, attending a judo event in Japan, somebody from the Japanese Judo Federation, in 1992 I think, asked me if I would like to take part in

the (sumo) world championships – all expenses paid – so I asked some retired, older German judoka if they would like to go to Japan to take part in the world championships and, more or less, we went to Japan. I trained them a little bit but from the beginning they were strong. We won some medals and then a funny thing happened.

I never pushed to be a big shot in sumo but I came and then we went to the Kokugikan and somebody gave me a flower and a nice big chair to sit on when all the others were sitting on small chairs. It was in this manner I was appointed head of sumo in Europe

MB: How was the International Sumo Federation formed?

GR: I really don't know. They had the first championship but there were no federations and when I was appointed as director of European sumo, being a person with many years of professional experience in Europe at this time, I said, 'OK, we need to make a real federation,' with the original statutes based on those of other Olympic federations and then, in 1995, we held the first European Championships and the first European Congress with five nations attending, including Germany, Bulgaria and France among the earliest members. The (attending members) elected me and since that time I have been re-elected, unopposed, as president of European sumo.

MB: Do you have annual elections? Is it a lifetime post?

GR: No, not lifetime, we want to be an Olympic sport so we follow Olympic guidelines, which means every four years (we hold elections). That means that next year, with the Olympics taking place, the (ESU) elections will take place.

MB: *Do the elections always take place at the ESU Championships?*

GR: Yes, for financial reasons. We have the Congress before the event and next year we will have the elections of the Directing Committee. I have told (the ESU directors) that now, at 67 years old, if I do it again and am 71 (when my term finishes), I think it is time that somebody else fills the post. I will stay as (an already-elected) honorary president and as a member of the Directing Committee but we now have several candidates (to replace me) so I have no idea who will succeed me but (I) have said I will stop even though I have been asked (to run) but I think 17 years is enough.

MB: *Time to pass the torch to the next generation?*

GR: Yes, and I told them if they need my help, because in sumo we don't have much money, (it is always there).

MB: *What is the financial situation like in Europe?*

GR: We pay everything ourselves. The athletes pay everything and this is the problem and something that perhaps the IFS don't understand well. I do want to stress that sumo is a wonderful sport and that it does belong to the Olympic family and we are working very hard in Europe to help the Japanese.

MB: *The ESU is, by far the best organized continental (sumo) body...*

GR: Yes, but still we have no money. But everything is

democratic and one thing nobody seems to understand is that we want to help. We love sumo but whoever is president in Europe, like me, would never go to the IFS without the approval of the European Congress – the Directing Committee. So, what really makes me sad and makes me cry is that, even now, I have been in Japan for two weeks and the Japanese (judo people) have paid for all of this (gesturing to his room on the 18th floor of the very impressive Tokyo Dome Hotel) and I am here as a sports director and the (judo) people have been very kind to me, but I have tried to meet the IFS many times when I came to Japan – to exchange views - but they always say, "No, we're busy." They don't want to meet me but whoever is president in Europe, if he or she wants to be a good president, must forward proposals in the interests of the International Sumo Federation.

MB: *How many continents do see (as existing) in amateur sumo? Realistically?*

GR: I think the ESU is the best organized. Even Asia, Oceania and America are 'so-so.' I'm not really sure but if you see the (world) championships, not many nations (from other continents) come.

MB: *How many countries took part in the 2007 ESU Championships in Hungary?*

GR: About 22 – many. Anyway, we should work hard and try to help the IFS but they kicked me out before then they let me in again.

MB: *Actually, SFM has tried to contact the IFS regarding media issues, for interviews and the like and they never answer – one reason SFM was not represented in Thailand this year. There is a language problem (despite the IFS supposedly being an English/Japanese bilingual organization) as only one person*

in the office is authorized to release comments but she has never (yet) answered an e-mail (of ours). As a former director of the IFS in addition to your role as president of the ESU, how do you see this and what do you think of the claims made by Mr. Idrissov in his own interview with SFM – about the system, the accounts and the method of seeking sponsors, all being closed?

GR: Everything that Mr. Idrissov said, I agree with. I completely agree, and, he is also a man with some experience with the International Olympic Committee – even more than I.

MB: *How do you run the ESU in terms of committees – accounts, PR and the like?*

GR: We have a treasurer, an auditor and we must be audited every year even though we don't have much income and everything is made public, (but), in 17 years (in amateur sumo) I have never seen any papers (relating to accounts at the IFS) and, as I said, it makes me sad. I do still think the leading positions at the International Sumo Federation should be (filled) by Japanese. No doubt about this, but, the Executive Committee must, as I understand it and, without criticizing, the IFS, (must understand) that the decision-making body must be the Congress; that is, the presidents of all the continents. But presently, all the decisions are made by the Executive Committee, which consists mostly of Japanese and a few foreigners. I don't really want to talk about this but if sumo wants to become (an) Olympic (sport), it must change in such a way that the Executive Committee consists of one president representing each continent, so six (individuals), and he cannot be kicked out normally if it is a real organizations because he is elected. I, for example, am elected by 26 (member) nations, maybe

more than there are participating in the world championships. Then (there should be) the president, a general secretary, a sports director, treasurer and referee director. That's eleven and almost the same as Mr. Idrissov said – I fully support (his comments). And then, below this, there must be commissions; a sports commission, also from each continent. Maybe it would only be Europe and Japan (at first) but also referee commissions and they make proposals to the directing committee who approve ideas and attend the Congress and the Congress finally votes. Nowadays though, it is all done by the Executive Committee, as Mr. Idrissov said, without any information (released) and we don't even have the chance to make proposals. I was always the bad boy who makes proposals but who was finally successful in many areas.

MB: *You have explained the perfect world as far as amateur sumo goes, but will it ever happen or will (your proposals) mean that Japan loses too much control?*

GR: It is like in judo now. A Korean and a Kuwaiti are in (power now) and the Japanese lost (these positions), but they are still the world's leading country in judo. That said, sumo is still a wonderful sport.

MB: *Being so closed, without all the proper committees, without the proper interaction of the Europeans, the Africans etc, will the IOC just laugh and say, you don't have this, you don't have that, when the next application is made?*

GR: I think the main thing the IOC will say is, 'Where do you have sumo? Who is taking part?' From (North) America there is only America. From South America, there is only Brazil, from Oceania it is only Australia and New

Zealand but not so many continents take part so they (IFS) must prove that sumo is practiced on all continents. I think the nations must change. As I said, the key positions must be held by the Japanese and I have many friends (in this area but) now they are not allowed to talk to me. I know them and they know me and they know what I have done (in Europe) and it makes me sad because in Riesa we had the world championships and we covered all the important admin. points, hotel categories etc, because I wanted to please the IFS.

We made a lot of effort with no sponsors and only the city helping us. It was a good championship and Mr. Tanaka was there until Sunday and he was sitting next to me and he was very kind and his wife was very kind.

MB: *How do you communicate (with the president of the IFS)? What language do you use?*

GR: Japanese. He doesn't speak English. Then, all of a sudden he said, 'Why don't we have bento (lunch boxes) for everybody – free of charge?' I told him we went to Japan and (organized) the half-board, full-board and various categories, and (you) agreed to this, and (bento in a) German sports hall may cause problems. We would have to increase the price a little bit. Then, all of a sudden he disappeared and none of the Japanese team arrived for the big buffet (we put on costing) between six and eight thousand euros (donated by the city of Riesa that evening). We had music and dancing but no Japanese appeared and I'm quite sure all the athletes would have liked (to have) come but then they had their own party somewhere.

MB: *Is the Japanese team (essentially) 'Nichidai' (referring to the dominance of the Nihon University rikishi in the teams selected for Sumo World Championships)*

GR: Yeah. I also heard they have no real elimination but that is their business. I don't care.

MB: *With the WSL (World Sumo League), how did that come about? So many were excited by it, particularly those in America. Was it a mistake for the ESU to get involved?*

GR: There were many things I didn't like (about the WSL) and when I managed the second world championships in Riesa, I was contacted (by Mr. Goldman of the WSL) but I didn't take any notice of him. I rejected him. Then, at the Duisburg World Games, I was introduced to Mr. Goldman by the IFS. They introduced me. I met him through them because he was a VIP (guest) of Mr. Tanaka (who) was sitting next to him. He (was involved with) awards ceremonies and was a big friend of Mr. Tanaka and that's why I got to know him. Then the IFS said, all of a sudden, 'no more Mr. Goldman.'

MB: *Why did they 'split up'?*

GR: I think he demanded too much money maybe.

MB: *The IFS?*

GR: Yeah, maybe, but the basic idea was the IFS trying to get more money. Goldman, in Madison Square Garden in New York, put on a very nice, much better organized event than the World Championships in Sakai. And then, all of a sudden, we were told that if we took part in the World Sumo League, we would be punished (and) banned.

MB: *Did that (threat of being banned) come before or after it all started?*

GR: Before, but, we (ESU) are a democratic organisation and Mr. Goldman said he would support us with several thousands of dollars per athlete and this was (a lot of) money for us. Then, we had asked

Mr. Goldman to come (to Europe) and we asked Mr. Tanaka for a meeting anywhere in the world to get some information on this because we could get some money for sumo, and at this time we wanted to know the reason why all of a sudden, (Mr. Goldman) was no good. I said we are in a democratic world and we demanded to meet him (Mr. Tanaka of IFS) but without any reasons, it was said that it was already decided. (Thereafter) we, (with) Mr. Gadd (Secretary General of the ESU) went there to see for ourselves what it was all about. But it wasn't just me; it was the ESU Directing Committee who decided that we would go – the European Sumo Union. And I believe I cannot be banned as I have never signed a document (making me) a member of the IFS. I am a member of a German club. I am a member of the German Sumo Federation and the German Sumo Federation is a member of the European Sumo Union and (therefore the) International Sumo

Federation, which means he cannot ban (me) if I am representing Europe. As I said though, as I will step down as president of the ESU next year...

MB: *Are the IFS trying to split you and the rest of the ESU?*

GR: They have tried already (for) many years! There was a no-confidence vote many years ago but only three votes went against me.

MB: *Can I ask who voted against you?*

GR: It was Poland (although now I am good friends with them), the Czech Republic and I have forgotten (the other).

MB: *One last question then, do you think a European would ever run against the current Japanese president (of the IFS)?*

GR: No, and I am against that actually. I am very much against

that because there are many very nice people in sumo but I don't think this is wise. I am not supporting this. I am trying to convince them. I am (trying) to help them – the International Sumo Federation.

Ed. Note – when speaking with Gunter Romenath, it is this final and seemingly unquenchable desire of wanting to help that shines through – permeating each exchange, each opinion. He is a man with an enthusiasm for amateur sumo that borders on the infectious, but whether or not the expertise and attention to detail a person has experienced in sports administration as Romenath can bring to the sport will ever be fully appreciated and adopted at the world level remains to be seen; long-term followers of the sport at this level probably won't hold their breath, but without a steep learning curve in the immediate future, how many would bet on Olympic acceptance anytime soon?

European Sumo Union

