

Jaromir Novotny Ambassador of the Czech Republic

Interview by Mark Buckton

*In mid-June, SFM's Mark Buckton sat down for almost an hour with the **Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Czech Republic, Jaromir Novotny**, at the Czech Embassy in the upscale neighborhood of Hiroo, Tokyo.*

After explaining the origins of the trophy presented by his embassy on behalf of his nation, the ambassador was kind enough to share with SFM some of his thoughts, feelings and experiences in and around the sport of sumo as well as mentioning briefly his obvious passion for ice hockey.

MB: Mr. Ambassador, just how deep does your own interest in sumo go?

JN: As ambassador, I am obliged to present the Czech Sumo Cup – the Czech Crystal Cup at the six tournaments per year

MB: Do you travel to each tournament to make these presentations?

JN: Yes, I go to them all. It is a long tradition. The Czechs started it in 1971 and the first winner of the (at that time) Czechoslovak Crystal Cup was Taiho so it is 35 years old now. The Czech Crystal Cup is third in line – after the (yusho) winner has been presented with the Emperor's Cup and the Prime Minister's Cup.

MB: I wanted to ask – how does the Sumo Association determine the order of the cups to be presented? Is it based on 'time served'?

JN: Exactly.

MB: Have you ever tried sumo

yourself?

JN: No, no. (shaking head and smiling)

MB: Would you like to?

JN: I think I am not strong enough and I am too old to start now.



The Ambassador – Courtesy of Czech Embassy

MB: If you could go back a few years?

JN: No. I don't think so.

MB: When did you first watch the sport?

JN: I first watched it when I came to Japan about one year ago. I was in India for five years before I came to Japan and they have a different type of wrestling over there but no sumo, and in the

Czech Republic sumo is not very popular.

MB: Just returning to the trophy, could you tell us a little bit more about the actual trophy you present?

JN: I can show you the trophy if you like?

(The ambassador shows MB down a flight of stairs and across a carpeted hallway, a short walk from the second floor site of the interview, and explains the two trophies on display – one, the large, perhaps 60cm tall and rather heavy Czech Crystal Cup presented to ozumo honbashi winners but retained by the embassy, (the yusho winner receives a miniature version to take home) and the other, a smaller and slightly more colorful crystal cup presented to the winners of a Japan-based robotics competition – the word 'robot' being of Czech origin.)

Upon returning to the site of the interview:

JN: (from 1993 onwards) We couldn't present the Czechoslovak Cup because Czechoslovakia no longer existed and eventually the Sumo Association agreed to our (presenting) it simply as the Czech (Crystal) Cup.

MB: Does the Slovakian Embassy present a trophy?

JN: No.

MB: On the issue of trophies, as you may know, the French trophy

(presented on senshuraku) has been withdrawn and some rather strange comments attributed to new President Sarkozy leaked out on the subject of sumotori – one result being the cancellation of the French trophy. Did you notice the ‘missing man’ on senshuraku last month?

JN: No. I am the third so I don’t wait for the others, the 12 or 15 (in line). There are so many people giving trophies nowadays – there is a queue. And, (referring to the Jacques Chirac link to the former French trophy) in our case it (the trophy) is not connected with one person, it is connected with the state.

MB: What would happen were your own successor a woman.

JN: She could not pass it. She (would be) forbidden to enter (the dohyo) so the deputy would pass it.

MB: No problems there?

JN: No.

MB: Do you think sumo is a sport that would have a future in the Czech Republic? You have a team (of amateurs) there now of course.

JN: Yes, we have a team but sumo belongs to another culture, not to our culture. Our number one sport is ice hockey. We are the world champions and we have many national players in the National Hockey League. Then it is football, tennis, skiing, volleyball, basketball but not sumo.

MB: It will never have a real place?

JN: No. It is not our tradition so....

MB: Have you met the two sumo stars from the Czech Republic here in Japan? (Takanoyama of Naruto Beya and Petr Matous of Tokyo

University)

JN: I have met them; when the president visited in February. They were invited to the reception with the president but when you are taking care of the president you don’t remember everyone you meet.

MB: Have you watched sumo privately – not as part of your official duties?

JN: Yes, I have been invited to the stables. Taiho invited me twice so I had dinner with the star of that particular stable – Roho.

MB: In which language do you speak with Roho?

JN: With Roho I can speak Russian.

MB: When watching sumo, do have any personal favorites? Anybody in particular?

JN: (Nodding and with a slight smile on his lips) - I keep my fingers crossed for Kotooshu and for Roho because I know them.

MB: Do you have a favorite style of sumo – oshi / yotsu?

JN: I like Asashoryu’s style but Hakuho is now better than Asashoryu. I have passed the cup to Asashoryu several times now and twice to Hakuho. Hakuho is younger and Asashoryu is older but was alone as ‘number one’ for so long.

MB: On the subject of the two non-Japanese yokozuna, some in Japan are not so happy....

JN: What can they do? It is the same in ice hockey in the Canadian, North American ice hockey league. The best players are Europeans now.

MB: (knowing next to nothing

about ice hockey) Are there many Czech players in the NHL?

JN: – Yes, Jagr is a very famous player (as is) Hasek the goalkeeper. Maybe 40 Czechs are playing in the NHL. Maybe 20 Finns and maybe 30 Swedes. So, you have to accept it.

MB: I know a few Finns and Swedes who like to debate ice hockey but knowing nothing, step back myself.

JN: Yes, they are the main competitors.

MB: (from England) Not the English?

JN: No, no no. Up until the 1930s England was good but.....now the top (nations are) the Canadians, Czechs, Slovaks, Swedes, Finns, Russians – in that order.

MB: Back on sumo, there is an unwritten rule that limits stables to one foreign rikishi. How do you see that?

JN: I think that the Japanese are defending their national sport.

MB: With the new yokozuna, the man you mentioned a few minutes ago, he has decided to use a different type of ceremonial belt to that used by Asashoryu – in the so-called Shiranui form. (explains) Attached to the belt are supposed curses (explains). Do you put any stock in such sporting beliefs and ‘curses’?

JN: No, not at all.

MB: Briefly moving to amateur sumo, next month the International Olympic Committee will vote on the possibility of adopting amateur sumo as an Olympic sport at some point in the future. Do you think sumo has a chance as an Olympic sport?

JN: How many countries do sumo nowadays?

MB: Officially 85, realistically half that.

JN: Really, that is a surprise for me. Even 40 is enough.

MB: With sumo going to the Olympics that would mean it has a wider global audience. Professional sumo has recently been to Hawaii. Last year was Las Vegas, in 2008 they will be in Los Angeles and in 2009 they are planning to visit London. Any plans to invite them to the Czech Republic?

JN: I don't think so.

MB: Why not?

JN: Who will pay? You need (an interested) public and the funds but that is my personal view. Maybe there are some people (in the Czech Republic).....

MB: About 18 months ago, the English language newspaper here in Japan – The Japan Times - really stepped up English language coverage (of sumo) and others

have followed suit.....

JN: Yes, they have very good reports every day (during the tournament) - on the back page of The Japan Times.

MB: So, with sumo getting bigger and bigger internationally (and as the BBC, Associated Press and even a literary agent have all been at my own door this year), I personally see international interest increasing. Do you yourself see this / any increase in popularity and if so as something that will continue or is it just because of the foreign influence in the sport today?

JN: Well now it is the Europeans in sumo today (lists all with numbers in the sekitori ranks) so

MB: Would you introduce yourself as a sumo fan or rather as a person presenting the trophy as part of his job?

JN: More as a person who is doing it as part of his job.

MB: So you don't make any special effort to watch the bouts

during the (working) week?

JN: I have to know who is who, (so I follow) every day when the tournament is on.

MB: I sometimes have trouble with the day job, getting to a TV or the stadium....

JN: Oh, I am not watching TV. I read it in The Japan Times – the articles about how the tournament is going.

MB: So no escaping from the office to find a TV?

JN: No, I would do it for the ice hockey when we are playing with Canada, the United States or Russia. Yes, I will do this for the ice hockey or for football but not for sumo.

MB: Thank you very much, Sir. I do appreciate your time, as will the Sumo Fan Magazine readership.

