

# The 'Little Frenchie' – Standing up and Being Counted One man's battle to represent his nation

by Sébastien Iniesta



*Here I am - Budapest!*

There we were... or, rather, there 'I' was.

For five months I had been fighting to take that plane, heading to Budapest and The European Sumo Championships.

Since 1999, no French wrestler had stood up to represent France in amateur sumo so it was up to me, stumbling as I was with my karate and athletics background, heading to a European Championship wrestling event. Was it really a good idea? I may be reasonably strong and have learnt how to move and I may know the basics of movements and timing but while I had had some decent training, I knew (next to) nothing about hand-to-hand fighting. As was, it was already too late for such questions.

I traveled by way of Geneva to reach Budapest. There, my friend Richard Neal, a teacher at a sumo club in Lausanne, introduced me to François Wahl, President of the Swiss Sumo Federation. The



*Official logo of the Championships*

meeting was warm and very interesting. We talked about the unfortunate replacement of Lausanne with Chiang Mai in Thailand as host for the next (amateur) Sumo World Championships. I learnt there and then that even sumo can't escape politics. I also understood that as the sole « French representative », my role in Budapest wouldn't be just that of an anonymous competitor; there would be more for me to do - I just didn't know to what extent.

On the Wednesday eve of the tournament opening, I landed at Budapest airport. The Hungarian organising committee had sent a car to pick me up. Throughout the

**sumo**  
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*The same in Hungarian, not easy to understand...*

whole competition I would be amazed by the professionalism of the organization committee. Schedules were sometimes in need of a bit of modification but each and every aspect of the event planned and handled down to the finest details - and with genuine



*A French flag at the European Championships - at last!*



*One of the nicest towns in Europe*

kindness never far away.

The first night went OK. I didn't realize I was experiencing the calm before the storm as, with mixed feelings, I looked over the town and its surroundings from the seventh floor of the Stadion Hotel in which I was accommodated. The city centre and the main river were several kilometers away and a wide road led straight to the station, where Richard was scheduled to arrive the next

morning. The place itself was far from 'sexy' and rather industrial if anything. I checked my situation. Equipment - OK. Food - OK. Money - OK. I had roughly 180 euros in cash plus some 80 more in Swiss francs and a full 50 'forints' - the local currency. On

top of this – an international VISA

card. Everything was OK; I could sleep like a log...

The following day saw the sumo federation registrations take place. There again, everything went perfectly. The French Judo Federation, which covers sumo in France, had advised me for several weeks that everything was taken care of: the annual federation fee, expenses related to registration in heavy and openweight competitions, and a financial penalty for not providing an official referee to officiate in the competition. What was remaining - at my expense - was the remainder of the hotel bill; I had already paid half or, at least that's what I was thinking. It would not be too long before I was disenchanted as the first in a series of problems were about to befall me.

I first discovered that whereas the French federation had indeed covered the annual registration fee, as always, that was about all they had done. Assuming the other expenses wouldn't annoy me I decided but then it started to get out of control.

"You have to pay for this right now" said one official.

"OK, no problem. Visa card?"

"No, no, in cash."

"Well I don't know if I have enough change. Can I pay you in both euros and forints?"

"No, no, only in euros"

"In cash? How much is it then?"

"Well, this amount" – showing me the figure.

"Well... I don't have that just yet.

Is there a bank open near here?"

"You have to go downtown"

"(...)"

The evening was about to fall



*Soon the time will come to taste a real dohyo*

apart. The nearest bank was miles away and I wasn't confident I could find a bank in which to change forints for euros at such a late hour. I could have done this in the airport, but that was fifteen miles away. It wasn't the happiest moment of my life. Finally, the organizers discussed my situation among themselves and somebody kindly offered to take my forints in exchange for euros to make up the amount owed. Although I had just lost all my ready cash, bar the Swiss francs, I was feeling really happy at this moment in time. That I still had Swiss francs in

Hungary, where the local change is the forint and the organization only took euros, was almost funny when you think about it.

Another cash problem followed hot on the heels of the others – the fact that I couldn't pay for the non-presentation of an official referee penalty – and so, had to present myself as French referee regardless of the fact that I no idea what this role entailed.

Fortunately, the organizers were full of goodwill and agreed that I would just have to referee on the

first day; in the cadet, junior and under-21 categories. Thinking about it, even if that would end up ruining my pre-bout concentration and my own preparations for Saturday's competition, it would be a nice experience all the same.

So, now an official of sorts and fully aware of the mountain of administrative duties I was part of, introductions all round came by way of my Swiss friends.

Throughout the event I felt myself made particularly welcome and all those I met had apparently already heard of the 'little Frenchie' – and were eager to meet him.

The European Sumo Union officials even proclaimed me the official 'Representative of France' for the meeting scheduled two days later and the power to vote was bestowed.

I did not know if I deserved all of this, but I couldn't see myself refusing such a responsibility after such a warm welcome.

And we weren't even into the competition yet!

*See how Sebastien makes out in his first ever opportunity to referee and fight in a sumo bout in part II of The Little Frenchie – standing up and being counted'*