



Mr. Baglan Idrissov Vice-President of the International Sumo Federation / President of the Kazakhstan Sumo Association

Interview by Mark Buckton

Mr. Baglan Idrissov is a Vice-President of the International Sumo Federation and President of the Kazakhstan Sumo Association. To date, he is the senior most individual in the world of amateur sumo that Sumo Fan Magazine has had the honor of speaking to – albeit thanks to the wonders of the World Wide Web.

Mr. Idrissov (BI) 'sat' down with SFM's Mark Buckton (MB) a month ahead of the upcoming Sumo World Championships in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to answer a few soul searching questions on his nation's sumo set-up as well as the amateur game as it stands today.

MB: Sir, can you tell us something of your own background in sumo and how you got to the position of President of the Kazakhstan Sumo Association and vice-President of the International Sumo Federation?

BI: In 1996 some of my friends – Greco-Roman wrestling coaches - were in Budapest, Hungary, for the World Wrestling Championships. There they met with sumo representatives who suggested they organize a sumo federation in Kazakhstan. After arriving in Kazakhstan they applied to me with all their papers as I was a person with contacts in the JOC (Japan Olympic Committee) - in 1994 being an attaché of Kazakhstan at the Asian Games in Hiroshima.

We started work immediately and (I) was then elected President of

(the) Kazakhstan Sumo Association. The same year the First Asian Championships were held in Osaka, Japan and at the Congress I was elected as Vice-President of (the) Asian Sumo Federation. In 2000, in Brazil, I was then elected an Executive Board Member of (the) International Sumo Federation and in 2003, was elected as Vice-President of (the) International Sumo federation. Last year I was re-elected as Vice-President of (the) IFS. That is a short history!

MB: What status does sumo enjoy in Kazakhstan?

programme.

MB: What kind of training facilities do you have?

BI: The Kazakhstan Sumo Association has no facilities for training. All the facilities we use are rented for certain periods and we have to pay for training and to use these facilities.

MB: Have any Kazak athletes won any medals in previous Sumo World Championships.

BI: In 1997, at the World Sumo Championships our wrestler in the



*Baglan Idrissov with Kazafuzan (Suyenesh Khudibayev) –
Baglan Idrissov*

BI: Unfortunately, sumo is not an Olympic sport and that is the only reason we don't receive any support from the government. It is clear that the country cannot cultivate all existing sports so we are still waiting for the acceptance of sumo into the Olympic

heavy-weight category won the bronze medal. I should mention that at that championship there were around 40 wrestlers in this category so the rivalry was very tense.

MB: What about at Asian Sumo

Championships?

BI: At each Asian Championship event we win medals – both the men and the women - silver and bronze - in individual and team events.

MB: Any realistic chance of dohyo success in Thailand? (site of next month's 2007, Sumo World Championships)

BI: Last year our (lightweight) wrestler (85 kg) was second, losing in the final to the Japanese wrestler. The men's team finished in 5th place, losing out to Poland in the semi-final. We hope to have at least the same results.

MB: Who do you see as the strongest nations in amateur sumo today – in both the male and female game?

BI: In the men's game - Japan, Russia, Mongolia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia.

MB: On the issue of Thailand replacing Lausanne as the venue for the 2007, SWC, how did that come about?

BI: Unfortunately the

championships set for Lausanne were moved to Thailand. Usually these things can happen but, say for the European countries, it is easier to go by bus to Switzerland, than to spend a lot of money to fly – and then not even to Bangkok, but further - to Chiang Mai.

MB: A look at the Japanese amateur sumo calendar would seem to indicate the dates could have been selected to permit Japanese athletes to participate in domestic competitions rather than for the good of the international sumo community. Any truth in that one?

BI: I should mention that the majority of the IFS Executive Board is from Japan and all of them are involved in Japanese student level sumo. That is the main problem I think because some members forget that the IFS and 'gakusei' (student) sumo are not the same. (They) should make more effort regarding the IFS - on international sumo.

MB: Once again, the main competing continent, Europe, is being asked to make the long haul out to the (for them) Far East. Do you think this will impact on rikishi attendances? (At time of

typing SFM understands France to have withdrawn due to the financial costs involved and Britain's heavyweight from the 2006, Osaka event is looking unlikely to make the trip along with at least one of Australia's stalwarts from recent years)

BI: Yes, right you are. I am not sure that it is a good decision to move (the event) from one approved host-country to another. I understand that it is all connected to finances but we should be more committal when a decision is adopted.

MB: I understand the IFS sent out a circular on August 21st permitting previously banned athletes from Europe (those who had taken part in a non-IFS sanctioned event) back into the IFS fold for the SWC but, at the same time deciding to keep out the officials known to have participated. How was this decided?

BI: As for me - I don't know (about that). All these decisions are made in Japan; and I have never been invited. If we compare the work of other (sporting) international federations, there is a calendar of events, of all the executive board meetings, of all the commissions. The work of the Executive Board of (the) IFS is more chaotic, than periodic and systematic. We have never been told about the auditing of the expenses of (the) IFS, and how many sponsors we have. I say 'we', but bear in mind that the sponsors are unknown to us. I don't know how (the) IFS is searching for sponsors. I have heard that some Executive Board members are contributing their own money as donations to (the) IFS and this has never been covered at the Congress. In my opinion, (the) IFS should pay all expenses for the Executive Board members travel and participation in the Executive Board meetings and sumo events. I usually stay in the same hotel as



Niyaz Gunyashev won a silver medal at the last Championships (85kg) - Baglan Idrissov

the wrestlers and coaches, paying for the trip and everything myself, but I never see the Executive Board members staying in the same hotel we do.

MB: Related to the question above, a common grumble in sumo circles centers on the amateur version of the sport being run from Tokyo without the input of the outside world and member nations. This would appear to be contrary to IFS statutes as posted on their website. Do you see this as a serious issue?

BI: Yes, I think that IFS should turn to the world of sumo, not oppose it. We are all one 'sumo family' and should discuss all matters together, not leave the (annual) Congress room without apologizing and without saying farewell.* Last year's Congress was the worst I have seen in eleven years in the sumo family, and that congress disappointed me.

MB: In what areas can amateur sumo be improved in the coming years?

BI: First, as the International Federation it should change the following:

Structure wise - the Secretary General should be from a country other than Japan, as we have President Hidetoshi Tanaka (in Japan).

The Executive Board members should be limited to 9 (instead of the current 30 – 6 from each continent) in addition to a president, a secretary general and a treasurer.

There should be several committees formed – the Sports Committee, a Medical Committee, a Rules Committee, a Press and PR Committee.

The IFS should also form a committee for sponsorship - that will work in the search for new

sponsors for amateur sumo. We know that (the) Japan Sumo Association with Mr. Kitayama as its President has a lot of big name sponsors and is a rich organization. (The) IFS can invite Japanese companies - airlines, automobile companies, industrial companies etc, along to cooperate. Work towards the promotion of amateur sumo should be activated.

There is no broadcasting (of amateur sumo) on Eurosport, ESPN or any other sport channels - only domestic (Japanese) and even then not live broadcasts. Work should be done in the field of inclusion of sumo in the (various) continental games – (the) Asian Games, Pan-American Games, Pan-African Games etc.

MB: This year, the IFS was not considered for inclusion in future Olympic tournaments according to officials in the Olympic movement contacted by SFM – and, given all the inner turmoil / sumo politics, do you see Olympic inclusion as possible any time soon?

BI: Without this (amateur sumo) will not work. For eleven years I have been trying my best to contact those in charge - to see whether or not amateur sumo has a chance of being included in the Olympics. I hope that this is the opinion of the majority of the sumo family. In 2009, the host-city for the 2016 Olympics will be decided and I hope that Tokyo wins – and then we shall see sumo in the programme. (The) IFS has done a lot to be (accepted as) an Olympic sport - women's sumo (Shinsumo) was introduced even though in Japan, women are not allowed to step on the dohyo at the professional level.

MB: Will control of the IFS ever pass out of the hands of the Japanese?

BI: No comment

MB: Should it?

BI: No comment

MB: One particularly odd rule of the IFS mentions that the number of IFS directors representing Japan be set at seven (7) with each continental body limited to one (1) director each. How do you feel about that – being yourself non-Japanese?

BI: I think I have answered that one above.

MB: In correspondence earlier this year with yourself, you indicated several areas the world of amateur sumo should be looking at in order to move forward. You mentioned certain areas you would like to see the IFS focus on. Could you expand on those points?

BI: Recently I visited Mauritius, where the African Sumo Championship should have been held. Unfortunately it was cancelled for financial reasons. Mr. Balkinsson, who runs the Mauritius Sumo Federation, showed me his facilities. I really appreciated his work. He is a person to be praised for his efforts to cultivate sumo in this small country and all he has done has been with his own money. The dohyo is an old one - he is applying to (the) IFS to supply him with a new one - he is waiting for used mawashi (to arrive), as no country bar Japan produces mawashi and his National Sumo Championships are organized on a high level. I really thanked Mr. Parsad Balkinsson for all his work but, it was a private visit.

I just wanted to compare set-ups in different countries. The Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Sumo Federation(s) have no facilities; they only have very strong wrestlers but nobody is going to help them. That is why we don't often see them at sumo events. This means – the countries with sumo history are stepping aside for financial reasons and soon we

will only those countries that have representatives in professional sumo and those receiving financial aid thanks to strong sekitori (coming) from their nations.

MB: Do you think we will see a repeat of the (selected ESU members VS IFS) fireworks* at this year's SWC in Chiang Mai?

BI: I am for negotiations and mutual understanding, not confrontation and disunity.

MB: Having spoken to several people in Chiang Mai, I was surprised no one in the local media or community knew the

SWC was scheduled to be held there. Do you think the event will enjoy a healthy attendance given the lack of PR ahead of the event?

BI: My opinion is that only the European countries can attract and invite the media to increase PR. In the USA it is rather commercial and in Asia it is just an event – nothing more. A lot of Olympic sports championships are held now throughout the world (it is the time for qualification tournaments for the Olympics).

MB: Will you be there yourself and if so, any message to sumo

fans around the world?

BI: We should improve the work of (the) IFS and bear in mind that we are one (sumo) family.

MB: Thank you very much Mr. Idrissov and best wishes to all the Kazak and other athletes competing in Chiang Mai.

** SFM understands from a number of those present, certain questions put to the President of the International Sumo Federation resulted in his walking out of the meeting.*