

A TWENTY-YEAR KIZUNA: FORTIFYING JAPAN AND CROATIA'S FRIENDSHIP



The city of Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture has cultivated a close relationship with Croatia through enthusiastic exchange since the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Sven Bjelan, a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) on Japan's cultural exchange program, JET, is actively striving to further deepen that friendship at the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020.

The seeds of the friendship were first sown during the FIFA World Cup cohosted in 2002 by Japan and South Korea. For their pre-tournament camp, the Croatian national team visited Tokamachi, a regional city in Niigata Prefecture. The local government and residents gave the team an enthusiastic and heartfelt welcome during their two-week stay, in which team members happily participated in a soccer workshop for children and other supporting events. On the day of

the team's departure, thousands of citizens lined the streets to bid farewell to the players, as they were reluctant to see the beloved athletes leave. Team captain Davor Šuker said, "No other town has ever made such an effort to truly get to know Croatia. It was a wonderful camp."

Since then, Tokamachi has actively engaged in exchanges to cultivate its 20-year close relationship with Croatia. Sven Bjelan, a Croatia-born CIR in the JET Programme, said, "Anyone

visiting from Croatia is surprised at how welcoming Tokamachi is to them." Even beyond 2002, large crowds of Tokamachi locals have continued to join live public screenings of Croatia's big matches in the FIFA World Cup. The field where the 2002 camp was held has subsequently become fondly known as Croatia Pitch. Now it hosts the Croatia Cup Soccer Festival, a local soccer competition, as well as a camp for the U-17 Croatian team during their regular visits to Japan for

SVEN BJELAN

Born in the Croatian capital of Zagreb, Bjelan developed an interest in Japan after joining a calligraphy seminar when he was 21. He studied Japanology at the University of Zagreb and came to Japan to study on two separate occasions, in Tokyo and Osaka. When searching for work in Japan after his return to Croatia in 2016, he learned that the JET Programme was recruiting Croatians for a CIR position in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture. His bridge-building activities began in 2017.



Croatia Pitch (background), where a pre-tournament camp was held before the 2002 FIFA World Cup, is a symbol of the international exchanges that Bjelan works on.



Top: Bjelan served as an interpreter at a 2017 meeting between SUZUKI Daichi, a gold medalist at the Seoul Olympic Games and the then head of the Japan Sports Agency, and the then State Secretary of the Central State Office for Sports, Janica Kostelić. Bottom: Bjelan also teaches at a cooking class for Tokamachi residents.

the International Youth Soccer in Niigata tournaments. The city's Croatia-related projects extend beyond sports, including Croatian cooking classes and film screenings, among others.

With Tokamachi serving as a host town for the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020, Bjelan hopes to further fortify the ties that the city has created with Croatia, and has been quite busy with preparations to make that happen. When he first started working as a CIR, his knowledge of the city and experience regarding exchanges with Croatia were limited; nevertheless, he took on his new role with vigor. Now his various

duties cover everything from project proposals to exchanges with and interpretation for Croatian visitors. The work has often been hard, however, one sight that has remained in his mind is that of local children interacting with top athletes from his country in 2019, during test events for a pre-Olympics camp for judo, karate, and taekwondo. Bjelan said, "Although it is not yet certain whether they will be able to interact directly during the Olympics, I hope that the children will be inspired by the Croatian athletes and that they gain an interest in their sports."

Tokamachi is a city surrounded by beautiful nature. The snowfall is heavy in winter, while the summer is pleasantly cool and dry. Those are some of the many similarities to Croatia, especially regarding the country's inland areas. Bjelan said, "A rich food culture of such staples as soba noodles and sake has taken root



Left: Kiyotsu Gorge, one of "the three great gorges of Japan" and home to a tunnel that allows visitors a close-up view of the precipitous, majestic cliffs, attracts many tourists. Right: Some of the major draws to Tokamachi include its rich traditional culinary culture, such as *hegisoba*, a buckwheat noodle dish served on a wooden square plate called a *begi*.



At a pre-Olympics test event held in 2019 to prepare for Tokyo 2020, Tokamachi children interacted directly with Croatian Olympians competing in judo, karate, and taekwondo.

in the region, and the lifestyle is more relaxed than in urban areas. Through these qualities one can feel the real charm of Tokamachi." Even though his tenure as a CIR will end someday, Bjelan is willing to provide support for exchange projects whenever needed. One of his future goals is to invite Tokamachi children to events in Croatia such as sports camps, and to create opportunities for hands-on interaction with his country's people and culture. He would also like to help Japanese companies to start business in Croatia. Even after the Olympics, his bridge-building activities are sure to expand further. ●

ABOUT THE JAPAN EXCHANGE AND TEACHING (JET) PROGRAMME



The JET Programme began in 1987 with the goal of promoting grassroots international exchange between Japan and other nations, and is now one of the world's largest international exchange programs. In 2019, the JET Programme welcomed 5,761 participants, and there are currently more than 70,000 alumni from 75 countries living in all parts of the world.

The JET Programme official website >> <http://jetprogramme.org/en/>