

ince the establishment of sambo as a formally recognized sport in 1938 by the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport of the former Soviet Union, the sport has been plagued with division and crippling internal politics. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to sambo's international growth in recent years was the downfall of the Soviet government that itself had given birth to the sport.

Now, 67 years after sambo's founding, FILA offers to breathe new life into a sport struggling for survival—a sport that has given the world such great champions as Oleg Taktarov, Fedor Emelianenko and Andrei Arlovski.

Anyone involved in sambo long enough knows that politics has plagued the sport for decades. We can't even agree upon how to spell *sambo* in English. Is it sambo, sombo or cambo? For the readers of *Grappling* who are less informed, here is Sambo History 101.

History 101

After nearly 20 years of development as a military hand-to-hand combat system under the newly established Soviet military, the sport variation of sambo was first recognized in the former Soviet Union in 1938. After years of growth and increased popularity, FILA, the international governing body for amateur wrestling, recognized and began to sanction sambo competitions in 1966. The sport grew tremen-

dously during this period under FILA's management. However, in 1985, the 25 national federations representing sambo in FILA held a meeting in Bilbao, Spain, where the decision was made to separate from FILA and create FIAS: The International Federation of Amateur Sambo.

Sambo prospered fairly well under FIAS's self-governance until the fall of the Soviet Union. The end of the Soviet regime brought a sudden outpouring of newly independent former Soviet republics demanding representation on the FIAS board. As a result of the inability to negotiate this through a mutually-agreed-upon electoral process, in 1993 FIAS split into two groups ... each claiming to be the "true" FIAS. Each used identical logos, held separate world championships and so on.

These organizations came to be popularly known as FIAS West and FIAS East. FIAS East was then presided over by president Mikhail Tikhomirov of Russia. FIAS West was and is now presided over by President Josh Henson of the United States. During the 12 years since the FIAS split, FIAS West has continued to dwindle. There has been poor tournament attendance and most recently the cancellation of its 2004 World Cup in France. However, Henson was a key player in the recent negotiation with FILA that resulted in Sambo's re-adoption. Inasmuch, it is expected by many that FIAS West will dissolve now that FILA has taken over

sambo sanctioning.

FILAS East has maintained a somewhat stronger, yet inconsistent international presence from teams outside Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this FIAS is also stricken with its own political wounds and infighting. The 2005 election that brought new President David Rudman into power was infused with intrigue and accusations of foul play, election tampering and cronyism from both sides of the aisle. Furthermore, along with his supporters, outgoing President Tikhomirov was a strong lobbyist in favor of FILA re-adoption. Now under the leadership of Rudman, many wait to see what will become of FIAS East.

There have been brief moments in which it seemed the two organizations might be able to play nice and put the past behind them. For example, in 2001 FIAS East concluded after its annual congress in Krasnoyarsk, Russia, that they would rename themselves the World Sambo Federation and finally clear up confusion regarding the two like-named organizations. This really would only add to the confusion as there were also smaller (now nonexistent) American and French groups claiming the same title. In the end, however, both organizations continued their claims to be the "true" FIAS.

When a world body splits, its representative national bodies are forced to choose sides. Thus, when the original FIAS subdivided in 1993, so did the United States Sambo Association (USSA). When the USSA pledged allegiance to FIAS West, a new splinter group called the American Amateur Sambo Federation (AASF) was formed and aligned with FIAS East. Since that time, the USSA and the AASF continued to run national events and put together national teams for each respective FIAS world championship. Throughout the years, both groups refused to work together and both began to dwindle. The USSA lost its cooperative relationship with the Amateur Athletic Union, which was also suffering from its own internal struggles. With FILA's renewed relationship with sambo, many have speculated that USA Wrestling will begin to sanction sambo in the U.S.

Looking Brighter in the U.S.

Recently, things have started to look up a bit for sambo in the United States.

Can FILA End Sambo's Civil War?

Struggling to Survive

In 2003, the American Sambo Association (ASA) was formed. The ASA's goal was not to become a governing body. Rather, it was to act as a "guild" for all who wish to promote and support sambo, regardless of political affiliation.

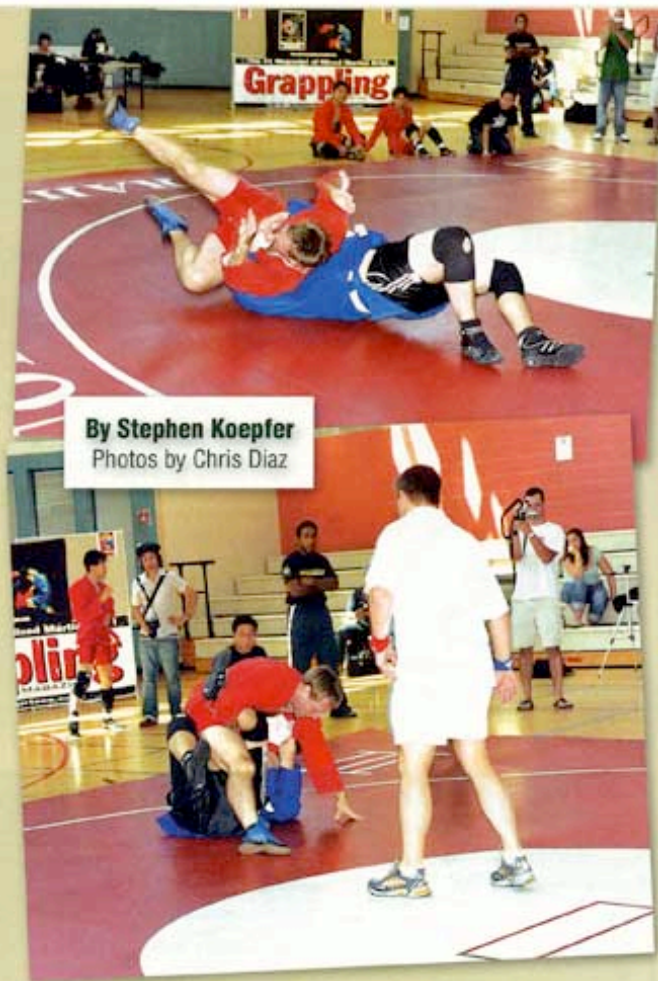
Around that same time, the USSA began to demonstrate a new willingness to cross old political boundaries and start working collaboratively with other sambo organizations. The ASA has been fortunate enough to be able to work with both the USSA and to some degree the AASF on various projects toward jointly promoting sambo in the U.S. One clear example was this year's Unity Classic Tournament that was promoted by the ASA and co-sponsored by the USSA. Unfortunately, in spite of an open invitation to do so, the AASF was unable to jump on board as an additional co-sponsor of the event.

As if to keep the sambo tradition of civil war alive, power struggles within the AASF led to a new split and formation of yet another splinter group called the United States of America Sambo Union.

Differing Opinions

So, now in a deeply divided sambo community, FILA has stepped up to the plate to help raise sambo to its rightful place among the great world amateur sports. Only time will tell what the result of this bold move will be. However, everyone has an opinion. Here are some thoughts from noted members of the American and international sambo community.

It should be noted that FILA, the AASF and FIAS East declined to comment for this article. Josh Henson did speak with me off the record but felt it premature to make any official statements. In response to my request for a statement from USA Wrestling, I received the following comments from the organization's director of communication, Mr. Gary Abbott: "At this time, USA Wrestling's board of directors and executive committee have not yet discussed the decision by FILA to host a Sambo World Championships. We do not feel it is appropriate to make any statements concerning this until our organization's leadership has had the opportunity to address the issue."



By Stephen Koepfer
Photos by Chris Diaz

The author says that sambo has been "plagued with division and crippling internal politics."

The Talk On the Mat

"I think FILA is a strong enough organization that eventually it will be accepted by everybody. On an international level, I think this will be huge for the sport. In the U.S., it will depend on what happens next. If USA Wrestling gets behind it, I think we will see the numbers of competitors and the quality of competitions grow. Many wrestlers will cross over, especially since more and more wrestlers are looking toward MMA competition."

Lance Campbell
Vice President, United
States Sambo Association
Modesto, California

"The effect will be good for some and misery for others who will lose their base of power. It will bring some prestigious unity and a FILA stamp for a recognized world title. However, I think the number of world participants will remain the same. I've been doing this since 1987 and the numbers of U.S. and international participants have never been like they are in NAGA and USA Wrestling."

Chico Hernandez
First Sambo champion
on a box of Wheaties
Two-time U.S. team member
Preque Isle, Maine

Struggling to Survive

"Anything that can improve sombo can only be good. But is the affiliation with FILA going to be run by the same people who let sombo down in the past? The



Sambo was developed as a military hand-to-hand combat system.

decline of international sombo has been happening since the fall of communism. The failure since then has been the lack of communication. For more than 20 years, the British Sombo Federation has been recognized as the governing body in the United Kingdom ... yet no one from FILA, FIAS (West) or FIAS (East) has thought to consult us. Why?"

*Martin Clarke
President, British Sombo
Federation
United Kingdom*

"It is clear that sombo needs to be governed by something other than itself. There are few folks in the United States who truly care about the sport over themselves. I hope that by rejoining FILA sombo can lose the chaos and end petty political squabbling that has been standard operation for so many years. My hope is that with a unified governing board sombo will grow as a sport, where the sport becomes the only focus. I also think that having an organization



In 1938, the sport variation of sambo was first recognized in the Soviet Union.

that governs wrestling in general is good for the sport(s) themselves. How it will all play out is still to be seen."

*Aaron Fields
Sea-Town Sombo & Seattle Ju-Jitsu Club
Advisory Board, American
Sambo Association
Seattle, Washington*

"In my opinion, this is a major step toward sambo's growth in the U.S. and internationally. Why? Sambo will have



Initially, sport sambo grew tremendously. When the Soviet Union fell, things started to change, says the author.

more financial stability and is expected to fall under the umbrella of USA Wrestling. As part of USA Wrestling, sambo would benefit from insurance coverage, a better budget and better competition sites. As FILA is under the umbrella of the IOC, sambo will have an increased chance for Olympic recognition. I recall the beauty of FILA's influence back in 1983 when sambo was part of the Olympic Festival. FILA will be attractive to many interna-

tional sambists because it will make the sport more stable and solid."

*Dr. Leonid Polyakov
Past President, American Amateur
Sambo Federation
Past Vice President, FIAS (East)
Monmouth County, New Jersey*

"I believe FILA's decision will be good for sambo overall. In North America, it will bring more wrestlers to

the fold. Internationally, I would hope that it brings some unity to the ongoing political turmoil."

*Gregg Humphreys
Judo/Sambo Coach
Miletich Fighting Systems
Bettendorf, Iowa*

"It will be interesting to see what level of support FILA provides. The best growth occurred on FILA's watch; however, sambo was always treated as the step child. I support this re-adoption by FILA and hope all quarreling factions will finally come together to help sambo grow and prosper. I would hope that FILA can provide infrastructure and support for a grass roots movement in the U.S. by offering written materials, audio-visual materials and seminars. The implementation of a coaching system similar to USA Wrestling's would also go a long way in helping sambo grow."

*Dr. Brett Jacques
American Sambo Academy
Newport Beach, California*

Struggling to Survive



In 1993, FIAS split into two groups, both of which claimed to be the "true" FIAS, says Stephen Koeper.

"It may be good for the international scene, but I don't see it doing a whole lot for North America. Until the U.S. truly unifies sambo in our country, I don't see us moving forward in the international organizations."

*Jeff Malott
Director, International
Sport Combat Federation
American Sambo Association
Affiliate Member
Indianapolis, Indiana*

"FILA's re-adoption of sambo should have a positive effect on bringing the various national and international federations under one roof. As one who has had the privilege of being involved in sport sambo for more than 16 years at the national level and international level and as one who has seen the division and ensuing weakening of the sport, I certainly welcome the potential for unity

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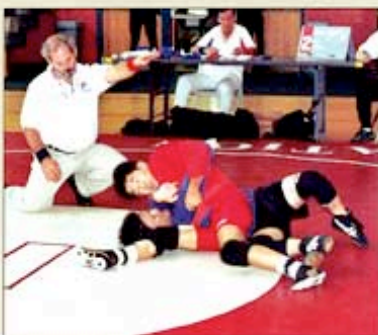
that FILA's re-adoption points toward."

*Shaun W. Scott
Treasurer, United States Sambo Association
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands*

"I am cautiously optimistic about FILA's re-adoption of sambo. However, I don't see FIAS East immediately cooperating. In the long run, FILA has more money, recognition and power than FIAS East and will probably be the one standing when the smoke clears. Nationally, I feel it will take quite some time to see any significant change. Regardless of who represents FILA in the U.S., all our distinct national bodies will need to put their old baggage behind them and work together. Lastly, I worry for Combat Sambo as FILA does not sanction striking sports."

*Stephen R. Koeper
President, American Sambo Association
Head Coach, New York Combat Sambo
New York, New York*

"Sambo began its fragmentation when it originally left FILA. FILA's re-adoption of sambo will reunify the splintered factions at the original source of the issue. FILA visions an athlete-centric approach to sports and by its very nature will restore sambo to its former international fervor, flooding



After the division, there has been poor attendance at sambo competition.

the athlete body with cross-pollinated competitors from other styles of wrestling. This is a significant boon to all martial arts, as wrestling has greater international recognition, event organization and amateur funding.

*Scott Sonnon
Head Coach, RMAX International
Distinguished Master of Sport in Sambo
Bellingham, Washington*

"Given the difficulties of creating self-supporting sport activities in general, and the difficulties sambo has had in the United States both in terms of organizational development and individual participation, it is clear that dramatic change is required if sambo is to experience any measure of growth. The time may now have arrived."

*Dr. Robert Laudicina
Master of Sport in Sambo
Faustini's Institute of Martial Arts
Oradell, New Jersey*

"While I am hopeful about FILA's move, the upshot seems to be that, though unity in FILA can potentially be a tremendous thing, presently existing sambo groups are understandably afraid of FILA just re-adopting sambo and trying to reinvent the sport. FILA's decision represents an opportunity and challenge. It may prompt sport sambo people to put aside their differences and participate in a single organization. It may lead to an acceptance of the validity of sport, free style and combat sambo competition. Or it can devolve into another big group trying to freeze out legitimate people it doesn't recognize. At this point, it's all speculation. I am most concerned for Combat Sambo. In 2000, FIAS East began a world championship in Combat Sambo. It is a great, controlled MMA-style match. Fedor Emelianenko was amongst its first champions. The first American medallist was Oleg Savitsky in 2001. Lord knows what will happen to it now."

*Dayn DeRose
Head Coach, South Mountain
Martial Arts
American Sambo Association
Professional Member
Madison, New Jersey ©*