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 co-hosted 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 Suker 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 their 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 Croatian cooking classes and film 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 the International Youth Soccer in Niigata tournaments. The city’s Croatia-related projects extend beyond sports, including 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

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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 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.

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.

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 5,763 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 is http://jetprogramme.org/