

TO GHENT I WENT

Ann Shields Perspective (abridged)

THE EVENT: World Championship Petanque 2017 – Trophy Henri Bernard 13-16 April 2017.

THE VENUE: Transporthal Vlaanderen Ghent Belgium. This is a Multisport Stadium opened in 2000 with seating capacity for 5000.

THE TERRAINS: Fine sand-coloured limestone bed of around 2 inches thick laid over the impact-absorbing material. There were 30 – 40 large terrains. The surface provided some very unpredictable high vertical bounces which resulted in divots exposing the material underneath. The terrains were some 20m from the closest spectator area. With the exception of the team coaches, (1 from each country) no one was allowed in the area surrounding the terrains while the games were in progress. Practice was not permitted while the games were still being contested.

THE COMPETITION FORMAT: Doubles Mixed – Bruno and Ann, Men's Doubles – Bruno and Stephane, Ladies Doubles – Claire and Ann, Men's Singles – Stephane, Ladies Singles – Claire. Games 1 hour and two ends. 5 rounds of Swiss, changed to 4.

GETTING THERE: Left Auckland 4.30pm 10 April 2017 arriving in Brussels 1.30pm 11 April in surprisingly good condition! The airport info desk directed me to the train ticket machines for a ticket to Gare du Nord Station however having once suffered a disaster requiring intervention of the Station Engineer in Barcelona I decided to obtain the ticket from the ticket office. My hotel was easy to find surrounded in cobblestones and not easy trolley-case pulling.

Booked in and then off for a walk. The botanical gardens were lovely and tulips were out. Next day by train to Ghent. Platform was changed and I could not get to the new one in time to get on the train. Was better prepared for the next one, positioned myself near the lift so I could get down and up again if the platform was changed again. Another platform change but I was ready for it this time. Blundered onto the train (up two very high steps) into first class. I wasn't there for long and had to trundle down two carriages with case. Found a seat eventually next to six jolly senior citizens with a pug dog asleep in a bag! Off train at St Pieters Station in Ghent and took a taxi to the B & B and met my host Sabine. While I was having tea and getting changed into my uniform Sabine biked off and got me a 10 trip bus pass saying that the No 6 bus would take me near the stadium with a walk of 1.5km. Off I went in my very smart uniform on the No 6 bus, asking the driver to tell me where the stadium bus stop was. He laughed & said you will know – I don't go any further! He flagged down a bus going in the opposite direction, consulted with the driver, waved me over and I was delivered to the front gate of the stadium! I followed the arrow 'REGISTRATION AND COMPETITORS ONLY' and there I met with Claire, Brian and Bruno – absolutely perfect timing. I was raced over to the registration table and immediately an ID bracelet was attached to my wrist. What about practice? – no they said no ones allowed near the terrains they are still being prepared but Brian took me upstairs for a look. Our playing boules details such as make and identifying numbers had previously been sent through to the Federation. The Federation was very strict in this area. If your boules were not listed as acceptable then you could not play with them.

COMPETITION DAY 1: Thursday 13 April. Awake all night! Sleeping pill did not work. Horrors!

Looked in mirror and saw a startled panda. Breakfast 5.30am. Made up sandwiches from the delicious spread of breads, meats, cheese, etc and some hazelnut Belgian chocolate. Enough to keep body and soul together. Off to stadium at 7.08am No 6 bus. Met the others, chose a place to attach the NZ flag and sit when we weren't playing. The NZ uniforms looked very smart and many asked to have a photo taken with us & their teams. Practice was allowed for half an hour, however with 52 teams trying to assess the terrains at the same time it was taking your life in your hands. Then the whistle blew and Bruno (shooter) and I (pointer) were straight into our first game of Mixed Doubles against Bulgaria – and we won, what a thrill. Just so happy to be here and playing. A huge electronic scoreboard recorded the countries and the scores. This was really useful as if a score was wrongly recorded it could be checked immediately with the desk. Next game Ladies Doubles with Claire (shooter) me pointer. Played Belgium and lost 6-13, Ukraine lost 0-13, then Russia lost 5-13. All very hard games. Played pretty well. The opponents were all very, very good. The Ukraine girls were very young and played brilliantly. Did not like being fanned but could do little about it! Fantastic, absolutely magic, having a wonderful time.

Dinner at 7.15pm. Meals were served in the complex next door about 400m away. Back to the stadium in plenty of time for Doubles Mixed with Bruno at 9.30pm. This was our last game, played Slovakia and L 5-10. In our two previous games we played Tunisia (doubles mixed championship winners) lost 6-13. Great game, very hard fought and I was happy with play. You can always do better you think but in that level of competition I thought we did well. We finished around 11.30pm and the president of the French Federation very kindly gave me a lift back to the B & B.

COMPETITION DAY 2: Friday 14 April. Off on No 6 bus. Trod on a handbag-sized dog, not on a lead. He made a hell of a noise and leaped off the bus and ran under it. Sounds of horror from those on the bus. Dashed with the owner down the bus steps. He finally came out and was grabbed and put on his lead. (He should have been on it in the first place). I was very relieved.

First game 10.00am, Dbles Mixed with Bruno. Played Germany who came third in the championship, we lost 5-13. They were magnificent players, he pointed like a dream. The girl did the shooting. This was rare in the Doubles Mixed. The German coach was very kind and friendly, often speaking to me and asking how we were going. Then sadly it was our last game, Ladies Doubles with Claire. We played a tough Slovakian team and won 10-9. I was in heaven. What a great finish. Went off and had a red wine.

QUARTER FINALS: Saturday 15 April. Breakfast at 7.30am and the promise of another great day albeit as a spectator. Went off to visit the town centre to see what was on offer. Then a blunder. Found myself right by the No 6 bus stop and decided after checking direction to go to the stadium for a relaxed coffee, lunch then watch the games. Entirely forgot I had intended to don my uniform for the parade. Major blunder. Had to take part minus uniform, fortunately I was wearing mostly black, so hide behind Stephanie in the photo. Mental note to self to wear uniform at all times, with the possible exception of being in bed.

The atmosphere in the stadium is building with supporters and teams showing signs of nervousness which had not been present in the lead up games. I saw some very good games. You had to be prepared to find a seat and wait until the game started. If you left it too late there was no room and

you had to move too far away to get a good view. Had dinner and back to the bus stop. Bus 8.04 did not arrive. Bus 8.34 driver was very agitated. She eventually said get on but we are going nowhere, there is an incident. After half an hour she announced we could go but not the usual route. She would put me off the bus as close to my destination as she could. She said it could be a bomb scare. Got through the centre of town and her ph went and she said she'd been given the all clear. I was relieved as I did not know my way around Ghent, particularly at night.

SEMI FINALS & FINALS: Sunday 16 April. Bus at 7.50am – disaster, put off outside hospital with driver explaining its Sunday and I only go this far. Absolute panic! Nothing around, no taxis. Set off and got horribly lost. Eventually found myself on the opposite side of the canal and had to walk an extra 2k around to get to the stadium side. Fortunately I flagged down a runner who was able to direct me. When I arrived the first final was half-way through, however I wasn't playing so did not inconvenience anyone. I thanked my lucky stars it did not happen on my playing day. However I got there and enjoyed the play. Absolutely marvellous. After each final they had the medal ceremony with speeches, anthems – it was fantastic. The Doubles Mixed was the final match on the programme and I watched it with the president of the Flemish Federation. He gave me a very nice badge and a black coche. During subsequent conversation he said they were surprised Australia had not put in a team. I had to say they missed a great event. What a wonderful day – and wait there's more. The dinner was from 9pm – 1.00am. It was held at a venue over the other side of Ghent. I changed my clothes at the Bradburn's hotel and then we went off to the bar for a kir royale to celebrate a very successful and enjoyable tournament. Drinks were served and then we went in for a lovely dinner with top desserts. The next day it was off to the station for the start of the next adventure, 4 days in Bruges, followed by 3 weeks in Portugal. My thanks to PNZ, APA, Herne Bay Petanque, to my playing partners Claire and Bruno, to Stephane and Brian our other team members and to Steph's friends and Bruno's brother for being part of my day in the sun.

OBSERVATIONS: Umpires 2 men, 1 woman. Lenient in the first two days. Boules were left on the terrains, players were being timed & observed but not spoken to, 4 very low key. However very strict about practise if games were still in progress. Players on neighbouring terrains were removed immediately. When it got to the semis and finals there was a change and things tightened up with often two umpires measuring together. At one stage the Spanish coach ran onto the terrain and embraced her player when he scored Spain's only point. The spectators roared with glee but she was carded by a very angry umpire! Players behaviour was generally excellent. There was a job to be done without any fuss and it was QUIET! The standard was the highest I have seen. If you pointed a boule depending on its resting position, it was either shot or outpointed. You were in no doubt that you would be playing the next boule. Every boule counted. Also the games were very attacking. There was no protecting of a head if a handy lead was achieved. Every head was played for either to enhance the score or to attack. I came away believing I need to revise my thinking and play more aggressively. The atmosphere was thrilling, happy and positive – I felt the Kiwis were well received. The spectators applauded every good shot. I had one great shot against the German team and was astonished to hear a roar from the crowd! Just amazing – they were watching us! (Of course they

were watching Germany).

Organisation was good with the exception of the change in number of games. The stadium facilities were excellent with good lighting

The huge scoreboard was a boon. If a score was wrong it was apparent. We had two wrong recordings which had to be fixed.

Could we have done better? Of course. Maybe a short meeting with suggestions of how to proceed and general discussion may have been helpful. BUT we did good!

PERSONAL FUTURE GOALS: Keep calm and play as well as you can

Be positive and dispel any negativity – support your team mates Play more aggressively when appropriate

Treat opponents with respect. Do not allow any team personal dislikes of opponents to arise as this can lead to loss of concentration – you are there to play and win not to try and become their personal friends – any ensuing friendships are a bonus

Ensure your practice and fitness regimes and preparation are at a level which will enable you to play your best.

There are not sufficient words to describe the wonderful time I had in Belgium. Ann Shields 7 June 2017