

## **WCF 14 pt World Team Championship 2000 from Milan**

### **Report by Peter Payne**

#### **Day 1 - Monday**

I'm on the road again, and this time it's Milan for the WCF World Team Championship. This inaugural team event is being hosted by the newly named Federazione Italiana Sport Croquet, with Il Presidente Gianni Leoncini and his willing and numerous team of volunteers. The venue, which will be well known to those who have had the pleasure to play in Italy before, is "Le Robinie" Golf Club, near Busto Arsizio, a little haven of peace and quiet stuck in the middle of the highly populated, relatively urbanised and industrialised Po valley, just 30kms north-west of Milan, quite near the Swiss border.

There are ten teams participating in the event, coming from three continents. Australia have travelled the furthest, followed by Egypt. Europe, not surprisingly is the best represented, with teams from England, Germany, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, Wales and, of course, hosts Italy. The format is as follows: There are two groups of five teams, in which each team plays the other four in three, best of three, singles (14 points advanced). Players are numbered from one to three (the order is freely decided by the team captain) and play their opposite number. Since we have three lawns to play on, the three matches take place simultaneously, double-banked with another tie. A 75 minute time limit has been placed on all games. All ten teams qualify for the knockout stage, but I'll explain that later on.

The weather here in Northern Italy is glorious (probably because the Belgians unfortunately are not with us!), with bright sunshine and temperatures in the high 20s during the day, and the odd storm to cool things down and water the lawns in the evening. My Californian tan has now been superseded by a dusky Mediterranean hue!

The players arrived in ones, twos and threes over the weekend, and the first official gathering was held on Sunday evening in the golf club. A welcoming cocktail, coupled with a "light" meal of antipasti, risotto AND pasta, followed by desert got us off on the right footing since it appears that the rest of the week is going to be one long succession of meals, interrupted by short bursts of activity on the croquet lawns.

Play started at 9am on Monday morning, and some interesting results have already been recorded. It must be said that the forces present here in Italy do not always reflect the true or traditional strength of the respective association. England and Australia have sent "select" teams (actually, a "senior" team in the case of Australia), whereas Wales, in particular, but also Switzerland, Egypt, Spain and hosts Italy, have sent full or almost full strength teams. It is unfortunate that major

associations such as New Zealand, the United States and South Africa are not represented here. However, it is certain that there will be some surprises over the week ahead.

In Group A, England were beaten 2-1 by Australia (revenge for the MacRob?!) and also by Spain by the same score. In the other match of the day, the Welsh duffed up the Egyptians by 3-0. In Group B, the Germans had a torrid time, losing 3-0 to both Ireland and Italy. The remaining tie was claimed by Switzerland, 2-1 victors over Scotland. The "classifica" is rather meaningless at this stage in the proceedings.

Monday evening was taken up with the sponsors dinner. Live music (excellent) and a wonderful meal of bresaola (Italian air-dried beef, swimming in virgin olive oil and topped with grated parmigiano cheese), followed by freshly made lasagna, braised veal scallops with spinach and potatoes, fruit salad and ice-cream, was topped off with speeches from Italians, Australians and Egyptians, in several languages. Pavarotti sang (recorded, unfortunately!), flags were waved, and hands were shaken or clapped, and sometimes both!

Tomorrow will be a long day of croquet, with the first matches starting at 8.30am and the last matches scheduled to commence at 5.30pm. The fact that principal sponsor Peroni have provided free Nastro Azzurro beer for the whole week (other clubs please take note!) will no doubt make the day seem even longer!

## **Day 2 - Tuesday**

Tuesday dawned another bright and sunny day and there was only the lightest hint of dew on the lawns as the first games got off at the ungodly hour of 8.30am. Two of the lawns here at Le Robinie are of excellent quality; flat, apart from the odd wicked boundary, of a decent speed and made of the greenest and most even grass you'll ever experience. The third lawn is, well, not quite like the other two... in any respect!

As mentioned yesterday, each team is made up of three players, although some teams have brought along a reserve. The players are:

### **Group A**

Australia: Tony Hall, George Oates, Urbicia Cerro Oates

Egypt: Ahmed Mohamed El Mahdy, Hisham Abd El Hameed Ashraf, Walid El Saeed Wahban, Magd El Sagini

England: George Noble, Martin Granger-Brown, Bill Lamb

Spain: Fernando de Ansorena, Juan Ojeda, Lucas Azcona

Wales: Chris Williams, John Evans, Ian Burr ridge

### **Group B**

Germany: Bruno Hess, Michael Scholl, Thomas Magin

Ireland: Fred Rogerson, Evan Newell, Patsy Fitzgerald  
Italy: Edoardo Lualdi, Paolo de Petra, Gianpietro Donati, Andrea Pravettoni  
Scotland: Rod Williams, David Appleton, Charlotte Townsend  
Switzerland: Peter Payne, Ian Sexton, Norman Eatough, Dave Underhill

With four ties played on Tuesday, the group orders were starting to take shape. There were, however, some more surprises, meaning that Wednesdays ties could still change everything.

In Group A, Egypt used their good hitting to beat Spain 2-1, England surprised everyone to edge past favourites Wales 2-1, Australia were even more surprised to be beaten by Egypt 1-2 and the day was rounded off by a return to sanity as Wales swept past Spain 3-0. Wales lead the group with 7 points and should logically take first place. Behind the "Princes of Wales", as they were called at the opening ceremony, anything could happen. England and Egypt are both on 4 points while Australia and Spain are on 3.

Group B is also very open. On Tuesday, hosts Italy beat Switzerland 2-1, Germany suffered at the hands of the Scots 0-3, Ireland were knocked by the Swiss 1-2 and finally Scotland stretched their match against Italy into the evening, obviously to good effect since they banked the full 3 points, much to our hosts despair. Scotland lead with 7 points, closely followed by Italy and Switzerland on 5 and Ireland on 4. Germany still have to get off the mark.

In the evening, we were all invited to a pizzeria for an evening of pizza (rather obviously) and Neapolitan music. We were entertained by a masked Pulcinella (who rather incongruously was wearing Nike sports shoes!) and the singing and dancing, with the croquet party gustily participating in both, continued through to midnight. Our rendition of O Sole Mio was not to be missed! Luckily, the games start at the more reasonable time of 9am on Wednesday.

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#### **Vencie and Day 4 - Friday**

Venice is a fascinating place to visit, and is one of the few cities that can truly live up to the label "unique", despite all the other assorted places that call themselves "Venice of the North" (Bruges, Birmingham!!!) or whatever. The one problem, apart from the fact that the place is slowly sinking into the water, is the number of tourists (over 12 million per annum, versus a resident population of less than 70'000), which only seem to

be outnumbered by the pigeons. But, with a bit of careful planning, one can get away from the madding crowd and there are innumerable deserted alleyways and courtyards to be discovered.

After taking a taxi boat across to the Piazza San Marco, I preferred not to join the lengthy queues for the more famous sites, and so spent the morning walking around the town, crossing the Canal Grande at the Ponte di Rialto and back again at the Ponte dell'Accademia; quite a distance in the heat and humidity. Some of us met up again for lunch, after which we took the lift up the Campanile; the 98.5 metre tall tower in the Piazza San Marco, originally built as a lighthouse, but used for more sinister purposes as a torture chamber in the later middle ages. The tower was extended several times until, in 1902, the whole thing finally collapsed under weight, killing the curator's cat (or so my guidebook would have me believe!). The tower was rebuilt in ten years and a lift was added in the 1960s, allowing today's tourists to benefit from an unforgettable view of the whole of Venice and the lagoon.

On the way back to Milano, we stopped off in Sirmione on the Lago di Garda, and although this was probably mainly to allow the Italians to watch the football match (Italy v. Holland), this was a perfect way to round off the day. After the crowds of Venice, the calm of this little fortified town was most welcome. A quick visit to the castle was most worthwhile, affording us excellent views of the town and lake. Four of us then retired to an excellent restaurant that we had spied from the battlements of the castle for a wonderful fishy meal, with the sound of the little waves lapping the pebble beach not 3 yards from our table.

After this welcome interlude, Friday saw the start of the knockout stage of the tournament. In essence, the team placed 4th from Group B played the 5th from Group A for the right to challenge the Group A winner in the quarter finals (and obviously 4th from A played 5th from B in order to play 1st from B). The first three teams in each group received byes to the quarter finals. The other quarter finals saw 2nd in A playing 3rd in B and 2nd in B against 3rd in A. The full draw looked thus:

Wales v. Italy or Australia  
Switzerland v. England  
Egypt v. Scotland  
Ireland v. Spain or Germany

The first round went according to plan, with Italy ousting Australia 2-1 and Spain defeating Germany 3-0. In the quarter finals, Switzerland got the better of England 2-1 while Scotland survived the Egyptian threat, winning 2-1 also. Both group winners also booked their places in Saturday's semi-finals, Wales beating local favourites Italy 2-1 and Ireland performing the same feat against Spain. If it wasn't for the Swiss, the semi-finals would have been an all "Home Countries" affair.

On Friday evening, we were invited out for an incredible fish and seafood meal. We must have been eating for three hours at least - basically the food never stopped coming! I was so impressed, with the quality as well as the quantity, that I'll have to go into (brief) detail. A warm seafood salad was followed by cold carpaccio of swordfish, seafood risotto, pasta (orecchiette), and five (yes, five!) different types of grilled fish or seafood. All this was washed down with unlimited supplies of wine (and water) and followed by sorbet, grappa and limoncello. How any of us were expected to play croquet the next morning is beyond me!

### **Day 5 – Saturday**

Saturday morning dawned warm and humid, and the four remaining teams; Wales and Switzerland on the one hand and Ireland and Scotland on the other, were clearly going to have a sticky day ahead. Play started at 10am - mercifully, after the previous evening's gargantuan meal!

In the top half of the draw, Switzerland took an early lead against fancied Wales, with Peter Payne and Ian Sexton winning their opening games against Ian Burrige (+11) and John Evans (+3t) respectively, while Chris Williams came back in extremis to beat Norman Eatough +2. Chris was the first to clinch a point for Wales, taking his second game +13, shortly followed by Ian (S) who equalised for Switzerland +2t. In the meantime, a match which could have gone either way, finally went to Ian (B) who levelled 1-1 against Peter +4. It all came down to the third game but Peter, who produced two rather critical unforced errors, was no match for Ian, who had set his sights on greater things. Ian took the game +9 to propel Wales into the final.

Meanwhile, Ireland were making rather lighter work of Scotland, with all three ties being wrapped up in two games; Fred Rogerson beating David Appleton +7 twice, Evan Newell getting the better of Charlotte Townsend +9 and +2t, and Patsy Fitzgerald completing the rout +1t and +11 against Rod Williams. The stage was set for an exciting and open final.

There were to be no time limits in the final (played on the two good lawns) and the players took full advantage of this to produce a gripping spectacle. The final outcome was uncertain right to the end, a fitting tribute to this excellent tournament, where the croquet was (almost!) overshadowed by the wonderful social programme concocted by the Italians.

All three first games went to Wales, with Ian Burrige taking Evan Newell +13, Chris Williams over Fred Rogerson +5 and John Evans sneaking past Patsy Fitzgerald +2. The second games however, all went to the Irish, with Evan replying +9, Fred +6 and Patsy +8. The last three games would be decisive.

Ian was the first to finish, taking his last match against Evan +7, despite

a missed peg-out which left his partner ball one foot out of A baulk, with Evan's back ball on hoop 1 and a lift to play: 1-0 to Wales. He was followed by Patsy, who completed an excellent week with a +3 win over John: Game tied 1-1. It was down to Chris and Fred to fight it out, and fight it out they did! The game dipped backwards and forwards for quite some time, keeping the appreciative crowd on the edge of their seats, and could have gone either way. In the end however, it was Chris who, with nerves of steel, made a final faultless break and pegged out +3, offering the "Princes of Wales" the World Title, and himself the trophy for "Best Player", a most deserved win - both of them!

The Italian flair for making sure that everyone enjoyed themselves was once again in evidence at the Championship Dinner on Saturday evening. The local politicians, who had so generously supported the event, were present, as were the Spanish and Egyptian Consuls. Speeches were kept mercifully short and all the participants received medals for their efforts. The oldest (Tony Hall - Australia) and youngest (Juan Ojeda - Spain) participants were also rewarded with enormous trophies. The meal, as ever, was excellent and the dancing continued into the early hours of Sunday morning.

The Italians must be commended for organising such a fantastic tournament which was, I'm certain, enjoyed by everybody; players, spectators and even the organisers themselves, who somehow found time to socialise with the visitors despite working such long hours to make everything happen. At the Championship Dinner, it was announced that the 2nd WTC would probably be held in Egypt in the autumn of 2002. Italy will be a hard act to follow, but those of us who have already experienced first hand Egyptian hospitality (Cairo'97), will have no doubt that they are up to the task. Hopefully, there will be even more teams present to enjoy the experience.