

SPORTSMANSHIP GAMES – 10TH ANNIVERSARY IN PARIS

By Diane Joyce

Summer had been pretty non-existent in 2004 but, with the Sportsmanship Games on the horizon, the weather was bound to pick. It did with a vengeance and the 10th anniversary in Paris was a real scorcher.

Having been in the planning stages for two years, twenty-four teams of six, plus another 50 guests finally made their way to Paris at the end of July. From as far north as South Shields and Carlisle to Malaga in Spain, the faithful endured long and arduous journeys to take part in what must be one of the friendliest tournaments on the calendar.

Unlike the poor devils in Carlisle who had a 4.00 am start, I was lucky and had a pick-up time of 9.15. It wasn't that it was a bad journey, it was that we just seemed to lose time here and there on the motorways and getting lost in Leighton Buzzard didn't help.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Paris we were about an hour or so behind schedule. Not too bad but worse was to come. After a debate over east and west for which direction to take, I lost the battle and the coach set off on the peripherique (Paris's version of the M25). When someone looked at a map and said the Eiffel Tower was on the wrong side, it became apparent that we were travelling in the wrong direction. Ten minutes anti-clockwise would have done the trick but we ended up circumnavigating Paris in a clockwise direction.

Having found the correct exit, next stop was Bowling de Paris to drop the bowling gear off. It was now dark and the Bois de Boulogne was starting to come alive with the ladies (or ladyboys) of the night emerging from the bushes. Instead of 5 minutes, we spent half an hour zig-zagging around trying to find the centre. I had recognised the area near the bowl earlier but it vanished into the night as we took yet another wrong turn.

When we arrived at Bowling de Paris it was about 10.00 pm. It was a beautiful warm evening and the restaurant terrace looked very inviting. I declined Julien Lours kind offer for us all to dine there, thinking it would be best if we could all just get to the hotel to check-in. After all, the hotel was only a 10 minute drive away...

We were booked into the Novotel la Defense, right on the banks of the river Seine at the entrance to the business district. As we drove up the Ave Charles de Gaulle, I gave a little speech, pointing out landmarks and our hotel looming up on us – nearly there....

We turned off to the hotel, passed the coach park, took a right and..... back into the one-way system. We then spent the next 45 minutes driving around the La defense area, getting hopelessly lost until I shouted to a taxi driver for help and he guided us out of the maze.

The final trauma was that the coach got stuck in the coach park and the hotel could not spare anybody to guide us out. At the end of our collective tether, we unloaded our cases and walked up a steep slope and along a path to check into the hotel around midnight – exactly the time when they stopped serving food – despite my pleas that we were all starving.

So we had to do the next best thing - we dumped our bags in our rooms and reconvened in the hotel bar, to unwind and de-stress. It had been a very long day.

We all met up at breakfast the next morning. The fact that no-one had eaten for at least 12 hours meant that even the cold sausage, bacon and egg was a welcome stomach-filler. Those who had a room with a fantastic view of Paris were sporting their bruises, where they had smacked their foreheads against the double-glazed window!

With everyone nourished and in a better frame of mind, we set off for the bowling centre. This time we could laugh, as the coach took a wrong turn into a service road and brought the traffic to a halt as it reversed back into the main flow. As the bowlers took time out for a relaxing practice session and explored the beautiful Jardin D'Acclimatation, I had a meeting with the centre management, set up the notice boards and prepared everything ready for the weekend's play.

After lunch, we returned to the hotel for a wash and change before a nice relaxing sight-seeing tour on the coach. We then had a cruise down the Seine with a commentary and I took advantage to catch some sun and relax for an hour before the evening's madness.

Three more coaches were on their way from the UK and I was in constant touch with passengers and drivers alike. After my experience on Thursday, I recommended that they eat en route and then come straight to the hotel.

To save time and confusion in the morning and to set my mind at rest that everyone had indeed made it to the hotel, I set up registration in the hotel bar that evening. Team captains collected their welcome packs and were given last minute instructions, plus forms to enter a pool competition which Alan (Ash) Hearn had volunteered to run alongside the bowling, in the extensive pool hall.

On Saturday morning the coach shuttle service sprang into action, ferrying bowlers and guests alike to Bowling de Paris. (By now the drivers had cracked where it was and how to get there in 10 minutes.)

My opening piece of music was appropriately, "Encore une Fois" by Sash. I had 16 seconds from the track starting to when I started my speech. However, the CD player was on the first floor and the microphone was on the ground floor, which meant a sprint down the stairs and some strange looks as I made my opening announcements amidst heavy breathing!

The bowling ran pretty much to time and plan with Geoff Rens of Pin Action winning gold in the scratch singles (658) and Lynn Jones from Friends winning in handicap (711).

The pool competition was on, then off, then back on again as we managed to negotiate a rate with the centre for a couple of tables for the weekend.

Bowling resumed with the doubles event after a lane maintenance break. Brothers Leslie & Lawry Duncan of Border Reivers shot 1367 for gold in scratch, while Robert and Rosemary Martin-Smith partnered each other for gold in the handicap (1329).

I had every confidence in Robert Perriaux and the rest of the French team, so I strayed 100 meters from the lanes and into the pool hall. I fancied myself as a bit of a pool shark but last years "Good Sport" Rob Williams knocked me out 16-11 in the first round - not very sporting Rob!

With bowling finished for the day, those remaining hopped on the shuttle and returned to the hotel for a sit down meal - split into two rooms and sittings because of sheer numbers. Once the meal was over it was up to the Manhattan Rooms on the 14th floor for the disco.

This was one aspect of the event that worried me - a French DJ - what would he play? At a meeting with the hotel management on Friday I was told he would play English and French music. French music! We heard that on the radio on the drive down - oh oh! However all my fears were laid to rest. Pascal was brilliant. One of the best DJ's I have come across. He didn't speak much, if at all but he had the tunes. He had the jingles. He had everything suitable and to hand, depending on what I was talking about or what was going on. He helped to make it a truly memorable night.

And there were plenty of memorable moments. Once I had organised additional tables and chairs for everyone, it didn't take long before the dance floor filled and a real party atmosphere was going. I set up the table with raffle prizes and prepared my speech, which grew longer and longer as people told me of their previously secret celebrations.

First of all I presented a special commemorative shirt and trophy to the 8 bowlers (Kevin Furness, George Hawkins, Chris Howland, John Parsons, Pete Sampson, Simon Taylor, Ian & Trish Tucker) who had participated in every single "Games".

To determine who should receive which size shirt, I had them organise themselves in size order, with the throng shouting "higher" or "lower" and Pascal playing the Benny Hill theme tune!

The raffle was next, with a large assortment of prizes. Alcohol proved very popular, considering the high prices in Paris.

All teams received an inflatable pin in their welcome pack. I invited them to bring their pin-pal along - in fancy dress. Quite an amazing and ingenious guest list was created, including a "drawing pin", "Osama Pin-Laden", "Pin-Ochio" and a "French letter" pin (yes it is what you are thinking). These and others were very good but it came down to the wire with the large contingent from Shrewsbury just getting the nod with their "AMuFF" from Pick 'n' Mix's "French Maid".

Ten minutes later and Pat Crocker from Pick n Mix won her team a free entry into next years Games by guessing the correct venue - AMF Wigan.

And then there were the celebrations - the people I got up to embarrass, just ever so slightly. Katie Haime had just had her 30th birthday, Matt Courtnage his 23rd and Sportsmanship Games virgin and guest Hayley Unwin was celebrating her 18th that night. Then the Williams brothers, Mark and Chris from Shrewsbury had both proposed to their respective partners Elaine Wheeler and Alison Wright on Thursday evening atop the Eiffel Tower. Finally, Kim (Totti) Locke had her partner Steve Wedgbury go down on one knee, in front of everybody and ask for her hand - she said "Yes".

With all the presentations and ceremonies out of the way it was at last time for me to relax a little and let my hair down with the rest of them. Some ventured out to sample the Parisian nightlife and returned to find the party still going until 3.00am

Sunday morning dawned only too soon and an unusually high percentage of people were eager to catch the first shuttles to the centre. Having pulled various muscles and worn myself out running up and down the stairs the previous day, I decided to take things a little slower, as did the bowlers. My voice had been a little ropery on Saturday and, with all the speeches on Saturday, it was even ropier on Sunday morning! The trios ran pretty smoothly with SCAGMA A (Graham Hales, Adam Booker & Mick Legood) taking scratch with 1750. High Wycombe Rollers A (Doug & Carol Eastall and Peter Fyles) won handicap with 1983.

It was also during the trios that there were almost 2 x 300 games. Both Bill Nichols and Brian Marks managed the first 9 in a row but with me lurking in the shadows, they were both tapped in the 10th for 276 and 279 respectively.

Following a break it was Mick Legood who won scratch gold in the "6th Man" event with 587 and Lynn Jones amassed 713 to win handicap. And then it was the team photos and certificate presentations and it was at this point where we started to lose time and I started to lose my voice. I managed to announce the first half of the teams but was forced to hand the mic over to my husband Barry to conclude. Everything just seemed to take that little bit longer which was to prove crucial later.

Many bowlers soldiered on despite nursing injuries and illness but some had to retire. Replacements were found but this played havoc for Robert who was running the scoring through the Advantage system. I had sent him my excel program but it would not work properly because I use a Microsoft PC and he had an Apple Mac (a new lesson learned). So Andy Fraser came to the rescue (a back-up plan already in place) but he needed to return to the hotel to collect his laptop. We eventually managed to get a taxi and Andy spent the team event tapping away furiously, inputting all the scores to date.

Play continued with the final event, the fives. It was Yehbutz who lifted gold in the scratch and Spare Parts in handicap. Play finished and somehow, without any real problems we managed to finish about an hour behind schedule. And here is where I made a major mistake (easy to say in hindsight). I should have allowed everyone to get their meal from the restaurant; instead I stuck to my original schedule and made the presentations first.

Of course the all events needed to be calculated first. Individually, it was Lawry Duncan on 2507 for his 12 games who won gold in scratch. Lynn Jones again graced the medal podium with 2776 in the handicap. Border Reivers' 13,088 was good for gold in scratch, whilst Aylesbury Aces (15,127) were handicap champions.

Prior to the bowling medals being presented there were a couple of other awards. Peter Fyles and his team from High Wycombe won the "word search" competition. They managed to find 802 words of 4 letters or more from the words "Sportsmanship Games" - could you do better, without running it through a special program, like Andy Fraser did!

Then there was the pool competition (thanks to Ash and Barry Crocker). Bill Riley was third, Pete Sampson runner-up and Lawry Duncan the champion - a double for pool and bowling.

My voice was totally shot - a squeak came out most of the time, so I was forced to whisper and get Barry to make the medal announcements from my crib sheets. And when all the medals were presented, there just left one final award - the "Good Sport of the Games". Barry gave the build up, citing all the reasons why this person should receive the award and then he passed the microphone to

me. I managed to croak "Wilma" in true Flintstones style and Wilma Sustins came forward to collect her award.

But of course there was another final award. I half expected a "thank you" and maybe a bunch of flowers. What I got was a very nice speech from Barry who then handed over to one of the "old campaigners", John Parsons. John, in conjunction with Graham Hales and all the other team captains had conspired to have a collection and I was presented with £250 worth of vouchers for Hoar Cross Hall - a health & beauty spa and golf resort - to help me recover!!! I was truly overcome. I managed to say "thank you" - which was just about audible through my tears of happiness, exhaustion and gratitude.

However there was one further obstacle. Myself and 52 other people had booked and paid to go to the Moulin Rouge that evening. We had over-run so badly that it looked an almost impossibility. A huge queue sprawled out of the restaurant and the clock was ticking. I was almost ready to give up but I didn't. I called in a previously offered favour...

Having bowled with her (team and county) and known her for 30 years, Jill Owen will forgive me for saying she has a big gob - one that is very audible, shall we say. I whispered my instructions to Jill and she became my heavy. "If you are not going to the Moulin Rouge, please stand to one side and allow those who are, through to eat". I then allowed the Moulin Rouge people 15 minutes to throw something down their necks.

The coach took 7 minutes to return to the hotel. Meantime, Jill issued my second lot of instructions. "You have 30 minutes to get washed, changed and back on the coach. Please leave make-up, jewellery, ties etc., until you are back on the coach" The coach stopped, 53 people alighted, ran to the lifts, ran through the corridors, got ready and ran back. And 53 people made it to the Moulin Rouge, with 5 minutes to spare (possibly less) and witnessed a truly magnificent show.

Some people had the luxury of a relaxing day on Monday. Unfortunately I had to return to the UK and drew the "driver from hell" on the return journey (the other 4 drivers were brilliant). Highlight of the return journey has to be the Derby contingent playing a 5-a-side football match in one of the (empty) carriages on the Eurostar - amazing!

So, with another Sportsmanship Games under my belt, it's time to go on holiday and recover. The whole Paris experience was truly exhausting and enjoyable at the same time. So many memories, so many good things, it will be impossible to follow. Or will it? Next years tournament is scheduled for July 30/31st at AMF Wigan. That sounds like a bit of a comedown. It can't possibly be better than Paris..... can it?.... watch this space...