

French Exchange 21st-22nd November 2009

I suppose this exchange started back in September when I was on the website filling in some match feedback. The system was flagging up that there had been some additional dates added to the availability page. On further perusal I noted that on the weekend of 21st and 22nd November there was an "Exchange".. Whatever one of those was! Being the type of person that would go to the opening of an envelope, I decided to tick the availability box and then wait to see which one of the "usual suspects" would be appointed to it!

On the 14th October I received a phone call from Colin Barthorpe. Initially I was wondering what "good news" Colin was going to bring. Had I been moved to a game in Durham or Plymouth?

However no, not this time.

He was asking me if I was still available over the weekend of 21st and 22nd November for an exchange with the French umpires association. I pretended to check my diary and then confirmed that I was still available. I was then informed that I had been chosen by the Selection Panel (EHUSP) to be one of 2 English umpires to be sent to France.

Thoughts started to run through my mind like "Why me?" and "How much is this going to cost".. especially as I had only recently returned from watching the JWC in Boston and European Championships in Amsterdam... (as well as the NPUA conference!)

The other vital piece of information to know was "Who was my colleague?" That poor fellow was Andy Burnette. I thanked Colin and immediately phoned Andy to gauge his thoughts. Strangely enough they were very similar to mine.. "Were we the only 2 people to put their name down for this?" ... is that the reason we were chosen? And "Paris....this is going to be pricey!!"

All Andy and I had to do now was book and pay for the flights and airport car parking. All of which would be refunded by the NPUA... excellent!

The 5 weeks absolutely flew between then and the weekend. We had both received details of the trip from the French liaison, Mathieu Gruson. Who had organised one of our French colleagues to pick us up from Charles De Gaulle.

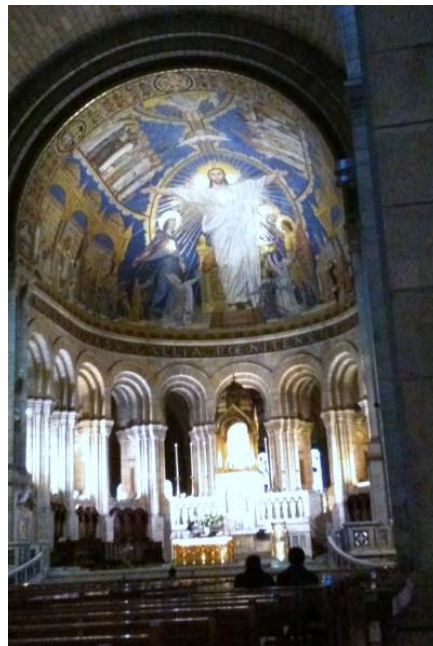
We both had two games each. On the Saturday, we would be umpiring in the Paris Region. I had at 15:00 Paris St Germain v Le Touquet with a young FIH umpire called **Benjamin Mauss**, and Andy was appointed to the 16:00 game C.A. Montrouge v Paris Jean Bouin with our host and guide for the weekend **Benoit Chopin**.

Benoit picked us up in a hire car from CDG at 21.30 after we had both EasyJetted (?) over. Benoit was a native of Lille and so with the aid of a sat nav and some impressive driving skills got us to our hotel in the 17th arrondissement shortly before 22.30. He was staying in the hotel with us and so (luckily) checked us in and organised a lovely dinner for us. Benoit's English was excellent (in fact all

our colleagues spoke very good English), which really helped , as I had heard some horror stories from some FIH umpires of drawing pictures and monosyllabic grunts in Pre-match chats!

After a long week at work it didn't take either Andy or myself too long to get to sleep. We had decided to set our alarm for 8.00am but we needn't have worried as the couple in the room next door decided to wake us up with some rather loud noises and screams. Luckily that alarm clock was turned off after a minute or so (not very impressive) and we got up for breakfast. Benoit was waiting for us down at reception and we entered the "salle de petit-dejeuner". This was no "Belle Vue" breakfast though. The pastries and fresh fruit were fantastic, as were the cold meats and cheese, all washed down with copious quantities of coffee and fresh orange.

After breakfast Benoit asked us what we would like to do. We both thought that having a quick explore of Paris might be a good idea giving us a way of stretching our legs before our games. Acting as tour guide Benoit took us to Sacre Coeur which was absolutely stunning. We were wondering if he thought our umpiring needed some divine inspiration but we will take anything that's on offer. In fact, there were some subtle subliminal messages on the ceiling of Sacre Coeur.



We then jumped on the Paris Metro and made our way to Pont Neuf to collect tickets for The Bateaux Mouches which we were going to go on that evening after the games. After a quick walk through The Louvre we made our way back towards the hotel stopping at a delightful Parisian Cafe for Lunch with Benoit yet again picking up the bill !!

I was handed over to Benjamin at the hotel and he drove me to PSG for our game. We arrived at the ground a good hour and a half before the start time.. plenty of time, or so I thought.

In France there are no Match Officials. Those responsibilities lie with the umpires (or in this case Benjamin!). Each player (and umpire) must have their own licence to allow them to play and this is

one of the many things that the umpires must check before the game. The licence must also be signed and stamped by a doctor saying that the player is fit enough to play. Unfortunately, one of the Le Touquet players (an Aussie) had his Licence signed but not stamped, meaning that he was ineligible to play. What was frustrating for Le Touquet was that they were a team brimming with doctors and no one had a stamp on them!

As you can imagine, feelings were running high, especially as the player had played the week before, Le Touquet were feeling hard done to.

With all the discussions that had occurred due to this and other matters, Benjamin and I were left with 15 mins to get changed, have a pre-match chat and have a warm up. Not exactly perfect preparation! The Pre-match chat was led by Benjamin and the focus of our discussions seemed to be about control and dealing with chat. This is obviously a hot topic at the moment in France and so I listened intently to our plan.

6 minutes later I was blowing my whistle to start our game. Feeling somewhat anxious and determined that this would not happen again tomorrow! If I was feeling anxious then, 2 minutes later I was petrified as Benjamin had red carded a Le Touquet player for dissent after having been given a yellow by him for a bad tackle. Time for Plan B!!

Somehow Plan B worked and the game passed without further incident, a lot to do with the score line which ended up being 10-1 to PSG.

Watching the game had been NYUPL umpire Sarah Collings who was in Paris on a gap year. She had travelled across Paris to watch/support a fellow English Umpire and was a valuable asset in the Bar after, with her excellent French! I had tried a couple of times, both unsuccessfully, to engage the Coaches of the teams to discuss the umpiring of that game and umpiring in France generally. Without being rude, one of the coaches explained that umpires and coaches keep a wide berth of each other in France and that they each do their own job and leave each other alone. Benjamin confirmed this. I explained that in England we are actively trying to open up the dialogue between players, coaches and umpires in the hope that we can move our game forward. If there is one thing this weekend has convinced me of, it is that we must keep at this, as it is vital for the continuing increase in standard of our game.

After sufficient rehydration, Benjamin took both myself and Sarah back to Montrouge where Andy had been umpiring with Benoit. As it was Sarah's home club she introduced us to the Aussie coach of Montrouge and we had a great discussion regarding the differences in the Australian, French and English games. He was very supportive of the Exchange program and thought that it would definitely help in aligning the game throughout Europe.

I shall now pass you on to Andy

While Matt was on the other side of Paris watching red cards fly about, my match between Montrouge and Paris Jean Bouin went off without controversy. The 6-2 score line didn't represent what was otherwise an evenly fought match on a mudbath of a pitch. The main priority for me was to the opportunity to get familiar with Benoit's umpiring and French hockey before our "big" match on Sunday between Lille and PSG. This was to be a re-match of the Championship final from the end of last season.

The immediate learning points from my first match were:

- (like Matt) the lack of match officials and the amount pre-match administration got in the way of decent preparation. French umpires have to log on to the French Hockey Federation website before the match to confirm the team sheets and the registration of the players and officials (even the ball boys!!)
- my lack of French was no problem - Using less verbal communication worked fine and, when I did need to explain something, most of the players understood what was happening. Half a dozen Aussies and Dutch around the pitch helped!
- physical play was dealt with very severely and very early. There was much less tolerance of robust tackles we might simply blow hard for.

After a better night's sleep (no amorous neighbours), Sunday started bright and early for me. After breakfast and dumping Benoit's hire car, he and I caught the TGV from Gare du Nord up to Lille. For anyone who hasn't experienced 200mph through the countryside in eerie silence, you have to try it! 137 miles in less than 55 minutes.... The 107 miles between Bristol and London take me 1 hour 50 minutes! France 1 England 0.

Lille is Benoit's home town, so he spent the rest of the morning showing me the sights and shopping in the Christmas market. During lunch (a cracking local potato and cheese dish,) Benoit casually dropped into the conversation that the Championship final the previous year "didn't go well" and that he anticipated the players "weren't quite over it yet". Define "not well" Mr Chopin. "Er, well...in the end... I think there were 3 red cards". Ok. So accepting that red cards are more common on the continent (a player on Saturday told me proudly that he had received 10 in his career!), that didn't sound like these teams have their Christmas party together.

Indigestion and vague panic kicking in, we headed out to the club on the edge of town. The ground had hosted the World Cup qualifiers two weeks earlier, so a newly laid pitch awaited. Walking into the clubhouse revealed a sight we don't see here - a dozen or so families eating restaurant-standard food including traditional raclettes and cooking their own meat on hot stones at the table. The wine was flowing too. Again, our French friends have us comprehensively beaten.

After completing the online match sheet and reviewing the players' licences - another 45 mins gone - we got changed and headed out on to the pitch. Matt had seen PSG on Saturday and their coach seemed pleased to see another English umpire - don't tell Matt (apparently he did very well in their 10-1 victory... did the losers think the same?!). Benoit and I spent some time tweaking our thinking from the previous day - I would play less advantage early on, he wouldn't over-react to early tackles and we both would ignore the inevitable histrionics of such a big match.

The heavens opened the second Benoit blew the first whistle and they stayed open, making the pitch fast and slippery. It was immediately obvious that the teams really didn't like each other. Every tackle had a crunch, but nearly all of them won the ball cleanly. However, both teams were desperate to win so even the mis-timed challenges resulted in a quick "auto-pass" without

problems. The ball pinged around at an impressive pace, easily up there with our Premier sides, and the game settled into strong patterns of play which made positioning far easier than the day before. The higher standard meant the ball went into less contact and the game was easier to umpire. The players responded to what I was trying to communicate and realised very quickly that I was prepared to play long advantages. One, on the far side of my 23 from a deliberate-ish foot which could have been a PC, resulted in a Lille scoring just before half-time from the cross which followed. The goal scorer pointed across and gave me a thumbs up as he wheeled away. Good news! (English players please note!) But then he started waving an imaginary card and pointing to the defender who he believed had stretched out a leg. Curious thing that, and something I detest about football. When he came back over for the re-start I said that I had only not given a card because he had suggested I should. As it happens, that was a complete lie - I had no intention of giving a card. Benoit was in a great position to give it if he thought the foot was deliberate. However, I took the view that the player was more likely to buy it if I appeared to agree with him but had taken the penalty away because of his actions. Who knows?! He shrugged and wondered off.

The rest of the game went at a furious pace, ending 3-1 to Lille and all open play goals, one of which was an outrageous reverse stick across the goal and into the top corner from the edge of the circle.

Overall, the game was enthralling. The standard of play was excellent and the match flowed from end to end. I felt Benoit and I umpired much better together than on Saturday (and that hadn't been bad) and we developed a good understanding and compromise between our styles. After the most scalding shower I've ever had, we enjoyed a couple of beers with the teams before Benoit dropped me back to the station for my short TGV trip back to Charles de Gaulle on the TGV to meet Matt and fly home.

Is the exchange worth it?

Both Andy and I are aware of the large cost to both the NPUA and our hosts the French Umpires Association. The association as a whole needs to be sure that its monies (and those of its members) are being spent wisely and a benefit obtained.

Neither Andy nor I have umpired a lot of non-domestic hockey, so we were delighted to be able to experience a different style of playing (and umpiring).

We both agree that verbal communication is important but it need not be verbose. In fact it is much better to be short and simple (insert your own joke here).

The one thing we must not become is complacent. We are very lucky in England to have the set up and support structure available to us, to help us perform to our maximum potential. Never again will I take a match official for granted, try doing their job on top of yours!

Don't get me wrong, we can still improve these exchanges, I think if an umpire coach came over with us and watched us in unfamiliar surroundings and pressures it would certainly help our development as well as their own.

We should be very proud of NPUA and what it stands for. Both Andy and I received ties and pins from our hosts. We should be able to reciprocate and I ask the Exec to look into this.

Why were we selected?

I have never liked to second guess our selection panel and I don't intend to start now, but I know the reason why a lot of people weren't selected.. they didn't make themselves available! All I can suggest is, if you can afford the time then put your names down... don't think that you'll never be selected so you won't bother.

We both had a fantastic weekend shared with great company and we both look forward to the opportunity to be able to welcome umpires (and coaches) from other countries and hopefully show them the same fantastic level of hospitality that we received from Benoit, Benjamin, Charles and Matthieu.

In fact my kit bag enjoyed it so much it decided to stay an extra night at Charles de Gaulle!!

Matt Harrison

Andy Burnette