

keely | dunn: ¡bienvenido y chau! - a spanish umpiring exchange weekend

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¡bienvenido y chau! - a spanish umpiring exchange weekend

Thanks to a rather late call-up, I signed up to be part of the hosting end of the Spanish Exchange last weekend. I was excited to see my friend "Vito" (Victoria Del Oulmo) again, whom I'd first met at a tournament in Ireland in 2004. I've also been working on my Spanish over the past few years, as I often work with and travel to Spanish-speaking countries as a Pan American umpire. Any chance to practise is a good thing!



The day before I was to set off for Birmingham, I got a bad piece of news. As a bit of background, this is now my 4th season in England and although I've spent 12 months out of the past 3 years here on a UK passport, I still only hold a Canadian driver's license and for at least some governmental agencies, I'm not a permanent resident. When my aunt attempted to have me put back on her vehicle's insurance for the 4th time, the insurer denied me coverage - full stop! "We don't insure temporary drivers", we were told, as if the last 3 years hadn't happened. Damn this recession! Knowing that we were so late in the game, I went online and hired a car. I couldn't just leave Vito and Pílar at the Birmingham Airport, after all, and one of the big lessons I've learned umpiring here is to roll with the punches - since they just keep coming, there's no point in fighting it.

Thanks to some massive rains that day, a ridiculous amount of roadworks and a healthy dose of Canadian naivete about said roadworks, I was a bit late in getting the girls at the airport. At the hotel Vito, Pílar and their translator, Rocio, joined Jackie Gibbs and I for some refreshments, which for me were well needed after the white-knuckle drive in the slashing rain.

Margaret McLoughlin joined us for dinner later, as she'd met Pílar when she was over for a tournament in Nottingham. It sounds cliché, but one of the best parts about umpiring truly is the people you meet, and it's great to be able to reconnect with old friends whenever you get the chance. We had a great time getting reacquainted and getting to know each other better, especially finding out what kinds of challenges Vito and Pílar face in Spain.

The next day we split into two groups, as Jackie took Vito to Leicester for her match with Sue Barker, and I was charged with getting myself, Pílar and Roccio safely to the University of Birmingham. Well, I managed the first part ok as we landed at the cafeteria just on time for pre-match refreshments.

At international tournaments we're often encouraged to do our pre-match chats earlier in the day, and sometimes even the night before, our matches. Part of that is to simply give you ample time to get everything covered - it's amazing how much longer the standard topics take when you're talking in your slowest English, your colleague is hablar mas lento en español and you're enjoying a great game of charades in between.

I was proud of Pílar as we toughed it out without Rocio's help and I think really got on the same page. One issue that Pílar was very thorough about was carding - she wanted to know when in England we usually give the green card (after the first "scorn" whistle? The second?), whether we give a second green to the same player for a different offence or go to a yellow (apparently it's quite common in Spain for a player to receive 2 greens - maybe that's a good sign they should be moving to a yellow instead!).

So after our lengthy chat we were running a bit behind schedule again, which didn't help when I managed to get us lost on our way to the pitch in that labyrinth masquerading as a campus. When we turned up we only had 5 min. to game time, which I was just beside myself about. I knew that Pílar (who is a serious runner) likes a thorough physical warm-up, but she didn't let the lack of it that day it bother her. Again, it's part of the process of getting outside your comfort zone - foreign country, different language, different hockey culture, mishaps and delays - and you just have to be able to step up and perform regardless. It was good experience for both of us, but still something I want to avoid repeating!

The game itself was an interesting affair, and I could almost see the different thoughts going across Pílar's face in the first half. She had the majority of the attack at that point, and when we came off at the break she remarked how unusual the flow of the game was for her. Even if she thought she couldn't explain it, I knew exactly what she meant because I notice it too when I've been away from English hockey - there's a particular tempo and an evenness to the flow that comes from the composure and patience that's common here - and a general lack of naked aggression that Pílar told me she has to deal with, especially in "el area".

For all of our careful planning of how to progress through the control ladder, from using whistle tone and gestures to greens and beyond, I managed to go straight to two yellow cards in the second half. It goes to show that sometimes the best plans are those that you abandon halfway through the game because something happens that you completely didn't expect.

Post-game, Pílar was greatly looking forward to having the traditional chat with the coaches. In Spain (and in many other areas of the world), they struggle with communication between coaches and umpires and she was keenly interested in not only

getting feedback from their perspective, but seeing how it all works.

During the car ride home, she quizzed me at length about how we handle coaches who aren't as positive and constructive as Mary and Phil were that day - do we argue back if we disagree? Do we ever refuse to talk to the coaches? I told her that from my perspective, sometimes it's more about showing a willingness to listen and accept responsibility for things we need to improve, rather than getting into debate over right and wrong. Simply saying, "okay, I understand what you're saying" can build rapport and respect that over time, gives you the chance to explain your perspective in a way that they'll want to hear. I have a feeling that Pílar and Vito will be trying to take this tradition back to their leagues, the same way I've tried to get it going in Canada since learning how it's done here in the NL.

Unfortunately we had to part ways the next morning as the Spaniards had a relatively early flight back home that afternoon and the only way to have them on a game was to have them umpire together at Olton. As for me, I was on my way up to Sheffield and eventually home.

For me, the weekend simulated a kind of mini-international tournament where you're outside of your comfort zone, getting to know new people, dealing with language barriers and establishing a common ground for your game plan. Handling all of those different distractions and still giving your best for the players is the name of the game, and it's tremendous that the NPUA can help provide this kind of experience for their umpires.



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