

## **Taranto, Italy, May 31<sup>st</sup> 2009**

### **Anse in little Italy**

Getting up at 4.30 a.m. is stupid. On Saturday, May 30th, Pfingstsamstag, I lifted myself up at really stupid o'clock in the morning to go to Italy for a Touch Tournament. Instead of going to Berlin and having fun playing at the Capital Cup like every other decent Austrian Touch Rugby player did, I decided to follow Italy's call to ref at their first out of 4 National Touch League 2009 Competition in Taranto near Bari in Southern Italy. Even though the fines I received and will receive all year by my Vienna team will melt away all my savings (on a side note: do I believe in the Touch Justice System I set up? In principle yes, but now I feel like being the first real victim there). One of the real cool things was that Touch Rugby Italy paid for flight and accommodation. And of course it was a real honor to be invited after all.

Anyway, flight left our puny Vienna Airport at 7 a.m., I was supposed to have plenty of time to indulge my new shopping passion. Well guess what, Lufthansa had just enough delay so that I did not have enough time to go to Milano but enough time to get really bored at the airport.

How do you know you are in Italy? Well, food is great but expensive, and they have the best espresso for a Euro. Try that in Austria...

And how do you know that you are in Southern Italy? An espresso is 70 cents, a Pizza Margeritha 2,5 Euros. Why the f can't they have the same coffee in Austria?

Austria: about 8 degrees Celsius, raining cats and dogs, a very unpfingstish weather (yeah I expected that MS Word did not know this word. Douche.). Milano: 15 degrees. Bari: 24 degrees, sunshine. Und die Frisur hält.

Anyway, after 11 hours of traveling (but who is counting? ;-), I arrived at the hotel, power napped and as I set foot on ground again, did not find any of the Italian players, who were also staying in the same hotel (which btw was called "Hotel Principal" – I have been to far worse places, but it did not quite hold what its name promised) so I took the opportunity to explore Taranto – and pars pro toto non touristy Southern Italy.

### **Language barrier #1**

One of the really cool things was that everyone talked to me in Italian. So is it my taint that I aquired chasing Touch balls and all other sorts of balls around, or do I even have a southern Ausstrahlung that they think I am actually Italian? How cool is that!?! Soon I had to realize that no one speaks another language there and that the Tarantians / Tarnatinos (or how the heck they are called) do not really speak any other language than Italian.

So I had no choice but to try my best Italian, which is exactly a mixture between the little French and Spanish I know, with a German accent. After a few encounters of the third kind in the supermarket I picked up „grazie“ (oddly enough, they did not understand my „gracias“ before), „prego“, „bona sera“ and „due espressi“. Sounds simple, but when you are stressed out, overworked and underf., I was quite proud of myself. After the first water I successfully ordered, I figured that I could live here permanently and pick up Italian within a week or two.

### **Coolness factor seaside**

Finding the sea was the easy part – although those who know me well enough can tell stories about my navigational skills (or the absence of those – in our family our father took all the navigational skills and left me and my siblings with none whatsoever). The hard part was getting down to the sea, since it seems to be all private or privately owned down there. I guess I was not supposed to climb a fence to get to the beach, but the seaside was part of why I came down there. I did not take a swim in the sea since it was all industrial oil refineries, shipping yards and other stuff around there.

But what made up for this was a good game of soccer on Astroturf I played with a bunch of 14 year olds. They did not speak a word of Inglese, and we have already covered my Italiano skills. Anyway, I realized that sport does not need a language, it's a language for itself. And that sucking at a sport is obvious without any words spoken too.

On a side note (on a side side note I realized that I keep making side notes, but my mind is not working linear enough to produce a consistent storyline (side side side note: I expect the reader to be able to be tough enough to follow the leitmotif anyway)) I found the South Italian concept of waste separation very interesting: they seem to separate themselves from the waste wherever it incurs (gosh I really hopes this translates).

### **Dinner at a very Italian Tratteria and Lost in Translation again**

Max took me out for dinner where I met a big bunch of Italian players and officials (or I'd rather say "presidentes", since everyone seems to be a presidente for something in Italy). They were all very lovely people, nice and welcoming. Yet I was very tired and hungry, being far from the 3500 to 4000 calories I require every day. Additionally the language barrier did not allow me to follow any of their conversations. I thought I had a pretty good idea what they were talking about, but in reality I could not have been further off most of the time.

It took them ages to get the incredibly good food – pasta and sea food. I did not really know if I had ordered something or not, but I ended up getting what everyone else was getting at my big table.

If you ever wonder when and why I came up writing such a long report or blog or diary or call it whatever you want, this was the time and place I wrote it in my head. I just had to type it

afterwards. Being so lost in translation at dinner, I bunched the lines in my head around and had a lot of fun doing so.

**The day of the Tournie or “It starts when it starts and it ends when it ends.”**



We were taken to the fields by bus early Sunday morning (oh well I should just mention how psyched I was when I heard some native English / Aussie accent at breakfast).

The fields were in an old huge soccer Stadium where they set up two pitches sideways. Not actually proper FIT sized, but pretty close.

I was waiting for the games to start, but nothing real was happening for a long time. One of the Expats told me: “Man you are in Italy here. It starts when it starts and it ends when it ends.”

Very very enviously I watched the teams all being dressed up in cool team sweaters or Poloshirts, carrying team bags and all in all looking very professional.

**The games or “We are Italians but we are not going to kill you”.**

As to the games: 8 teams in 2 groups, 20 minute games swap ends at every touchdown. As the only FIT qualified referee I ended up refing 7 games, including semifinal and final – as a single refing. Pretty tough to keep up the concentration for that long, but I guess I did quite OK. The captain of the Dolce team did not agree at all, complaining at very decision I made. I

had a word with her after a game and she told me, that they get caught up in the heat of the moment pretty easily. And that it will be all OK in the end. I could not really discuss her catchphrase “We are Italians but we are not going to kill you” any longer, because the next game was about to start.

Since my arrival, everyone of players, visitors, officials and presidentetes were treating me incredibly friendly, with the utmost respect, always giving me the feeling of being special and appreciated. By mid-day I guess everyone knew me and my name was pronounced something like “Anse” by the Italians – very nice and cute.

In addition to the refing I was given the opportunity to play 3 games for team Orange from Belluno. They showed up with only 5 players (respect for that) including rugby playing Elina who lives in Vienna and is now the fiancée of an Italian Touch player – the Vienna Tournament brought them together last year with them getting married this August. Thanks again guys for the opportunity to throw the ball around and score a little! Despite having no subs most of the time you improved a lot with every game and always kept up a very very good mood!

### **Touch in Italy or on black sheep**

The standard of Touch played in Italy improved at least a 100% since the Rovigo Tournament I have been to a year ago. Out of the 8 teams at the tournament, 5 were 100% proper Touch teams, 2 somehow Touch rugby mixed but with a lot of potential and drive to learn the game properly.

However, the black team from Rovigo was one of the big disappointments of the day. Unable to speak any Inglese and very unwilling to play proper Touch, learn the rules or ref signals for that matter. In my personal opinion it is very unfair for teams playing proper Touch, always going back the 5 or 10 meters or to the score line, if a team does not do any of this. As a ref you cannot play advantage if the team doesn't understand the concept and its execution. So I ended up awarding one penalty after the other to the black team's opponents, but more or less destroying the game.

### **The Final or “We have trained all spring and only want to go back 3 meters”.**

In the final Rovigo was playing Modena who played an outstanding level of Touch all day, having two very experienced and skilled players and managed to have a bunch of not so much experienced players and kids (9 year old Julian and her 10 year old sister Mila) not only play but be really involved in the game.

Anyway, Rovigo was complaining and talking back to my every decision, accusing me of being completely insensitive. Before the game they had a translator come to me and tell me that they had trained all spring, were a little tired and only wanted to back 3 meters instead of the 5 or 7 I set. What can I say.

After one misbehavior after the other, I sent the most annoying player off. As I explained to them, that they were now only allowed to play with 5 players till I called him back, another player shook my hand and said that his team was playing with 4 players from now on.

Modena, even though their bright yellow jerseys were hurting my eyes all day, ended up winning the final with no touchdown scored against them. The black captain talked to one of the Italian refs about me afterwards. The only thing I picked up was when he pointed at me and said: "Lui? No!"

### **The After Party**

At a restaurant 45 minutes from the hotel, some great Italian food, a lot of muscles and wine was served. A lot of good talk about Touch and partying. The drinking games did its trick to make the bus ride back being like the pre after after party.



### **The After After Party in Room 607 or “What happens on tour...”**

We had quite some discussion about the “What happens on tour, stays on tour” vs. “what happens on tour, get up on Facebook discussion”. We settled for the second option. So all that I can reveal is the following:

As I expected, in the morning of the tournie I was offered all sorts of bribes. All you can drink beer, wine, money, also some rather funny threats.

The girls from the Milano Barbarian team, in its core a drinking team with a Touch problem, had a different approach: They said they would make it worth my while if they won every game I reffed them. Even though being completely impartial and acting as an FIT official, as I recall, the Barbarians (side note: the “Bar” in “Barbarians really comes from the word bar) not only won every game I reffed, but also the one game I played against them with Orange.

Thanks again to the girls of room 607 for hosting this wonderful party! You have been so nice, warm, funny and English speaking, you really made my day! What a great group you are! I will try and behave next time.

### **So to sum up:**

I made a lot of new friends, met extraordinary people, had incredibly much fun, saw and reffed some really good Touch and was treated as nicely as I have ever been. On top of that, I have been introduced into the circle of the M-game of life.

Thanks a million times to everyone who made this weekend so special!

So Italy, you will definitely see more of me!

P.S.: I really would have loved to include more photos. Unfortunately I was way too busy during the day to take some.