

## **CE Barbarians – 2008 Touch Euros Report**

The **Central European Barbarians** – an open mixed team made up of touch players from Austria, Czech Republic and Hungary – participated as a guest invitational team in the **2008 European Touch Championships in Paris**. This very professionally run Tournament had 720 players in 45 teams from 13 European countries and had 50 non-playing Referees and was played over 3 days on 5 fields.

### **The Quickie:**

- An awesome experience both on and off the field.
- We played and watched some of the best Touch players in the World, and then had beers with them.
- We lost all our games but we had pretty modest expectations. But to give some perspective, we played teams like England who have 18,000 registered Touch players and have been training for this Tournament as a team all year long – Austria has 23 registered players and some of us just met our other team members hours before our first game.
- We learnt ALOT about how to play touch better (see later).
- We played in the Mixed Open Division (Girls+Boys), but there were many other divisions (Mens, Womens, Over 30s etc)

Most of us were pretty new to touch - some of the Austrians had only been playing since February 2008, so it was quite interesting to play against the best players in the world from NZ and Australia.

### **The Barbarians**

Some of the team met each other only 45 minutes before our first game, so we were at a huge disadvantage when playing the other teams. However, the aim of us participating as a mixed up team from 3 countries was to gain experience to bring back to our countries to try to help develop the sport over here, so it was always going to be difficult. We had a hard job getting a team together from 3 countries with last minute cancellations by players but we managed it sat the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. So we were a squad of 16 (which is the max. you can take to a tournament, of which only 14 may play any one game) – 8 boys, 8 girls.....8 European nationals, 8 non-European players. Ben the Kiwi from Hungary, a touch player for over 10 years and Level 2 Ref, was our Captain.

Our Hotel was directly next to the playing fields, and dodgy fast food ‘Quickie’ restaurant next door got some of us through the 3 days with marginal levels of nutrition...

### **Opening Ceremony**

This was cool, all the teams marched around under their flag – ours of course was the biggest, with all 3 flags of AT, CZ and HU on a long flag pole making everyone else curious to who the heck we were....It was a bit ominous when lots of other teams had Masseurs, Physiotherapists, Managers and really cool off-field Uniforms/Track Suits. Yeh but our Flag was still bigger. Then came the exhibition games of Colonials Men (expatriate NZ team from London) versus European Mens Team (Team selected from different European clubs) and NZ versus Australia. This was the highest level of touch most of us had ever seen.

### **Guernsey**

First game was at 8am Friday morning against Guernsey (one of the small Channel Islands in between France and UK – don’t be fooled, it has 36 different touch teams running there – not much else to do there I guess!). We got beaten 9-1 by their very fast 3 man driving team,

although Jason (CZ) managed to score a great try after Maritini (AT) set it up. 8am is fundamentally a wrong time to be playing touch we concluded after this game...Also, they had very very good and experienced girls, and in mixed touch, girls are the ones who most often win you the games. So boys look after our great Austrian girls, as you gonna need 'em!

### **Italy**

Then came Italy – the team we thought we had a good chance to beat. Italy was made up of a few Italians and the rest were Kiwis, Aussies and Sth African and French. At half time it was 6-6. They scored most of their tries by doing very fast switches that they had practiced a lot (the Kiwi and Aussie are teachers at the same International school and told me they had practiced their switching for months together everyday after school!)- and unfortunately our defence had more holes than Swiss cheese, as we struggled to drift/slide correctly and failed to talk to each other on the field especially in defence. Interestingly enough, everyone had plenty to say at half time but this hopefully was a lesson for the newer players during Tournaments – on the field talk and listen, off the field at half time just listen to your Captain and don't talk. On the good side, our girls scored a few tries thanks to Rafas long passes to the wing. Final score was 11-7 to Italy. They went on to win 2 more games (beating Guernsey 6-2) so the Italians were much better than we expected and congratulations to our neighbours for doing so well.

### **Ireland**

Last game of the day was against Ireland...well I should say “*Bunch of Kiwis living in Ireland*”. It was nice being a Kiwi at this tournament coz there were so many other Kiwis there to talk to etc, in fact I think every team had at least 2-3 Kiwis in it (except for the French – but then they didn't win anything – OK, I'm just joking, the French mens team were awesome!). But there are 280,000 people playing touch in NZ – officially (250,000 in Australia and 500,000 school children playing it). Anyway, Ireland kicked our assess 9-2, and Jason received the prestigious MSP award (Most Stepped Player) as one kiwi side stepped him and scored before Jason had the chance to blink...and then he did it again to Jason. Jason did not hold the prize for very long as Dan got it the next day when a 42 year old Kiwi did the same thing to him.

So Day 1 finished and the team was improving a little bit, but we'd lost all our games and it was time for a lot of food and a beer. The pre-ordered dinner was one of the few disappointments of the tournament – not exactly the French cuisine we had expected eh!..off to Quickie again...

### **NZ**

The luxuriously late time of 8.50am Saturday morning came our next game...against the NZ Touch Academy...featuring “Mr Touch” himself Peter Walters (Worlds best known touch player – played in every Touch World Cup since 1988) and some of the best touch players in the world. They were touring Europe in 2008 to coach European teams. No worries, the Barbarians were ready to punish them, yeh right. Our modest goal was to lose by less than the Italians had lost to NZ. They lost 17-0 and we lost 19-0 but for me and many of the team this was the high point of the Tournament...the NZ team were not going hard core against us as they realised we were beginners, but they displayed the highest level of touch that there is, and they were very friendly and nice to us as they calmly slaughtered us and re-emphasised the importance of playing well but playing fair and in a good spirit, which are bastions of this fantastic sport. We also played on the main Stadium field which had grass so nice you wanted to eat it – so all in all it was a pretty amazing start to the day.

## **Wales**

Next came Wales, who beat us 7-2 or something like this. We did score some cool tries in our games. Many came from us dumping the ball quickly for Rafa to scoop up from Dummy (on the 75) and he would either run through past the defence to pass to one of us, or he would throw his loooong pass to the wing. Other tries came from a few nice setups from Ben, Jason and Dave and also from Maritini.

## **Spain**

Then we played Spain, again we had a chance to win a game. Touch has been in Spain for 8 years already, but we matched them 3-3 right to the end when a lack of concentration by some of us allowed them to score the winning try in the last second. We had the ball, someone overstepped and gave a penalty to the Spanish. The Ref blew the whistle and held his hand out to indicate a penalty but some of us subbed off or didn't stop subbing off. The Spanish saw this, played quickly and scored as only 2 Barbarians were on the field to defend. It was a heart-breaker for us as a draw would have been fantastic. BUT we were improving as a team as we learnt by our mistakes. Oh yeh and Hans reffed this game, he was great! Hans was the only Ref at the Tournament to have his own fan club and from what the other Refs told me, he did a fantastic job. Ref Hans - a legend. As for the reffing, it was of a very high standard to what most of us were used to. We had 3 Refs at all times. Some decisions we didn't agree with, but that is sport. It made a huge difference to have good Refs, and we learnt a lot of how to play with Referees. They set the 5 meter rule to be about 7-8 meters, not the 3-5m some of us are used to in Vienna, so it was hard core getting back onside.

So then we went out and had a well deserved team beer and some Barbarian meaty dinner. Some of us (like me) were completely exhausted by this stage...and we still had 2 games the next day to go...

## **England**

Sunday morning, 8am..ugh...against....oh its only England the reigning European Touch Champions. Actually we didn't suck so bad by this stage as they only beat us 6-2, and these guys were in the mixed open division final later that day. They had 18-20 year olds from the English Touch Academy in this team - these youngsters were being trained for the 2011 Touch World Cup - this gives an indication of how serious Touch is becoming in Europe. These guys were fit and quick, but we held them out as our defence was improving a lot! My favourite part of this game was when I asked Rafa to stop throwing long passes as they were all forward, so the next thing he did was throw a long pass - and Eva scored a try from it ☺ England seemed to do a few 'phantom touches' (calling a touch when you don't actually touch the person), which seemed a bit unsportsmanlike and they made us a little frustrated and a few times I thought we were going to have some fights breaking out...So we supported Scotland very loudly who beat England in the final.

## **Australians**

And then, last game...against The Sydney Rebels (Australia)...the best players from Sydney touch clubs...again, full of Kiwis! They had some fun with us, doing the most amazing moves and fancy pants stuff I've ever seen. At one stage one guy laid down on the ground in front of us and still managed somehow to score, one other time 2 players dived in the air simultaneously at the line and then passed the ball to each other in mid air and score, right under my nose. Best moments of this game were that Michy scored a try against them (YES!) from a rocket long pass from Rafa. Also, Jason attempted a drop goal over the Rugby Goal posts, but he missed and was penalised (he should have been sin binned for missing!) - a bit of comic relief when the score was about 10-0. Bernie made a stunning intercept and almost

scored as half the team passed the ball on around on the run (Crusader style) only to be stopped just short of the line. But by this time some of us like me were completely wasted and were in a daze of tiredness and were just making mistakes. It was all over at 17-1.

### **Finals**

Then we kicked back, got some beers and watched the finals in the Stadium. Awesome game between NZ and Australia, and some other good finals including a drop-off (1 player comes off every 2 minutes) in the Womens final. It was a great atmosphere in the Stadium with Scottish Bagpipes, beer, shirt swapping and the relief of finally finishing playing.

### **Party**

Then came the party... and a few hundred touch players were mixed with lots of beer and food and put together in a big hall and told to enjoy it....it was great and I left when the Welsh team were slam dunking Apple pies into the Basket ball goals, the NZers were just about to do a mass Haka and German men touch players were running around naked...

### **MVP**

Our Most Valuable Player (MVP) Award went to Rafa – as voted by the other teams we played. He set up many of our tries with his explosive runs from Dummy Half and his great pass. Martini, Kathi S., Bernie and Jason also got votes for MVP. Michy got 3 tries, the highest total, and it was great that our girls Eva (2), Johanna, Niki and Kati W scored also. Jason was a bit of a wizard on attack with 2 tries, whilst Dave, Graeme, Dan, Ben and Maritini (2) all scored.

### **Supporters**

We have to mention our own supporters club – the Netherland Mens team. Great bunch of guys (again all expatriots, no Dutch actually in their team but they DID wear orange) who were very good players and even better drinkers and gave us a great morale boost in our games. We returned in kind and watched some of their games and were treated to their own special Dutch Haka which I'm sure will be put on You Tube soon (Johanna?)...

### **Shirt Swap**

Also I have to mention that after the Tournament "Mr Touch" Peter Walters asked me to swap my playing vest with him. I told him of the history of my shirt that it represented 3 countries and Michy and I had to chase a Serbian Bus all over Vienna to get it and that it is a one off never to be repeated shirt to which he replied simply "Choice".

### **Injuries**

Esther could only play 1.5 games because of her injured foot (injured before the Tournament) but apart from this we had no serious injury. Most other teams I talked to had lots of injuries after the 3 days so us Barbarians just must be hard, knarly and tough. It was difficult to play three 40 minute games each day for 3 days, especially for some of us well-over 30 year old folks. The pace and speed of the tournament games was about 2x faster than what we are used to, and we were defending (i.e. running backwards) about 70% of the time.

### **Touch Lessons Learnt**

But we learnt so much and below is my list of what I remember that we did consistently over 8 games and can improve on. Remember that we all should be really proud of how we came together and played well against teams far more experienced than us and hopefully we are all really enthusiastic to get better so we can go back and kick their asses...

What can we improve on and learn over the next year:

1. *Do the basics right:*

- receiver of the ball needs to stand deeper so he/she doesn't get a forward pass – especially the wingers.
- perform correct “roll ball” – learn to roll the ball properly so it is stationary and not moving, don't overstep (i.e. **Don't Roll** the ball at all!).
- Talk on defence to tell your team mate which attacking player you are going to touch.
- Listen to your team mate if he/she is saying he will make the touch.

2. *Defence:*

- talk and listen on defence.
- drift/slide with the ball.
- only ONE person makes the touch. NOT two people going up and making a touch.
- wingers – do NOT come inside to touch the player when the link is drifting outwards to get him. About half the tries scored against us were from here.

3. *Referee:*

Watch the Referee and listen to them as much as possible. They tell us when we are offside and they tell us what the touch count is for example. If we have the ball and the whistle blows and the Ref puts his/her hand out, just get back 10 meters (DO NOT Sub off!) and get ready for the attacking team to come at you. We must learn to react quicker to the Referee. Hans can help us with this at our training games.

4. *Switching (running in opposite directions and passing to each other):*

We can learn to do this as most teams did this quite effectively against us to set up their tries. It takes a lot of practice to get this right, but it should be fun trying eh...

5. *Dummy Running:*

In most cases as Dummy Half, just pass the ball off the ground immediately to the runner – don't pick it up, run 10 meters and then pass to the runner who has nowhere to go and gets touched (e.g. Hospital Pass).

6. Learn to drive the ball up when the *Defence is shooting* on us, by making passes.

7. *Keep Quiet at Half time.* You have a Captain who by his/her position has been selected because they have more experience. Having 8 people all talking at half time, especially inexperienced players, doesn't help much. When you are talking you aren't listening. Do our talking ON the field.

8. Continue to play Touch with as *good a spirit* and with as much *fair play* as we can. We did play fair with good spirit and didn't cheat (...is not admitting to the Ref a sneaky forward pass cheating?..NAH!) and this is something we can be proud of.

A big thanks and congratulations to Ben, Jason, Bernie, Dan, Kati, Esther, Kathi, Michy, Maritini, Graeme, Johanna, Suzy, Eva, Dave, Rafa and Nicola for being Barbarians.