

PRE SEASON TRAINING IN POLAND & WORLD UNIVERSITY GAMES IN CHINA

By David Powell – August 2011

In this article I'm going to talk about some of the experiences I've in the past two months, both in Poland at the Universiade in China.

The start of the European League season is finally here, and...I'm ready! For the majority of the past two months I have been based in Rzeszow, Poland (around 500km southeast of Warsaw) training full time with my team preparing for the season in which the first match kicks off the weekend 3rd/4th of September. I've just returned from Shenzhen, China where I competed in the 2011 Summer Universiade (World University Games) from August 11-23.

When I first arrived in Poland in late June, I had my doubts. There were so many thoughts and questions going through my head, not speaking Polish, not seeing my family and friends, having to cook for 12 months (which honestly scared me the most!). To be honest I had to 'harden up' and had a "bring it on" attitude. This is the life of being a professional table tennis player. Pretty much as soon as I arrived, we started training. The first aspect of the training that really struck me was the physical and gym. In Australia I was doing gym twice a week, and that was on a good week. Here, we are in the gym every single day without fail, and on some days twice a day. My typical day reads like this; an 8am wake up with training commencing at 9am, lasting about 90 minutes then a gym workout from 10:30 till 11:30. Our second session begins at 4pm going till 5, and then 4 out of the 5 days a second session in the gym at 5-6pm. We are lucky about the location of our table tennis hall, about 100metres from our apartment.

This season I am playing for MKS "Strzelec" who are in the first league. There are 5 leagues in Poland (1st to 5th) and then an elite league which is called "Extraclasseur". There are usually 5-6 of us that are training full time, with all of them playing in the "extraclasseur" league. As a guide to their standard, they would have world rankings of anywhere from 200 to 350, so considering I'm around 700 I'm in a pretty good place. I have an open mind and trying to listen and learn every chance I get. Even in just two months the players have suggested some things that have made my game reach a higher level.

During the season there are a total of 18 matches plus finals, and 10 teams in the league. So we play 9 matches at home, and 9 matches away playing the same team twice. There are four players in my team; two of us play table 1, and the other two play table 2. At the start of the season you must nominate your players to play in a particular spot (so your best players play table 1). I am playing position Number 1 Table 1. In every match, you would play 2 singles and 1 doubles. This season our team is quite inexperienced – we have four 20 year olds including me. I don't see this as a bad thing though, we're all keen and hungry to win!

My contract is a very incentive based one; basically I get a standard wage every month and then bonuses depending on how many matches I win during the season. This is also a really new exciting experience for me; one that you can't get in Australia; it's the first time in my career where I'm playing for decent money; and for most players a way to put food on the table. As a general guide the players in the Extraclasseur league would earn anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000AUD per month, so up to 40,000 for the season which is 10 months. In Poland that is a lot of money considering the average wage is \$1,000AUD per month.

I've also just returned from China; representing Australia at the 2011 Summer Universiade and what an absolutely unreal experience. It is the second biggest sporting event in the world (after the Olympics) and attracted over 12,000 athletes and many, many more volunteers. It's an event that is relatively unrecognised in Australia however this year we did send our biggest and most successful team of around 220 athletes. In table tennis we had four men and three women. The depth of the event is strong with the top 16 seeds in the men all ranked inside the top 100 in the world!

They built all new venues for each of the 26 sports and an athletes' village. Some of the eye opening things were; a dining hall that was open 24/7 and literally it was (I was there at 4am once or twice once I had finished competing!); access to world class sporting facilities, police escorts, 24/7 access to some of the best medical staff Australia has to offer including sports physiotherapists and sports doctors. My preparation had been good in the lead up. I spent a few days in Beijing, prior to the games, sightseeing and relaxing after a solid 5 weeks of training in Poland. During these sightseeing days I was having ice-baths every night to make my legs feel fresh for the next day. Overall, I was physically and mentally prepared to compete. However the night before our competition started they held the opening ceremony so we didn't get to sleep until around 12:30am but these things can't be helped. The opening ceremony was just spectacular!

We were all eagerly awaiting the draw; and what do you know; we are drawn in group A with No.1 and crowd favourites, China! Australia was seeded as number two, Canada as three – all other groups had 4 teams. This was going to be a tough group to make the top two, as we knew we had to win one team's match to advance into the main draw. The table tennis venue was around 45km away but as we had a dedicated lane to ourselves only took around 55 minutes.

Our first teams match was China. I was up first against national team member and current world number 9, Xu Xin with 15,000 spectators watching – yes fifteen thousand. This was my first experience playing a top 10 player in the world plus playing in front of so many people. The scores read 11-7, 11-4, 11-7 and I'm guessing you know which way! In the first set I had 4-4 and was playing well. I didn't really miss a lot but he just hit winners off pretty much any ball I gave him. In the second he played well; I was too predictable and there wasn't a lot I could do to hurt him. In the third he gave the crowd a little entertainment lobbing the best part of set to me; a few good rallies but I couldn't nearly match his skill. Australia went on to lose the team's match 3-0. Next up was Canada. We had a good chance to win this with the right match tactics/order. We were 1-0 down and I come out and played the number 2 from Canada winning 3-1. I was nervous, but played tactically quite well. Match was tied at 1-1. We had to win the doubles, and if we did we would have a good chance to win as I was playing the deciding match a 2-2 against their number 3. George Tang & Michael Brown fought hard and played well for the entire match however lost 3-2 after having 2 match points. Unfortunately we lost the team's match 3-1 and didn't advance into the main draw.

In the singles draw I drew a pretty good draw considering I was the 49th seed. In my group were players from Macau (China) and Lebanon. The first match was against Macau where I played just good enough to win 3-1 and the second was against Lebanon where I dominated for most of the match and took it out 3-0. I was into the main draw, but I knew it would get tough from here. I drew Mikhail Gladyshev from Russia who is World Ranked 250. I lost 4-0 playing okay overall. The first 2 sets he was always ahead, and I'm trying to play catch up the entire time. In the third he beat me easily, I really fell down mentally and it hurt on the scoreboard; I was feeling pretty low at this stage; his game was making me feel slow. In the 4th I had to burst and despite being 9-9 he won it and took the match 4-0. I was dominated over the whole table for the match, he had really good feeling and control and placement and I basically couldn't keep up to be competitive.

In the mixed doubles I played with Simone Chuah and we were playing Lebanon. We were 2-0 down but we played well and fought hard to come back and win 11-9 in the 5th. We lost 3-0 to Japan in the next round. In doubles event I played with George Tang but we lost to a Brazilian pair 3-0 who were too strong for us.

After our event finished it was time to go support the other Aussies who were left in and experience some of the culture and nightlife Shenzhen had to offer. China once again doesn't fail to impress and they have staged another world class event. It was fantastic to go and eat some really good local Chinese food and go into the city and have a few drinks with the locals. Simply amazing people and an amazing culture!

For now (Saturday August 27) it's back to Rzeszow where we have one more week of training until our first match on the 3rd of September. I'm motivated and ready to go! Bring it on!

The pictures below are of me playing Xu Xin at the Universiade then George Tang and Michael Brown and myself at the opening ceremony.

