

Touring Europe

For the past several weeks, I have been away from Calgary and Rex's corner in Hockey Talk. After returning from my trip, Paul, the editor of Hockey Talk has asked me to write about my travels in Europe for this week's edition.

Here goes...

In late August, I toured five countries in Europe (Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, Italy and Switzerland) I had the opportunity to coach an Under 18 Canadian Rep team consisting mainly of "AA" & "AAA" players from Alberta and British Columbia. We participated in four practices and eight exhibition hockey games in approximately a two week period. We spent the majority of our time in the Czech Republic and Switzerland. However, we played exhibition games in Austria and Italy as well.

It was a rewarding experience not only from a hockey standpoint but equally from a cultural/learning experience. It was indeed a challenge task molding a team of players who had never played together before, who I had never seen skate before and as well dealing with a demanding travel schedule. However, true to the Canadian way the players showed great camaraderie, team chemistry and spirit on and off the ice. Often if not always the cards were stacked against our team... competing against players who had played together for upwards of four years, coping with bias and shaky officiating and playing teams with extra talent i.e. ringers in their lineup. It appears that no matter what type of Canadian team plays in Europe... European teams truly get up to play the Maple Leaf!! They aspire to do well against Canada and take great pleasure in beating us! As Wayne Gretzky was quoted during the Salt Lake City Olympics..."Europeans hate Canada... they love to beat us!"

I have many fond memories of the tour... here are a few which stand out in my mind.

We practiced in a small town outside of Prague... our players brought along on the tour extra used equipment to give to the local minor hockey programs... many Czech programs lack adequate hockey equipment in their communities... the look of surprise and appreciation on the face of the rink attendant after we left behind a pile of used equipment in our dressing room was priceless!

While traveling to Prague and the surrounding Czech countryside we saw first-hand the destruction of the major floods... a great deal of damage to farmland and residential areas. We had to make a few adjustments to our travel route due to several bridges being too unsafe to travel across.

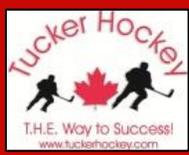
Prior to our first exhibition game in Czech, I warned and tried to educate our players about "European Officiating"... but my comments seemed to go in one ear and out the other! Often legal checks in Canada ended up being called as boarding, high sticking and roughing on the other side of the pond. We spend approximately three quarters of the game short-handed. We learned the hard way encountering our first loss! However, we became aware of what to expect in future games... it was true wake up call.

Another Czech team we played several days later had a few ringers... we saw one player taking his helmet off on their bench... i.e. bald head & all... under 18? ... I don't think so... a senior player in the lineup! Nevertheless, we achieved our first win.

We played an exhibition game in Austria... two of their players had different colour helmets and hockey pants i.e. listed on the roster of their local Division 2 elite men's team... remember they hate to lose to Canada! Factoring in a long day of travel from Czech to Austria as well, we were no match for this team. Our exhibition game in Italy again featured a stacked team with their best Under 20 player in the country in their lineup... we lost the game which was very exciting and competitive 7 to 5. Even though we lost, I was very satisfied with our team's effort and play. Their best Under 20 age player scored 3 goals and added an assist. But the whole experience of the game and the post-game hospitality from the Italian group was one of the true highlights of the hockey tour.

While traveling by bus throughout Austria, northern Italy and Switzerland, we encountered some incredible scenery... absolutely beautiful! The highway structure of bridges and mountain tunnels are quite impressive indeed. While touring in the mountains of Austria, east of Innsbruck, we traveled thru a 15km mountain tunnel as well we crossed many incredible bridges along the mountainside offering breath taking views and drops!

Another impression on the tour related to some of the recreational facilities in Switzerland which consisted of a playing rink, practice rink, dryland facilities, restaurant/lounges as well as dorm/hotel facilities in the one complex; a great setup for teams traveling to the area to participate in a tournament.



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When participating in a six team tournament in Switzerland... we played a Davos team which had played together for nearly four years... stacked with many of their top Junior age players... they listed a travel roster of thirty three players. We were no match for this team which had set plays and elite individual skill levels... their shifty forwards often turned our defensemen inside/out with their puck handling skills... the high stretch man was a common team tactic in this game! This team eventually won the tournament. Our second game of the tournament was the most exciting and satisfying win of the tour. The team showed great poise and team play on the ice... coming from behind to win a thriller! As the tournament progressed, we lost the bronze medal game... a heart breaker in overtime... but without experiencing the dreaded shoot-out!

It was a demanding couple weeks of touring, coaching, playing and experiencing the culture of other countries abroad. Most definitely... a great education for the kids who have returned to Canada appreciating a little more how fortunate they are to be living in a country such as Canada with its high standard of living and a deep passion for the game of hockey! Personally, the opportunity to coach and to tour with a hockey team in parts of Europe was a rewarding and enjoyable experience but I had a very pleasant and secure feeling when I saw the Canadian flag in Toronto's Pearson airport on the returning flight from Munich, Germany.

Go Canada Go!!

Yours in Hockey,
Coach Rex.