

World Cadet Challenge – Slovenia
26 October – 3 November 2013

By Jake Duffy

The World Cadet Challenge in Otocec in Slovenia was everything I imagined and so much more, with players from all around the world competing with heart and passion for their respective countries and continents. The competitive standard is so high that you must start strong, be ultra-aggressive and consistent or the game will be over before you know it. There is an almost tangible confidence about the European and Asian players which comes from the high quality training and readily available competition in their respective countries. For instance, in Australia, qualifying for the Global Cadet Challenge is a major deal (and a one-off tournament), while in Asia and Europe, this signature competition is added to a series of tournaments where these players can compete at this level, with a very high standard of player, all the time! It goes without saying that the better the standard and frequency of training and play, the better the results on the table.

Preparation at the Schlager Academy in Vienna set the scene for the first five days of our European trip. This prestigious facility is a real eye opener because its commonplace to see top one hundred players (men and women) training here. Even Werner Schlager himself ambles in and out of the academy, and on the odd occasion, as he did with me earlier on this year, takes the time to give a bit of technical advice (on my serve) to a veritable novice. The quality of training is exceptional, matched only by the quality partners, routines, and the demands set by top coaches who will accept nothing less than 100 percent commitment and positivity on the table.

Travelling to Otocec to begin the Challenge was a five hour journey by bus from Vienna. Team Oceania was nervous but pumped as we travelled with the Latin American team. Michael Browne of ITTF Oceania organised every detail for us which was no mean feat when you consider coordinating travel for, in the case of the boy's team alone, players from the Gold Coast, Fiji, New Zealand and Tahiti. My recollection of Slovenia as we travelled along was a lot of trees. I showed my Mom some of the pictures I took along the route and I think she thought she was back home in lush green West Cork (Ireland)!

The day of the competition dawned and I freely admit I was nervous. The atmosphere was electric. I'd never been to a competition as significant as this before so I just had to stand tall and get on with it. I didn't have a chance to size up the opposition as the rounds were only announced the night before. The Asians and Europeans quickly established their dominance with consistency, spin and power on a totally different level to what we're used to in Australia. David Powell, as our coach was an excellent mentor. He was able to break down the match play and really offer helpful technical insight. It was my first time travelling with David and it was a really beneficial experience as you always learn something new from every coach you work with.

When I look back on my performances, the big take-out for me was to be more aggressive and not to lose silly points at critical times. My best wins were over Latin America and the World Hopes teams but other games were fairly close too and could have swung in my favour if it wasn't for my inexperience and losing points at important times. I can't say I played my best in Slovenia but I battled hard and my confidence was building all the time. The Cadet Challenge was a big reality check for me on the standard of play, fitness and professionalism that I need to attain if I want to compete on an even keel with the best players in the world.

The winning of the Fair Play and Friendship award came completely out of the blue. I had no idea that I was receiving an award until I was told to stand in line (by Michael) with the medal winners and even then I had no idea what for. My coach Bruno Levi and Dad are always talking to me about work ethic and having a good attitude no matter how bad I'm playing or training. I acknowledge that I'm far from perfect in this area and it's a work in progress but to be selected out of some of the best cadets in the world and given the sportsmanship award is something I will never forget. It's a massive honour, not just for me but for my family, the Gold Coast club, fellow Queenslanders and my Aussie and Oceania Team mates. It's something that encourages me to do better at my next international tournament and who knows, maybe next time win the Fair play award and bring home a Gold, Silver or Bronze medal too if I play with confidence and determination.