Report on IJF Veterans Olbia Sardinia and British Masters Wales September/October 2017.

With the advent of technology which I reluctantly must embrace (try booking a flight anywhere without it) the secretary’s report on the Master Squad Activity has become almost redundant. Many concerned parties at home can watch the fights in real time and, in the case of an event a few years back, text their beloved to commiserate before the player himself knows that he is out of the competition. The results and the draw sheets are available on-line to those who are interested or sufficiently clued-in to access them on Smart ‘Phones.

And so, I can only contribute a personal overview and do it quickly before Facebook posts completely overtake the old-fashioned written report. This year the British Masters Open coincided with the IJF World Masters and the IJA Master Squad were divided.

Thanks to some benevolent stalking on Facebook today (I don’t have the time or emotional energy for two ‘phone calls) I am able with confidence to congratulate Paul McConville and Manus O’Donnell who both have travelled to and competed at World Master Events abroad in the past. They were our only representatives in Wales this year and both took Bronze.

The main body of the Squad going to Olbia Sardinia lost previous medallists Brian and Dermot Killeen to last-minute (non-related!) injuries and in the final head count only seven IJA players stepped on to the mat in Olbia Sardinia. However, the week almost looked like a family outing for the Dennis family with three competing, accompanied and ably supported by two wives, a sister-in-law and two grandchildren. The duration of these events can be hard on the most die-hard of judo fans, especially with uncomfortable and crowded seating, but this family, along with injured Brian, were there and making lots of noise when they were needed.

A special thanks to Deirdre Leonard of the IJA offices who ensured that the Squad Registration and Inscription was in order and allowed all our players to weigh-in and register relatively smoothly and painlessly.

Day One started off well with Dave Meagher on Mat 3 of the five fighting mat areas and how proud we all were to see Ireland Vs. Japan on the big screen followed by winner Ireland. Dave lost his next two fights but performed very well as a relative newcomer to Veteran events at this level. Meanwhile Jack (Christened John) Dennis was fighting on Mat 5 but luckily Paul Cummins could take the Coach’s Chair for both players as none of the fights took place simultaneously. Jack also had three fights and only lost to Olympian Terry Watt, giving Ireland our only medal (Bronze) at the event. Jack first took part in these competitions in 2002 (encouraging your reporter to have a go, also) and has accumulated a staggering seven medals (Four Gold, One Silver, Three Bronze) from participating in only seven of them.

Jack had no problem warming up with a son and daughter on hand, but Paul Cummins had to change out of the mandatory track suit bottoms required for coaching and give yours truly a good forty minute “pull-around” in the by now sweltering marquee attached to the Arena in preparation for a 14:30 start to my category on Mat 2. The less said about my performance the better, a judoka with both the surname and country of origin France outgripped and threw me for Ippon with a left-handed technique in the first twenty seconds (if it was less, please don’t write in and correct me). He then had the effrontery to lose his next fight with Paul and I leaning on the barrier watching in dumbstruck horror. This loss ended my participation in the category.

Moving on swiftly, Day Two had two players, John Dennis (same passport/IJF name as his da just to keep the uninformed observer confused so now you could say we have a Jnr. Competing in a Veteran Event) and Enda Hackett both close to the top of the list which meant Squad Coach and Secretary had the privilege of walking out with them almost at the same time. One of the few drawbacks of the Venue and Organisation is that the competitors’ corral was screened from the mat area and the staff were vigilant and inflexible in their policing of the procedures so I didn’t get to see both players fight but I was treated to a ring-side seat of Enda fighting “out of his skin” as they say, winning two out of four bouts in fine style. John Dennis, meanwhile, was winning his first two fights under Paul’s eye and getting closer than ever before to a World medal when he lost a great “ding-dong” fight to the eventual Bronze Medallist from Poland. On a personal note, I have never seen John and Enda fight so well at one of these events and their fights can be seen on Mat 1 and 5, respectively.

Day Three started on Mat Three with Paul Cummins as our only fighter of the day. Our roles from Day One were reversed but unfortunately our warm-up routine led to a small but significant injury to Paul’s knee so we didn’t get as physical as we had the previous year when he went on as far as a Bronze Medal fight. His first fight went the distance and although under fierce pressure from his taller Italian opponent he scored the first Wazari with his signature left drop seoinage. Down a Shido but leading with this score, he relaxed slightly on the edge of the mat as the clock went to zero zero zero and was instantaneously thrown for Wazari. Matte was not called until after he landed on the mat and he then went on to lose by that same Shido. The correctness of the scoring after the buzzer sounded may be a subject for dispute or debate but this report is not a forum for such matters. The events of my own downfall were then echoed as the winner of the first bout did not advance sufficiently to give Paul the opportunity of a second or third fight. Although this was a serious setback and disappointment, Paul soon rallied round and resumed his coaching role. It is to his credit, and indeed the rest of the Team, that no Irish player was caught out by the running order, or walked out alone, during the whole Tournament.

Day Four saw the World Veteran Debut of Ellie Dennis who dramatically came out of retirement as Irish Masters Open Champion in 2016. Ellie was fighting on Mat 4 and I managed to secure a nearby seat squeezed in amongst the Dennis clan. Ellie went the distance twice with two very strong players, one of whom was French and went on to take Silver. The ferocity of the grip fighting in her category, and in any of the “younger” Male and Female category must be seen to be believed, at least to your reporter who has rarely observed Senior Judo Events at such close quarters. The fighting philosophy of this family and the club at Lusk is not to complain or make excuses but inside sources were aware that both father and daughter had (again, unrelated) toe injuries but these were not apparent when they took to the mat.

Chris Hickey who was invited to referee at this prestigious event, also managed to keep a weather eye out for our players and rallied round to offer condolences and advice where appropriate.

Despite the disappointments of some of the individuals, the event was generally well run and professional and the atmosphere (translation: deafening shouting and cheering) especially if one was seated amongst the French, Swiss or Italian fans was often intense. The Irish Squad got through without any significant injuries and with a strong resolution to keep on training and keep on fighting.

Donal Tannam

Irish Master Squad Secretary