

Eurosib Saint Petersburg Open 2004, ITTF Pro Tour

25-28 November, 2004, Saint Petersburg, Russia

The Pro Tour in Saint Petersburg was the first Pro Tour organized in Russia. As a US citizen, I had to get a visa to go to Russia. I was a little worried about getting a visa because, I thought, it could be a lot of hassles and could take a long time. Surprisingly, it was very fast and easy. I got all documents from the Russian international department by fax, and it took one week to get a visa. The cost of visa is \$100. For extra money I even could get it the same day in San Francisco Russian Consulate, but I had plenty of time, and was not in a hurry.

The flight from San Francisco to Frankfurt was 11 hours and then 3 more hours from Frankfurt to St. Petersburg. I was on the same flight with Irina Borisova. The driver was already waiting for us in the airport, and he drove us to the hotel.

The hotel, where all international umpires stayed, was 4 stars. Each international umpire had his/her own room with TV. There was no iron, hair dryer, or even clock in the room, no lotion or napkin. But the room was warm and very clean. The average temperature was 28 F or -2 C degrees. In the hotel we were provided 3 meals per day, but usually we could eat only 2 times because of our work shifts. Food was OK, buffet style.

The venue was very good. Good flooring with Taraflex mats, good lightning, good size of the courts with 5000 seats for spectators. At the beginning 12 tables were set for qualifications round, down to 2 for semi, and only 1 for finals. There was one "TV" table for the most interesting match (probably just recording) starting from quarterfinals and a live TV broadcast for the finals. There were 26 umpires (13 teams - umpire/assistant umpire), and a team umpired each match, including qualifications rounds. The decision, who is an umpire and who is an assistant, was made based on the country of the players involved in the match. Both, an umpire and an assistant, had a scoreboard. It was easier for me, and it was easier for other umpires to just turn a score sheet instead of using hand signals for scoring, because hand signals are used for so many different things.

Table tennis in Russia is not very popular comparing with other sports. For example, in the same venue ticket for table tennis costs 200 rubles, and for ice hockey – 1500 rubles. By my estimate, it was probably 2500-3000 spectators for the semi and final matches including a lot of school kids, who could watch table tennis competition for free.

Day before the tournament two Netherlands umpires organized a blue badge seminar followed by the exam. Only IUs who had at least 2 years of international umpiring were invited.

It was a briefing for umpires day before competition started, and each day we were getting a work schedule for the next day – either morning (9:30-15:30) or evening shift

(15:30-21:30). It was one café at the venue, but choice of food was very limited. At the venue umpires had a room, where we could leave our coats, bags, etc, and guards guarded it all the time. Water, tea/coffee and some snacks were available in the room. Having morning/evening shifts was very nice, because St.Petersburg is a beautiful city, and we had time to go sightseeing.

Shuttle between the hotel and the venue was arranged every 30 minutes and it was always on time. The distance between hotel and a stadium was about 20 minutes drive, kind of long and inconvenient, especially for the players, because in many cases they could not go back to hotel, eat and relax between the rounds. During our shifts, umpires had matches each 45 minutes non-stop. Couple substitutes were available in case of sudden illness. If you are lucky, and the match is short, then you have time to go to bathroom or get some snack. We also got \$15 per day in addition to 3 provided meals. Because of our shifts and long distance to the hotel, most of us were able to eat only 2 times a day, in the morning and in the evening. At the end of the tournament, just after the finals, it was a very small banquet for all officials with champaign and vodka. Very Russian tradition!

On the way back home I was on the same flight to Frankfurt with Kalinikos Kreanga from Greece, the winner of the men singles in this tournament. I asked him, what is his opinion of the tournament. He told that he really liked the venue, but the one of the important thing for the players is a hotel being close to the playing place, so that they can have some rest or eat between the rounds. In this tournament it was too far and extremely inconvenient. Also, he mentioned that during last Pro Tour in Chicago 5 players were injured because of cement floor, and most likely players would not come to US tournaments unless conditions will change.

At the Open Ceremony the organizers of the St. Petersburg Pro Tour told that they want this tournament to become an annual event, and this is good news. Overall, the tournament was done very well, umpires got good treatment, and I had a great experience.

Yelena Karshedt