

My WAO Belgium Experience – by Iris Richards

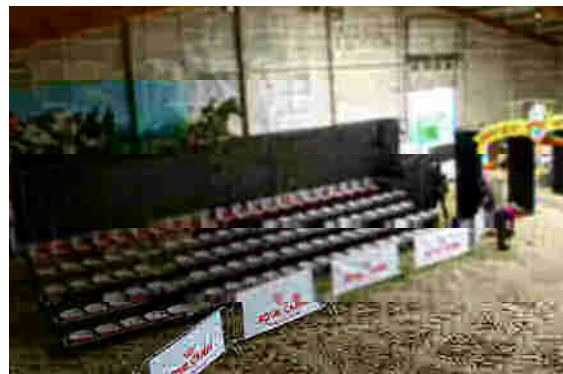
Following a successful WAO in England in 2011, where I had been part of the organising committee; I reservedly agreed to travel with the WAO crew to Belgium in 2012. Having recently had a close family bereavement, I felt somewhat uneasy at leaving my family and 5 dogs, whilst I took part in this event away from home.

My trip began as I was sharing a ride with Greg and Laura Derrett, accompanied by Lee Amos on Sunday 13th May. We travelled from Worcester, onto the channel tunnel and into France. After a 3 hour road trip through France and into Belgium, we arrived at the De-Warre Equestrian centre close to 5pm Belgium time. We met with Monica Percival, Anna Jonsson & Pam Green, who were on site already, and that evening accompanied them, together with other WAO crew members to a local pub for an enjoyable meal Belgium style. Followed by wonderful Belgium ice cream “Al Fresco”



De-Warre is used by the Belgium Olympic equestrian team, and has generous viewing areas with a very large indoor arena, together with large outdoor ménage. Set in a quiet picturesque valley, the venue lent itself perfectly to be transformed into a location suited to hold a World Agility competition.

Such transformation began in earnest on Monday 14th May, with a dedicated team of 14 people, over the next 48 hours we arranged trade stand locations, seating outside and indoors, together with backdrops and entrance tunnel into the main ring. Fencing, signage, entrance marquees, banners, kennel provision area, computer and IT facilities, agility equipment, timing, competitor welcome packs and sound systems were all prepared too.



Everyone worked well together and fitted in with the facility constraints and restrictions. We were well accommodated at the venue, but like all these events, preparation is key, and acquiring supplies in a foreign location proved a little challenging at times.

Following the WAO in England in 2011, Monica Percival and Greg Derrett have worked together tirelessly to bring this event to fruition. Despite some political grievances being displayed by the Belgium KC, this was overcome and their sheer determination and perseverance to arrange a worldwide event for dedicated agility competitors definitely paid off.

Having worked closely with Monica and Greg during the event, there is a clear passion in them both to succeed. Two successful business acquaintances striving towards a joint goal, and their ability to drive and muster enthusiasm for the event, throughout all who attended or were involved in any way was impressive to see.

Wednesday saw the teams having the opportunity to train with their dogs in the main ring. This was surrounded on two levels with seating, including balcony viewing alongside the bar. This training proved popular with a number of

teams; giving each the chance to associate themselves with their dogs on the sand surface. Many world class competitors view this as time well spent in their preparation of the event. The Australian team of handlers had been provided with host dogs from the UK, Netherlands and Belgium, so this was an ideal time for dog and handler to begin acclimatising and forming their working bond for the days ahead. It gave everyone the chance to iron out a few last minute nerves, or understand the adjustments needed for the equipment, surface and general surroundings. After a 12 hour day of training slots, everyone prepared for the following “check in” day.



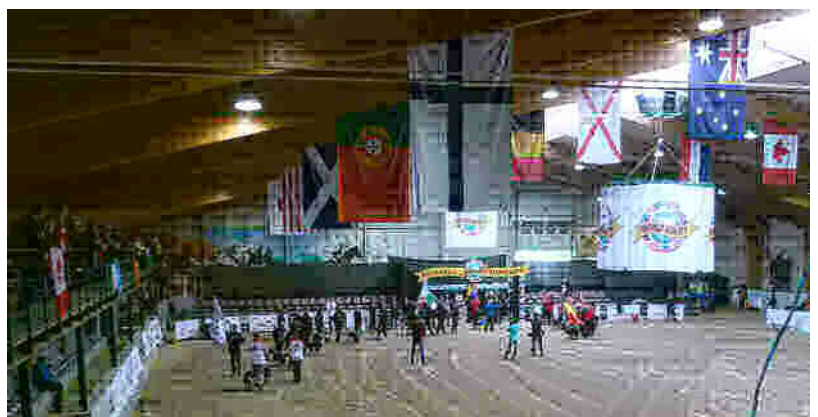
Check in day is always a nice opportunity to meet the competitors and team managers from each country. It also incorporates the necessary vet check and official measure of the dogs to confirm that they are able to compete at the jump height they had entered. This scrutinising always throws up a few anomalies in the dogs’ height and some countries did have amendments made to their class entries. Laura Derrett competently measured all 251 competing dogs and Lucie entered all the information into the WAO database to be stored for future events.

Throughout the day, my team checked in all 20 teams from around the world. Some had taken the chance to visit the venue on the previous day, but for many, they were pleased to be taken on a brief tour of their surroundings. The two outdoor rings and warm up exercise area were located a short distance from the main ring, but all had the same surface for the dogs to run on.

After the allocated time slots for each country’s training had concluded for the day, it was time for the WAO opening ceremony to be held. Paul Hinchley who was ring manager overseeing the main ring; mustered everyone behind the backdrop, and Naomi then announced each country into the arena, led in by a WAO helper. The teams filed in alphabetically, concluding with the host nation Belgium. The Belgium national anthem was then respected and Greg Derrett gave a short address welcoming everyone, including the judges for the event, Lee Gibson, Scott Chamberlain, Thomas Ammitzball and head judge Bob Griffin, together with introducing the sponsors Royal Canin.

This ceremony was a mixed array of colours, incorporating a hardy collective of competitors with their dogs of all sizes, including cross breeds. For some this was their first experience of a WAO ceremony, and the anticipation of the forthcoming three days competition was evident to see. Each team proudly displayed their country flag and emblems which were received by all with great spirit and camaraderie.

A busy day ended late into the evening, as due to some height measurement changes, last minute amendments to running orders were inevitable. The office crew worked tirelessly to prepare for the next days’ competition.



My role over the next three days was somewhat varied. It mainly revolved around meeting the team managers each morning to provide them with the relevant course plans and running orders for the competitions which were being held that day. In addition, I ensured that there was cover at the main entrance to greet spectators and give them information about the event, together with a visible wristband after they had gained entry. Spectators could have a browse around the numerous trade stands available, and were able to collect a gift from the main sponsor stand at Royal Canin on their way into the event.

Each country could potentially submit two teams for the Team Pentathlon events, which were spread over the 3 days of competition, concluding with the fast and furious Team Speedstakes on Sunday. Once the entry forms were submitted, the office then prepared running orders for each event. Bob Griffin as head judge was available to answer rule queries with team managers as necessary.

To say I had a relaxing day, after the initial manic first hour of the pre-competition start time, was an understatement. Once each class had finished and results compiled, it was my responsibility to ensure each team manager received a copy of their results. The countries for the first two days of competition were placed into either group A, B, C to assist with course walking and rotation. The scribe sheet check in area was busy throughout the whole competition. The managers had the chance to check their team members' time and scoring result within 5 dogs having run in the class. This meant that there was a constant shift of the last 5 scribe sheets during the whole class. Once the managers had viewed the sheet they could "sign off" in agreement that it was an accurate record or the result. This was then fully processed into the results system.

As an information desk to Team Managers, I built up a good rapport with these individuals and although some countries were rather more hands on with obtaining information than others, I think we were all mindful of each other's pressure we were under. My role was to be a point of contact, or a go-between for a query to the office. This enabled them to continue inputting and checking scores without interruptions. As you can imagine, there was never a moment without a query of one sort or another.

At the end of each class, once results has been verified and printed, I together with Monica arranged the various



prize giving ceremonies. Norton Rosettes had provided the stunning inscribed black and gold rosettes for each competition, and Monica had also arranged WAO key chains for 1st place of each individual class. Medals were presented at each of the podium ceremonies which took place on Sunday.

During the pre-event arrangements, we had prepared prize giving trays, which were used to display the rosettes, and this enabled me to prepare these in advance.

To say I double and triple checked what was being presented, was an understatement. I became very paranoid about making sure this was 100% correct as I am sure from a competitors' point of view there is nothing worse than receiving the incorrect rosette or prize.

Monica was brilliant in organising the judges to be exactly where she needed them, and Greg would arrange the relevant countries or competitors behind the scenes to arrive in the ring for the correct presentation. After dressing the presentation area with the sponsors Royal Canin banners, we undertook our first prize giving ceremony of the event which was individual Snooker.

Cued by Naomi our announcer the presentation proceeded, and no sooner had this taken place in the arena, it was all hands to the deck to set the course for the next class. I had a brief respite, and could breathe a huge sigh of relief that it all went well and move onto the next task in hand.

The decision between Monica, Greg and I was taken to amend the prize ceremonies slightly so that all the podium presentations were held together on Sunday and could be incorporated within the closing ceremony. The teams therefore paraded into the arena as they had done during the opening ceremony, and after the final individual class presentations, we moved onto the podiums which included the Gold, Silver and Bronze medals being given out by the class judges.

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It always gives a sense of pride and achievement to see the competitors receiving their medals and I know that I will never be close to stepping on a podium in the world of agility myself, but to assist in accomplishing this task for everyone else to enjoy did give me a great amount of pleasure.

The closing ceremony was as colourful and full of high spirits as the opening ceremony had been. Once all the presentations had concluded Monica Percival gave a short address thanking

everyone for competing, participating and helping in any way to make this a very successful event. It was announced that the WAO event for 2013 will be held in Oveido, Spain.

As the event concluded, the climate changed and the rain poured for a while. As many helpers as were available, assisted in clearing the main arena of equipment which was taken and loaded into the waiting lorry of First Contact who were journeying home that evening. After a couple of hours work the venue was reduced to the Equestrian centre status it had begun with just 6 days earlier.

WAO had asked the venue to provide a meal for everyone remaining and approximately 25 gathered for the last time together before farewells were made, and packing continued.

After three packed days of agility competitions and four days of preparation, it came time on Monday 21st May to ensure that the site was cleared and everything was packed to come away from the venue. Esprit UK who had constructed the entrance tunnel into the main ring, arrived and began disassembling this unit. This together with the podiums and other essential WAO kit was loaded into their van, before they departed also.

Greg, Laura, Lee and I departed leaving Monica, Anna & Pam to follow a short while after. They were returning to USA the following day, having an overnight stop in Brussels. We had a good trip back through France and into the tunnel. Tiredness took on another level for us all in the tunnel, for our homeward journey under the sea, and we all caught a quick sleep, being woken by Greg's phone alarm prior to departure. After a couple more hours we reached Worcester once more close to 9pm.

If I could put into words what helping at the WAO meant to me this year, I would say challenging, rewarding, exciting, memorable, and tinged with slight apprehension. Overall I thoroughly enjoyed my WAO Belgium experience. Helping to organise this event, accompanied by some of your best friends was a pleasure and I was very humbled to have been given such a high level of responsibility at such a world class event.

Forging strong international relationships within the agility community is paramount for its continued growth and success. I firmly believe that Monica and Greg are striving towards this goal by their diversification and continuance of the WAO event which will be held in Oveido, Spain in May 2013.