

European Championships in Pipe Smoking 2008

By

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2008 UPCA U.S. National Pipe Smoking Champion



with Vernon Vig (left)

So there I was, sitting right next to the galley on the plane winging its way to Belgium, trying to keep my feet from being run over by airline service carts.

I was off to the “European Championship 2008 in Pipesmoking” after having the good fortune to win the United Pipe Clubs of America (UPCA) 2008 competition in Chicago in May. Not only did that win get me two trophies (I took first overall in addition to the U.S. Title) and a Heeschen pipe that I chose, it also got me this trip.

I’d not be the only American going, noted Danish-pipe guru Rick Newcombe would be there, along with Vernon Vig. Vernon who up till now I’d vaguely recalled from one handshake after the win and several emails. There would also be two others, Doc Garr and Mike Bussacco, but I didn’t know their names at the time.

Me? Hanging out with these guys??

If someone had suggested any of this I’d have rolled my eyes and wondered what was REALLY in the pipe they were smoking.

But there I was, on the biggest pipe-show trip I’ve ever taken, pipes and leaf in my carry-on, trying to sleep, trying to fit in a seat too small for my 6’6” frame.

Did I sleep? No, not really, just too many pipe-dreams, thoughts and thank-yous.

No doubt I was most grateful for my wife Jane for letting me go, and her willingness to care for our little one solo. But I also had to thank my little daughter, Phoebe, barely 8 months old at the time. You see, Phoebe had been partly responsible for my winning time of 1:17:50 in Chicago. My technique was just to sit, smoke slow and think about her smile. It worked.

I’m not a big one on smoking techniques. I don’t know the Frank Method for loading a pipe. I don’t “Chase the Ember” like many Italian and Danish smokers do. I probably should learn that, to get those amazing times of 3 hours-plus. But that’s not really me, at least not just now.

Prior to the 2008 Chicago competition, I've only been in two other official smoking contests.

The first was at a CORPS show in Virginia, some 13-odd years ago. Then we sat in rows facing one way, smoking plain cube-cut white burley. As one man put it looking out at us, it was "...a sea of green faces...."

At least two smokers got sick, one didn't make it to the restroom before he lost his lunch, the other didn't make it that far.

I forget who won, but the friend I was with went out first, getting MANY matches and a meerschaum pipe!! I went out in the middle, feeling queasy and needing to shave my tongue. The experience was not a good one, as my next contest wasn't until 2007 in Chicago.

There I placed in the middle ranks – good enough to get a Kurt Huhn bulldog that's a nice little pipe and a tin of tobacco that I've not opened yet.

The best part of that contest was NO BURLEY!! I was amazed that we used something that wasn't so vile. I got to keep my lunch.

So winning 2008 Chicago, was a big surprise to me.

The plane was landing now and it was time to get to the airport train station that, after one transfer, would take me to Aachen Germany. Take me to the Sofitel Quellenhof hotel (now the Pullman Aachen Quellenhof).

Leaving Belgium was a bit of an eye opener, as the train pulled by lots of graffiti. So much that it reminded me of New York in the 1970's growing up as a kid. All that disappeared once we crossed the border. A short cab ride later, and I was "home".

After checking in, I had time to go for a walk outside to the gardens of the Eurogress – a national conference center. Of course I brought a pipe wanting to sit, smoke and consider the fountains and Greco-Roman Architecture, but it was too cold and windy to light up, so beating the rain back inside there was time for a quick dinner and bed.

Fellow members of the *North Oakland Tobacco & Pipe Club* (pres. David Sahagian) suggested that I'd be representing ALL American pipe smokers, as the U.S. Champion. No small task. In that spirit, I brought only American pipes to Germany to smoke.

A Bonaquisti, three Rad Davis, a Jody Davis, two Ruthenbergs, a Fillenwarth, an Ozark Mountain Briar, and a Michael Parks (ok ok so Michael's Canadian, but why not, eh?). All made the trip to Germany, and returned safely.

I figured in Europe no one would be impressed with Danish or English makes, so my Larsen's and Ashton's stayed home.

Why is it that pipe bags just NEVER seem to hold enough??

Friday was my day to explore the city before anything pipe-wise was to start, so off I went after an amazing breakfast.

Strolling along I noticed that no-one was about, I mean NO one. Then I saw that ALL the shops I had passed were closed. More than once I was the only person on the street at all. It certainly crimped my plans to get German Chocolate and bring that home.

Not every place was closed though. The Rathaus was open so I went and explored. It's a 14th century gothic-style building that is still used as a town hall today. It's also part of a larger complex dating from Charlemagne's time including a cathedral with some the most wonderful mosaic ceilings. The buildings are massive, similar to many Gothic-style Churches in the U.S. but this was the real deal. You could feel the history. I'm sure that many of the cobblestones I walked on pre-dated our country -- probably several times over.

All was not lost though, as local bakery was open for pastries and tea. Then it was off for more sightseeing and luckily getting some postcards to send home.

On my way back I learned that everything was closed for the Reunification Holiday – when Germany celebrates the rejoining of East and West. Note to self: check local holidays before making plans.

Down one street I found an impressively large pipe shop, the “Schneiderwind Pfeifen” a shop dating from 1846. Its windows full of Winslow's, Petersons, Big Bens, and several Danish and German High-grades. But sadly it was also closed. After fogging up the glass, I was able to get the catalog and make it back to the hotel before the afternoon rain.

Then came HEAVEN.

Picture this: A wonderfully appointed dark wood bar with modern oil paintings, REAL German beer on tap, excellent service, a big comfy chairs and a pipe!! All in the hotel while the rain started to wet the windows.

It's true – in Germany you can smoke in bars and no one cares. Some of the patrons there had cigarettes, but pipes and cigars are fine.

So I sat with my Bonaquisti Sabbia – a free form Dublin with a canted bowl and a reverse curve to the shank and stem so it looks like it bends up. Filled it with “Pickwick” a medium English/Virginia blend from the Connoisseur Pipe Shop in New York and slowly puffed while writing postcards. For years Pickwick has been my “go to” blend, it's when I don't want surprises and am not feeling adventurous. I've broken in most of my new pipes with it. Excellent.

A note on Bonaquisti pipes. They're excellent pipes and great smokers. I wonder why they don't have more of a following, but that might change. Paul is a super guy and I learned a lot from him chatting at Chicago in 2007. He makes very good pipes which are the equal of most any North American carvers. Note to self: get another Bonaquisti.

Later that afternoon I met up with Vernon Vig – President of UPCA and the New York City Pipe Club. For that evening's President's Dinner I was able to go as his “wife” (she had not made the trip so I took her place) and meet many of the other club presidents.

It was a thrill to hear introductions of the Presidents of the German, Netherlands and Russian pipe federations in three different languages. Not to mention the “Rauchclub Haal's” President's heartfelt speech as that club was hosting the Championships. There were clubs from all over Europe – Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Poland, Russia the list seemed endless. Everyone was recognized to polite applause.

While waiting for the main course, several people dug out pipes and lit up at the table! I was at a loss! Smoking at a dining table in a hotel? Are you kidding??

But it was true – another slice of Heaven.

Joerg Wittkamp, whom I met in Chicago and befriended this trip, was at my table and pulled out a tin of rare tobacco and offered it to me.

Did I have a pipe??

Of course!

After a moments hesitation I filled my Rad Davis Panel Billiard, sat back and smoked. It was a rare moment.

This particular pipe is very dear to me. It's an early example of Rad's work, but that's not the whole story. I had bought this pipe from Smoker's Haven in Columbus as a birthday present to myself a few years ago. My wife was with me, but so was Sailorman Jack who worked there.

I'd gotten to know Jack by stopping by the shop every Saturday afternoon for over a year or so to sit, smoke and talk about the world. As many know, he was from New York and remembered me from one of the first pipe shows that I went to, when they were still downtown.

When Jack found out that the panel was my present to me, he wouldn't let me have it! Not until after he sang happy birthday to me in his deep baritone. Then he smiled and said "there's nothing I like more than a good panel..." and handed me the pipe. I still miss Jack, his smile, wit and his old-world gentlemanly charm.

How He would have loved that dinner in Aachen.

Saturday was the big day – day one of the pipe show in Wurselen.

After breakfast Joerg met me and was nice enough to drive me to the show – about 15 minutes away at the Wurselen high school.

The show itself was in the halls and entryways of the school. The main gym had been set up for the big dinner that night.

Not big by our standards – the show was choice in the selection of pipes and makers.

About 40 tables were there, makers and dealers. No one had any collector tables. After one attempted swap, I realized that the five pipes I had brought to trade were all going back home with me.

There were pipes of all kinds; Balleby was there with some tasty examples, so too was Poul Winslow, Karl Joura, Tom Eltang, and Luigi Viprati. Newer carvers were also there, Jurgen Moritz, Frank Axmacher, Reiner Thilo and Uwe Jopp, just to name a few. Per Billhäll was also there with some amazing estates, including a whole row of Nordh's, not to mention Eltang, Cornelius Manz, Former and others.

There was a whole table on one end devoted to brand new Baldi's – with grain to die for. One dealer was selling Lorenzo's and another was selling some very nice Petersons, including two stunning silver-mounted bulldogs. But it was the many artisan pipe makers that really made the show for me.

The shows in Germany run on a very different model than here in the U.S.

In Germany, one of the big pipe-houses, like Peter Heinrich or Esterval's Pipe House, for example, puts on the show. All transactions go through them. When you buy a pipe – you take your slip from the maker or dealer, pay the show host – then take another slip back to get your pipe. In turn the host secures the space, tables and addresses all the details. Every host has regions of the country that are “theirs”.

Here in America – the shows are put on by pipe clubs. Chicago, Columbus and CORPS to name a few, are all put on by a club, where as a patron you deal with the dealer or carver directly.

I suspect that each model has its benefits, but I know that more than one carver in Wurselen mentioned that they like the American model.

On the first day I also met Rick Newcombe and had a chance to get to know him. I hadn't seen Vernon much as he was stuck in meetings all day. In fact, we rarely saw him as meetings were the order of Sunday as well.

Saturday ended with me not having bought anything. But it was time to change and get ready for the dinner later that night.

The dinner was at the gym in Wurselen, set up with many flags of all the nations competing in the Championships the next day. Several of the flags I knew, but others were new to me.

Team USA had our own table, where I had the pleasure of chatting with Rick's lovely wife Carole. I also got to meet Doc Garr and Mike Bussacco of the Pocono Mountain club. They told me they had found a bar where they had gotten to meet some locals, and of course smoke. So my hotel's bar was not a fluke! What a pipe-friendly country.

After the meal, it was time to officially welcome everyone and open the competition taking place the next day. It took some time as all speeches were made in German, English and French. We learned that for the Germans, the smoking competition was doubly important as it would decide their national champion, regardless of when he or she finished. The last German smoking, would take the title.

What was even more stunning was that a member of the German Parliament was on hand for the ceremony.

Think about that.

In the U.S. would a Senator or Congressman have anything to do with a pipe smoking contest?? Or with anything related to smoking or promoting it?

No. Not really.

But in Germany it's different. Delightedly so, as evidenced by those on Team USA smoking at our table. Smoking in Germany is accepted and promoted.

Sunday came and it was back to the show. It was time to get my first pipe, a freehand Frank Axmacher that I had spotted on Per Billhäll's table. It called out to me, a disc-shape pipe with a smooth edge, and each side sandblasted. It's asymmetrical and the

engineering is such that though everything seems off-center it all lines up. It's unlike any pipe I have, both in design and execution.

Then Per introduced me to Frank, A stone mason by training. We chatted about pipes and design and how he had to work with blocks where the grain was twisted. Reaching into his bag he pulled out another freehand that he just finished. I liked that one too, so after some discussion and my carrying it in my pocket for an hour it joined the other pipe in my bag.

Then it was competition time.

Filtering into the hall I was struck by all the different clubs, and countries that were there. We Americans were in bright red, but there were vests and outfits of every color, on both men and women. There were national costumes, hats, pins galore and I'm sure some contestants sported large smoking medals.

Seated at table Number 2 I was the last to find my seat. Apparently this year the seating was assigned, much to the disappointment of the Italians who wanted to sit as a group. My table seemed like a veritable United Nations of Pipe Smoking, my tablemates were smokers from Belgium, Germany, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands. Facing a wall, I had no idea where my teammates sat, but it was time to focus, and to start thinking about my daughter's smile.

We went through all the steps, the timed inspection, the loading and then the light. I had hoped to record or at least hear the sound of 320 people all striking a match at once, but since I was one of them, I was preoccupied.

At first draw I winced, the aromatic they had chosen was not my cup of tea. Oh well, at least it wasn't straight white Cubed Burley.

It all went well, with people going out at the usual intervals, half-hour, 45-minutes and so on. The biggest shock to me was feeling a hand on my shoulder after five minutes or so.

It was Doc Garr! He wished me luck as he left.

Five minutes?? What happened??

I found out later that he never got a good light with his second match, and that he was the runner up to me in Chicago.

I was bummed for him, but smoked on, focusing on my "technique."

At some point I found myself thinking about other things, camping, mountain biking and technical rock climbing.

What?

My pipe's going OUT???

Puffing madly I tried to save it, but it was too late.

I was out at 1:00:30, worse than my time in Chicago. Guess I have to focus more on my technique. I handed in my card, collected my stuff and left, as the rules stated we had to. My time was good enough for 118th out of 320.

The halls outside the gym were packed with smokers and their families. Far from being a pit of disappointment, there was happy chatter all around with smiles as friends and teammates compared notes.

Working through the crowd I found my teammates, all happy to have competed. Our combined time of 2:35:19 was good enough to come in 14th out of 18 teams, beating Portugal, Slovakia and Russia. In team smoking they take the top three times, and add them together. The winner this year was Denmark with a combined time of 8:02:58.

Wandering back to the tables I recognized Jurgen Moritz, a pipe-maker I had met in Chicago. He hadn't been there the day before and had brought some pieces with him.

It didn't take me long to choose one that I had to have, a slightly bent smooth brandy with a horn-tipped shank and an inlaid ivory ring on the stem. It was mine.

Budget?? Right.

I just hoped my wife wouldn't be too mad. Turns out she wasn't when I called her, suggesting that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Feeling better about my shopping and being grateful for her understanding, I sat with Rick Newcombe who was selling German copies of his book In Search of Pipe Dreams. We chatted about pipes and our experiences.

Perhaps he put it best saying "...even if you don't speak the same language as the person you're sitting next to at lunch or during the show, we all speak the language of pipes."

Of course I showed off my new pipes. And so did Rick, picking up a very nice Balleby straight bulldog, and a bent Cornelius Manz. One that I had looked at and considered, but decided it wasn't really "me".

I made a few more rounds of the tables, then realized Vernon and I had to leave. Not even staying to watch the Italian who smoked on to set a new world record of over 3 1/2 hours.

We had booked a train back to Brussels that night as there was a threatened Belgian train strike for Monday. Not wanting to be stranded on the border we were leaving a night early. Going back to the Quellenhof, we got our bags and headed off to the station. Again meeting Rick and his wife who were leaving on an earlier train, we chatted and ate a small dinner. Vernon then disappeared into a station shop to get something while I watched the bags.

Wouldn't you know it?? He had found and gave me a tin of tobacco that was made for that little Aachen magazine shop! It seems like a medium English, but I've not popped the lid.

Yes, Germany really IS pipe heaven, where you can find pipe tobacco everywhere, and then smoke it as you will.

On the dark platform, with the wind and weather picking up we noticed we were the only two passengers in sight. Soon after we heard an announcement in German, not understanding, we walked a bit with our bags to find a family that was able to talk to Vernon in French.

Turned out the train was cancelled!! As the strike was not only real, but was going to start at 10:00pm, which would have stranded us on the border.

Don't these things start at midnight??

Running downstairs we located a bus in the rain that would be taking us to Brussels. Turns out the German train company had made arrangements. Settling in our seats we chatted about the show and competition as the bus took us to Brussels, both of us clutching our carry-ons with our precious pipes.

Late that night, comfortable in our shared room we had a last pipe. Well actually, Vernon smoked his new smooth straight Winslow from the show, and I smoked a Cuban Cigar that had been given to me. I'm not a cigar guy at all, but even I knew this was something special.

Next morning I flew home, eager to see my family, but happy to have had such a wonderful trip. The pipes I saw were great and I love mine, but more than anything else this experience showed me that it's really about the people.

People from all over, who share an interest and love of little bits of wood with holes and mouth pieces. Wurselen, was a small pipe show with a huge competition, where Chicago is the reverse, a big show with a small competition. Competing or collecting, pipes and smoking and tobaccos and carving bring us all together. It brought so many to Wurselen.

It brought me across an ocean to smoke a pipe, and allowed me to make some new good friends.

I thought about that as the plane winged its way home.

And this time I wasn't near the galley.