



GOLD MEDAL WINNER GEORGE DIGWEED ADDS YET ANOTHER TO HIS VAST COLLECTION OF WORLD TITLES. BRIT RUNNER-UP SILVER MEDALIST MARK VESSEY (LEFT) AND BELGIUM'S ERIC MANSHOVEN WINS THE BRONZE.

TALES FROM A SHOOTER'S JOURNAL

'WHAT I DID THIS SUMMER' (PART I) BY
STEVE FISCHER

After the airline hostess directed me to my seat on the 747 for the flight back to Miami, I let my mind wander back over the last week and the great time I had in the Czech Republic shooting the European FITASC Championship. The cabin chatter wafted around me and I happened to pick up the conversation of a couple of youngsters referring to what they would likely have to do for their homeroom teacher when school began in the fall. "*Miss Waterman*

always has us do an essay on 'What I Did This Summer';" commented one of the kids. "*Mine too,*" replied the other.

Now that little bit of information gave me the idea to start a journal and record, in a similar manner, my travels and adventures during the summer – filled with some super sporting and FITASC tournaments which would take me to three different countries in Europe! I thought it would be a good idea to record the details of my trips and

adventures in order to not only relive them myself, but to be able to share them with friends. After all, it isn't every day one gets the chance to travel to far off places to shoot in competition at some of the finest grounds in the World – and I don't want to forget even a moment of it!

FIRST STOP

My first stop in Europe took a bit of planning and preparation. Nothing too terribly difficult, but

the Czech Government had a few questions and several rules and procedures that were necessary to cross the border into their country. In order to enter the Czech Republic with a firearm one is required to obtain a special visa for guns and ammunition. An application for this visa must be obtained from the Czech Embassy in Washington. The questions were typical – and requested the make, model and serial numbers of the gun or guns being taken into the country. Also required, literally, was an ‘engraved invitation.’ They requested that the tournament host send a notarized invitation to the shooter listing the date of the tournament. After completing the application it must be returned to the Czech Embassy along with the notarized invitation and a small fee per gun. Mine was \$19.00 each, which also had to be in the form of a money order or cashier’s check. Several delays, due to language barriers, delayed my permit to the

eleventh hour – I received it care of M & M Sporting Clays while attending the Masters Cup! It arrived on Thursday and I got on the plane Monday morning. Whew! Too close for comfort.

GETTING THERE

British Airways took me and Bob Haynes to London’s Heathrow airport for our connection to Prague, CZ. Bob and I would be two of only three Americans going to the European FITASC Championship – Joe Toot being the third. We would meet up with Joe in London for the last leg of the journey into the Czech Republic. We flew overnight, arriving at 7 a.m. The flight to Prague wasn’t until 2 pm, so we had several hours to kill.

We had wisely requested that our guns and baggage be transferred to the connecting flight so we wouldn’t have to go through customs in England and then have to drag our bags and gear around

the airport for about six hours and then re-check our guns. By now, the time difference and jet lag began to take its toll, at least on me, so I found a nice comfortable chair to catch a few winks while Bob checked out the many shops and duty free stores. We also took some time to convert some of our U.S. dollars into coin of the realm. We needed both Czech money and a few British pounds for pocket money. This is, by the way, a lose-lose, proposition. The money changers take a small percentage for a fee and the posted exchange rates always seemed to be just a bit higher than the actual rates. They buy low and sell high, so exchange in either direction will cost extra.

We later found that many of the hotels in both Great Britain and in the Czech Republic would change money – but their rates were even higher. The closest to actual exchange we found, was by using a Visa or MasterCard – they compute at the actual exchange rate.

Finally, the flight for Prague was

ready and after a couple of hours we landed. First job was to get through customs, clear the guns and head for the rental car area. This process was quick and painless, although I could foresee some serious language barrier problems. Nothing, and I mean nothing, in Czech resembles in any way, shape or form, any words in English! For example, I noticed a doorway at the airport that was labeled (I assume) for ‘in’ and ‘out.’ One door said ‘WCHOD’, while the other said ‘WYCHOD.’ I couldn’t make my tongue twist those out, no matter how hard I tried. Thankfully, there were many signs in English as Prague is a popular tourist destination. I could read ‘car rental’ just fine!

I had contacted Hertz several months before the trip and found out that in order to drive a car in the Czech Republic one must have an international driving license. The nice lady at Hertz told me to go to any Triple A office and pay the \$10 fee, and be sure to bring two passport size photos – and the license would be issued on the spot. I did and it was. The real shocker was when the nice lady at Hertz told me just how much the rental car would cost. Just short of \$700 for the week! Ahh, what the

MOST OF THE LONG WALKS WERE WELL MAINTAINED, AND THE SCENERY MAGNIFICENT!



MY TRAVEL AND SHOOTING FRIENDS, BOB HAYNES (LEFT) AND JOE TOOT. WE WERE THE ONLY AMERICANS!





THE MAIN CLUBHOUSE AT KONOJISTE.

hell... in for a penny, in for a pound! So now, Bob, Joe and I are at Prague airport, with our gear, guns, passport and gun visa. The next step was to clear customs which was easy and painless. The Customs officer checked our papers and matched them to our guns very carefully – and then welcomed us to his country!

The hotel was not far, located in a cozy little village of Nataky about 12 miles from the shooting ground. All we had to do now was to negotiate through the streets to get to the main highway, which would take us toward Brno and our hotel. Thankfully, the signs leading to this major roadway were very good and in no time we were on our way – finally able to relax a bit and look at the absolutely beautiful countryside. While still within the city limits of Prague we could see the changing face of an old European City, now some 20 years beyond Communist control, expanding into marvelous modern technology. New buildings were springing up everywhere and we could see literally well over a

hundred cranes dotting the city – in various stages of raising tall offices, hotels and apartment buildings in every direction. In stark contrast, the old city and its lovely old world architecture captured your eye for the sheer beauty of design and craftsmanship. We would be sure to find some time to further investigate this interesting old city during our stay. But for now, we just wanted to find the hotel and get a good meal under our belts. In less than a half hour we found the hotel, got our room and did indeed have an excellent meal in the hotel restaurant. After dinner, I would bet I was sound asleep within two minutes of my head touching the pillow. I'm sure Bob beat me to sleep – as I distinctly remember him snoring as I too, drifted off.

GETTING SETTLED IN

The Czech Republic must be located in a higher hemisphere – as the sun rose around 5 a.m. and didn't set until almost 10 p.m. This made for nice long days of shooting and touring. Our hotel included

breakfast, which is fairly common in Europe, and offered both hot and cold food and assorted beverages from coffee to juice. It was a nice start each day without going out to find a restaurant or a fast food breakfast.

By 9 a.m. we were headed to the shooting ground. The rural scenery was beautiful with huge farm fields growing wheat and other crops. There were several fields that were covered in beautiful small yellow flowers – I never did find out exactly what they were, but they sure were pretty.

The highway led us to the town of Benesov and a curvy snake of a narrow road led us up the mountain to another small village called Konojiste, where the shooting ground was located. As we drove, the terrain became more steep and mountainous as we weaved our way ever up hill for about four miles until we reached our destination. We were directed to a parking area about half a mile from the club house area where a shuttle bus was continually running every few minutes – moving

shooters and spectators back and forth. The club house area featured a large covered area filled with picnic tables, as well as a sunny patio area for dining or relaxing in the sun. There was also a full restaurant and bar in the main building which also housed the offices, restrooms and ammo sales.

Two practice fields were open and running shooters through their paces. After traveling so far for so long, we all wanted to pop a few caps at the practice targets.

The first thing you notice about European targets are that they are presented faster and longer than most U.S. targets, so getting in a little practice was a good thing for us, and helped me to get familiar with the differences. Judging by the practice targets, we were going to see some serious shots in the Main Event, starting the following day.

After getting familiar with the area – and meeting some friends we had not seen since two or three World Championships ago – Bob and I decided to go back to the hotel and get a good night's rest. There would be four Parcours shot, two per day on Thursday and Friday. Then the ground would change the courses for Saturday and Sunday and we would shoot them again – two per day.

THE TOURNAMENT BEGINS!

Thursday saw the opening of the Championship and Joe, Bob, and I got a lucky draw – shooting our first Parcours in the afternoon. It was perfect shooting weather with the sun up and clear sky and the temperature in the low seventies. Great for hiking up and down some pretty steep terrain that was the B and C Parcours. A and D layouts were a little more user friendly, but I have learned that tough terrain is usually synonymous with FITASC in Europe. There are no golf carts,

pull carts, water, and often, not much to sit on if you have to wait to shoot. Port-a-Johns are often in short supply as well! Probably the reason that the Europeans are generally in better physical condition than us is that they spend much more time walking than we do. Even so, some of the terrain was pretty strenuous and A.J. 'Smoker' Smith, a fine British shooter, had a time of it – climbing out of the B layout with a knee the size of a football. Not to get ahead of myself, but his wife Tina carried his gun and bag and A.J. toughed his way up the hill with the aid of a tree branch for a crutch and managed a Gold medal in the Veteran Concurrent with a brilliant 179 which was also good for a 4th place tie with young Ben Husthwaite in the Seniors – half his age! Way to suck it up, A.J.!

Meanwhile, friend Bob is shooting very well and likes the Czech food. He likes it a lot! In fact, you could say that every time you stepped on his foot his mouth opened! The club served a deliciously marinated steak and I think Bob was racking up about three a day by Sunday! And the Czech beer is some of the best in the world. Their Pilsner is smooth and light and packs a wallop with a bit more alcohol than American beers. After shooting, it was a pleasing drink to relax with. We completed day one of the competition with great hopes and aspirations and looked forward to tomorrow's targets.

SECOND LEG

A nine o'clock start time got me and Bob up early – and gave us a chance to see the horrendous line of traffic, headed thankfully in the opposite direction we were going, toward Prague. The right hand lane is exclusively for trucks and you could see trucks for miles and

miles, heading into the city. It looked far worse than Miami rush hour traffic and I was thankful we were not headed in that direction – which leads me into mentioning driving and drivers in Europe. This main highway that took us to the shooting ground was very much like the Autobahn in Germany. It was in excellent condition and drivers drove very fast. The far right lane was exclusively for trucks and other slow vehicles, the center lane for general driving and the left lane for hauling butt! A quick flash of high beams coming up from behind was immediately obeyed by courteous drivers who got out of the way quickly. Failing to move over from the speed lane in Europe will likely result in a ticket and as I observed, the European drivers are far more expert and courteous than most of their U.S. counterparts! Courtesy is the norm – without road rage or those who try in the U.S. to be speed monitors by blocking up the passing lane by cruising at the posted speed limit and will not move unless fired upon, which in Miami is not totally unheard of!

Those who had shot opposite Parcours could be heard exchanging war stories and giving advice on specific targets that were difficult or very interesting. 90 mm edgy teals and quartering shots were a major topic, as each Parcour would present at least one of these nasty shots. So far, none of the targets had been excessively long or too fast, but some were presented out over a spectacular ravine or across a ravine and below the shooters' feet. There were a couple of edgy chandelle-style rabbits thrown high into the air – and the battues were also out there and fast! Parcour A featured a tricky short windowed rabbit with a hot rising teal. Not terribly hard, but easy to miss if you didn't concentrate.

The scores were beginning to give a sliver of evidence as to which Parcours were the hardest and who was doing well. As expected, George Digweed, Ben Hushwaite, and several other British shooters were beginning to string out the 22s, 23s, and 24s. There were even a couple of straights on the board.

There was a noticeable chill in the air Friday night – and cooler weather was on the way according to the locals. Our main concern was rain, especially with the colder

temperatures and steep terrain, which would make for tough going for everyone.

Bob and I headed for the hotel that afternoon and decided to investigate the small town near the hotel. We were looking for a new restaurant and something to do – as Czech television is just that... Czech. It was really weird to see Mel Gibson and Danny Glover speaking Czech. Occasionally we would pick up MTV and get to hear some music, or pick up a sports channel only to hear the narration of a golf tournament in about four languages all at once!

Our drive into town found a huge store, similar to the Wal-Mart super stores. It was called Hypernova and it sold just about any and everything you could think of including food, clothing, electronics, cameras and cars. There was also a mall-type shopping area that surrounded the central store that featured clothing, shoes, hobbies and even a money exchange. We wandered upstairs to where there was a food court – and found of all things a KFC chicken shop! By this time we were ready for some home-style food, even though the restaurants we had been to were excellent. I couldn't wait to sink my teeth into a KFC chicken leg! I was not disappointed, as the taste of the chicken was very much like home – and this store had a feature not available in most other KFC restaurants. Chicken wings. They were lightly breaded and deep fried, without barbeque sauce, or honey. Just plain old chicken wings and French fries. Excellent!

DAY 5

Saturday did break out a bit cooler, but remained thankfully dry. I was on the A and D Parcour rotation once again and looked forward to some gutsy, excellent targets and some cooler temperatures. We were not disappointed. One peg of Parcour A ended with a fine driven type presentation. Three machines were up on a tall hill, about 85 feet or more above us. Machine A threw a true driven target straight over the shooters head. Target B was also driven, coming over the left shoulder. The real kicker came from target C which was twice as fast as A & B and forced you to shoot quicker. The third part of this peg was also a driven shot – but really moving so fast that you couldn't risk taking it

as a driven. You had to do a 180 degree turn and shoot it as it went away into the trees. We went on to find shots across canyons, going downhill and under our feet, and almost every layout would have a 90mm midi that would scorch across the sky. Not always far away, but always very fast! Most all the shooters, including myself, tried very hard to keep our scores at 20 or above. Sometimes a difficult task.

We finished up and met at the club house commiserating over good and bad shots we had made that day. Bob was holding his own and doing very well, while I struggled a bit. Since we shot the early rotation that day, we decided to take a ride down into the city of Prague and to see some of the sights – especially as it was highly unlikely that either of us would ever get back here again.

OLD WORLD PRAGUE

A short ride of about 45 minutes put us on a wide main road leading into the heart of Prague. We wanted to get as far as the big river that runs through the city and to spend a little time just being tourists. We actually had no trouble finding it as the road we ended up on went right across it. After a

quick U-turn, we got lucky on a parking spot right next to the bridge and got out to walk around a bit. We could see the old and new melding into one as we walked and watched. The cobblestone road that led into the center of the city was unique in that electric street cars were still in use and ran up and down the road powered by the overhead electric lines that were everywhere.

When we reached a good vantage point on the bridge we could see the tour boats loaded with tourists cruising up and down this ancient water way. The old buildings of the Centrum area stood out on the horizon in every direction. In contrast, the new construction and hi-rise buildings stood out to remind us that everything changes – sooner or later.

Another trademark of this town and this country was evidenced by the numbers of stunningly beautiful women. Black hair and blue eyes were common and I can't remember being anywhere that had so many beautiful women in one place. Ahhh, to be 20, no, 10 years younger once more! After an hour or so of sightseeing we decided to head back to the hotel for dinner and to get ready for the last leg of this tournament.

COLD AND WET!

As nice as it had been for the past three days, a cold front managed to sneak in and it was below 40 degrees with misty rain mixed with ice crystals that greeted us that morning. That was when disaster struck for me as I got out of bed. The hotel beds were small single beds with a wooden framework holding the mattress in place. Somehow, when I sat on the edge of the bed to get up, I hit that hard wood frame which lit up a problem nerve in my lower back that has plagued me for years. The pain was intense and I knew almost immediately that I had little chance of making it down into the B and C Parcours and out again with a back problem. I could still walk and the muscles thankfully did not go rigid and tighten up, which would have been a major disaster and very painful. I decided to see how I felt by my shooting time which was around 1 pm in the afternoon. If it went away, I would shoot. If not, I would have to withdraw. Unfortunately, by starting time, I wasn't much better, and thought discretion to be the better part of valor, so withdrew, not willing to take the chance of further complications should I slip or fall on the wet ground. The good side

to that problem was that I had time to really cover the final day of competition and the coming shoot-offs.

George Digweed, England's premier shooter (probably the best in the world today!) was racking up targets and was as usual, the one to beat. Ben Husthwaite, another top Brit, was giving him a run for his money staying within a bird of 'Big George'. A Junior shooter from Hungary by the name of Andreas Szerdahelyi was also very close, with the possibility of a tie if he could pull it off. He had actually tied Digweed at seven down on the first 100 targets! Belgium's Eric Manshoven was also shooting better in the last 100 targets and was pressing hard to reach Digweed and Husthwaite. It was developing into an exciting finish with many competitors already in, taking another walk to the Parcours to watch George finish.

The Europeans take their shooting very seriously, especially FITASC. By now, the weather was deteriorating even more and the rain intensified causing the 40 or less degree temperature to feel even colder. It didn't seem to bother George as he finished a full five targets ahead of the rest. Mark Vessey from Great Britain and Eric Manshoven were tied at 181 each along with Junior Andreas Szerdahelyi of Hungary – Ben Husthwaite had slipped to 179 just out of a medal.

The shoot-off for Silver and Bronze was held on the practice Parcour just in front of the club house – and the targets were tweaked up to provide the spectators with one heck of a show as Mark, Eric and Andreas began the shoot-off. The E target, a long and fast 90 mm crosser would be the 'spoiler' so to speak, as it was at the edge of the envelope and only hit once from peg one to the uproarious satisfaction of the

THE COBBLESTONE ROAD THAT LED INTO THE CENTER OF THE CITY WAS UNIQUE IN THAT ELECTRIC STREET CARS WERE STILL IN USE AND RAN UP AND DOWN THE ROAD POWERED BY THE OVERHEAD ELECTRIC LINES THAT WERE EVERYWHERE.



spectators, and maybe just once more on peg three – an even more difficult shot from that angle. At the end of the 25 target shoot-off Great Britain's Mark Vessey would take home the Silver medal and Eric Manshoven the Bronze. The Silver and Bronze position was also shot off for Super Veteran – Italy's Silvano Basagni edged Great Britain's David Payne out the Bronze medal by one target. Junior shooter Andreas Szerdahelyi won the Gold medal handily at 181 while France's Bastien Havart took the Silver and Darren Moon of Great Britain the Bronze. In the Veteran's Concurrent, A.J. 'Smoker' Smith won the Gold medal by six targets over fellow Brit, George Parsons. Claudio Bortot from Italy took home the Bronze. The Ladies Concurrent found Italy's Spada Katuscia taking the Gold medal with a fine score of 169, while Silver and Bronze went to Great Britain's Ruth Naunton and Kate Brown.

The Country Team event winners were also awarded the traditional Gold, Silver and Bronze and both the team winners and individual winners received beautiful Czech cut crystal awards as well. In the Senior division, Gold

winner was Great Britain with Silver going to France and Bronze to Italy. The Concurrent winners from the Ladies went to Great Britain while the Silver went to Italy and the Bronze to France. The top Junior team was France with Hungary at Silver and Great Britain at Bronze. The Veterans Concurrent found Great Britain once again winning Gold while France took home the Silver and Italy the Bronze. Super Veteran team Italy won Gold, with Great



TRY SHOOTING SITTING DOWN SOME TIME!

Britain taking home the Silver.

While on the subject of awards, I must mention the Handicapped event just prior to the Main Event. It was called HandiSport and was divided into two categories – standing and sitting. If you think for one moment that the competition was taken any less seriously by the host or the competitors, think again. They take their game just as serious as the rest of us non-handicapped shooters. In the standing category Italy's Elio Spadoni took the Gold medal with a fine score of 72 – shot by the way, with only one arm! The Gold medal winner in the seated division was Great Britain's Paul Baily at 74. The Silver medal went to Brit David Craik and the Bronze to Antreas Andoniou from Cyprus. Truly remarkable shooting. Well done!

With the ending ceremonies and awards completed, we headed down the mountain and back to the hotel to have dinner, relax a bit, and then try to fit all of our stuff back into the bags we came with!

BACK TO THE REAL WORLD!

This exciting and adventurous week had finally reached its end –

and Bob and I set out to the airport about three hours early after saying our goodbyes to the hotel staff. As we drove into Prague we both agreed that the entire trip had been fun (Bob finished at 168 in the seniors, which was about 13th in score!), but home was really sounding good.

We were a bit apprehensive at the airport, again with the language barrier and carrying the guns along, but the Czech Police were very pleasant when checking our papers and guns for the trip home – and we certainly learned just how important keeping all your travel papers, visas, passports, etc. in order really was. The rest of the World works a bit different than the U.S.A. where you can get anywhere just about, on a driver's license! The rest of the World runs on visas and passports, so keep yours close at hand at all times.

As the flight time came up, Bob would head to Colorado Springs and I was going to Miami – leaving first. We had enjoyed a great trip with a lot of laughs, good food and great shooting and would meet up again later in the year for the World Sporting Championship, being held in England.

But first, after a couple of weeks back home, I would be heading for the second leg of this Journal's journey, the World FITASC, to be held the week of June 14th, 2004, in Signes, France, followed by the Clay Shooting Sporting Classic in England, late June.

After 10 hours of sitting in an itty-bitty seat, not designed for a human bottom, I most thankfully reached Miami, Florida about 6 p.m. After about a half hour of U.S. Customs clearance and yet another examination of my shotguns, I was finally home once again. A good feeling, I must say.

HANDISPORT STANDING WINNER OF THE GOLD MEDAL WAS ELIO SPADONI. HE SHOT 72 OF 100.



ANOTHER GOLD MEDAL FOR A.J. SMITH IN THE VETERANS CONCURRENT WITH FELLOW BRIT GEORGE PARSONS (LEFT) THE SILVER MEDAL WINNER, AND ITALY'S CLAUDIO BARTOT WINS THE BRONZE.