

Olympic Test Event – 18-21st November 2015 Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

Travel

A detailed umpires' briefing was sent out a couple of weeks beforehand by the Referee from England, Stuart Sherlock.

I decided to extend my stay in Rio by three days and paid for the additional nights directly with the Hotel Grand Mercure. Fortunately, I decided to check in online 24 hours before and discovered that my 12.30pm flight was now departing at 11.40am. I began my journey on the 15th November and travelled by car to Purple Parking at Heathrow who would then transport me to the airport. The outward flight took just over 11 hours and, for the most part, was smooth except for few minutes of mild turbulence.

The flight arrived a little early but there was nobody there to meet me, or at least I thought. I waited a while but as it had not been confirmed that I would be collected, I decided to take a taxi to the hotel. This proved to be a big mistake as I found out later that someone had come to collect me but we had missed each other. The taxi ended up costing around £40 for a 50-minute trip and the taxi driver did not know where the hotel was! The hotel was only 5 months old and was not very well signposted. The driver got close and then asked another driver who knew the way to complete the journey. Eventually, I arrived at the hotel and checked in around 11.30pm and managed to get a last drink at the bar before 12.00am.

No transport was necessary from the hotel to the venue as it was only about a 7-minute walk.

For the return flight there were no such problems and I was picked up on time at 8.30pm on the 24th November by car and taken to the airport.

Accommodation and meals

The Hotel Grand Mercure was very new and very good. The room was very good and had twin beds and plenty of cupboard space. On the first night I had my own room as I had arrived a night early but on the second night I had to move rooms from floor 7 to floor 11 where I shared with the Slovenian umpire Matija Krnc for the remainder of the stay. He was very pleasant and spoke good English but went to bed quite early but also woke up early and most days he had come back from breakfast before I had surfaced. The room was very clean and had a telephone and a television with hundreds of foreign language channels with only a couple in English. There was also a free WIFI service.

Breakfast was taken at the hotel and lunch was taken at the arena. The foreign umpires were given a per diem amount on a credit card (like Glasgow) which covered for dinner and extras. Then we had to find an ATM and try to work out how to withdraw the money as all the instructions were in Portuguese. Dinner in the hotel was quite expensive, so most evenings we ate at a local restaurant which was about a 15 minutes' walk from the arena.

I thought the standard of food at the hotel and the arena was excellent and there were always at least two or three choices on offer.

There was an umpires' lounge with coffee and water and occasionally fruit but no milk available. It seems that our hosts do not drink coffee with milk, so I soon got used to black coffee. Fortunately, milk was available at the hotel at breakfast but again not in the rooms.

Venue and playing conditions

The tournament took place at Riocentro Pavilion 4 although the Table Tennis event next year will be in Pavilion 3. There will be 5 Pavilions in use next year for the Olympics but not all of these have been completed yet. These are multi use arenas and Badminton started constructing for their event even before we had finished ours. It is a magnificent arena which also stages concerts and exhibitions and was only a 7-minute walk from the hotel. Most of the time the weather was kind to us and we didn't require an umbrella, although the hotel did provide them, where necessary.

There were 4 courts in the main arena with 16 practice tables in an adjacent hall. No practice was allowed on the match tables.

There were Men's and Women's individual events on the 18th to the 19th and Men's and Women's team events on the 20th to the 21st.

In the individual competition the event was played as a progressive knock out system. In round 1 seeds 25-32 played against 17-24. In round 2 the winners of round 1 played seeds 9-16 and in round 3 the winners of round 2 played seeds 1-8. This meant that Paul Drinkhall only played in round 3 on Wednesday and the quarter-final, semi-final and final on the Thursday. All matches were the best of 7 games.

In the team event, each team had 3 players with A and B playing the first two singles and C playing the doubles with either A or B. The remaining two singles were played by whoever didn't play the doubles and player C. As most of the teams were from Brazil, most of the matches involved at least one Brazil team. All matches were the best of 5 games and played to a finish only.

Unfortunately, due to no prize money and no ranking points, the only non South American athlete was Paul Drinkhall, who was the number one seed and fulfilled his ranking by winning the tournament.

The main arena had plenty of seating on one side but there were very few spectators and most of the audience were players, coaches and officials.

The flooring was an unusual light green and the lighting was very good as you would expect and the temperature and the humidity were fine as well but only because the air conditioning was on for most of the time.

The tables, nets and surrounds were sponsored by DHS and the balls were Double Happiness white. The layout was very good and there were two television tables with internet streaming throughout the tournament. Each court had a raised chair for the umpire and a large scoreboard for the assistant umpire. There were also volunteers at the end of the court to operate the computerised scoring at the end of the court. The

assistant umpire controlled the timing of the match by use of a switch. There was also a computerised time-out machine on all four courts.

Match Officials

There were 24 umpires but only the 7 BB umpires plus 5 Brazilian umpires (2 BB) actually umpired. The 7 BB umpires were from England, Netherlands, Slovenia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Korea and Singapore. The umpire from Egypt withdrew. The Referee was Stuart Sherlock and the Deputy was Cheong-Ki Chan from Hong Kong. The others acted as scoreboard operators and worked in Racket control. The 12 umpires were divided into squads of 3 (Umpire, Assistant and Call area/reserve) who rotated after each match. My squad for the first two days included Imad from Lebanon and Montes from Brazil.

It was decided that, because of the heat and the lights, no jackets would be worn.

As expected, no evaluators were present.

The Korean umpire was not present at the time of Paul Drinkhall's first match, so I became Assistant umpire at very short notice.

I was given the Women's singles semi-final to umpire with Jose from Brazil as Assistant and I umpired the Women's team final with Maria from Brazil.

The march-on training took place at 6.00pm on the Tuesday followed by the Umpires' briefing. A lot of the meeting involved information about what was required in the call area. All rackets were checked there as well as shirts, names of coaches and ball selection.

We were given a schedule every day with squads of three for two and a half days except for the final stages and squads of two for the team matches. I umpired a Men's team semi-final and a Women's team final on the last two days.

The standard of refereeing and umpiring was very good in general although many of the Brazilian umpires spoke very little English.

The per diem rate of 700 Brazilian Reals was quite generous and paid in the form of a credit card and was distributed at the briefing.

There was no umpires' party arranged due to lack of time and different shifts but everyone mixed very well in the umpires' lounge and some came out for dinner in the evenings.

Organisation and Presentation

The competition was very well run and a lot of care was taken with the march-on and presentation of matches and all the players and officials were announced for every match.

There was no printed programme except for printed schedules for players and officials.

For the Finals on Saturday the umpire was fitted with a microphone and a sound pack.

The medal presentations were well done but with no national anthems.

Any other comments on the trip

I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Rio de Janeiro and the organisation, transport and accommodation were faultless. The hotel staff and the volunteers were also very helpful and did a great job.

As I stayed on for a couple of days after the tournament I was able to see some of the Badminton test event, which was very different:

1. A lot more countries entered the competition including those from Europe.
2. They had a total of 10 officials on court (Umpire, Service judge, 6 line judges and 2 end line judges, who all marched on and off together).
3. They had 5 match courts but all the matches were announced after the previous one had finished without a Let ever being called. It was a little bit like Wimbledon with a rolling schedule of different competitions. For example, court two would have a Men's Singles followed by a Mixed doubles followed by a Women's doubles etc.
4. Badminton is now played up to 21 serving alternately with an interval for coaching once one player has scored 11 points and best of three games. One coach was allowed at court side but there seemed to be no problem if he called out between points.
5. For doubles, the players knock up with their partners rather than their opponents.
6. Again, like Wimbledon, the umpire decided each point and pressed a computerised screen in front of him. Obviously, the chair is a lot higher.
7. All the officials were dressed uniformly in black and wore a T-shirt and no jacket.

I am not sure if this idea of presentation would work well with Table Tennis but some of the ideas might be worth a try in National competitions.

Whilst I was in Brazil I learned that my next International tournament will be the German Open in Berlin in January.

David Edwards