

GC EUROPEAN LEAGUE



The self-appointed team captain was enthused enough by a fresh sporting adventure to enter Ealing for the Latvia heat of the new European League without first checking whether anyone else at the croquet club would even be interested. Raising teams to play away matches just a few miles from Ealing's Lammas Park home in West London can often be problematic. So it was a considerable gamble to put Ealing's name down for a tournament being staged in a distant Baltic country extremely anxious about the future intentions of their nightmare neighbours in Russia and Belarus. But Ealing not only quickly found four competitive players excited by the opportunity of playing in the inaugural Champions League of croquet, against all the odds and Dynamic Grade ratings, they qualified as one of the two teams going forward from the Latvia group stage to the grand final at Roehampton in October.

It was a great experience from start to finish. The build-up included working out the best way to reach Riga, which was via Warsaw, ensuring the precious mallets also arrived at the same destination, organising the special royal blue team shirts - with an Ealing in Europe motif - and designing pennants to present to the three other competing countries from Finland, Germany and Latvia.

The Ealing party of five, including one travelling supporter tempted by taking in the sights of old town Riga and its remarkable history, arrived in Ikšķile, around 30 kilometres outside the capital in time for the welcoming dinner attended by all four teams. The friendly but competitive atmosphere at the meal - including the suggestion that the finalists should jump into the mighty river Daugava that runs alongside Ikšķile CC's idyllic setting - put everyone in the right mood for the ensuing croquet. This sense of occasion was stoked

further when Ikšķile host Roberts Stafeckis, chiefly responsible for bringing croquet to Latvia and building a state-of-the-art clubhouse with three lawns to match, played that spine-tingling Champions League anthem before the start of play at the request of the Ealing captain. Will Roehampton follow suit? The first day ended with all four teams level on one win from two matches, setting up the best possible scenario of the two teams winning their one remaining match staying on the European croquet road to Roehampton. It was the six-handicap but fast improving Emma Bowen-Doherty who was the star of the Ealing team, scoring three long hoops in succession to clinch the decisive doubles rubber against Ikšķile. Such was the hospitality extended by the host club at the lavish barbecue on the Saturday evening, there was some doubt whether Ealing would be able to field a full team for the climax of the competition the next morning.

No surprise really when after the beers and the wines, mine host Roberts produced bottles of Latvia's national drink Riga Black Balsam which has an alcohol content of 45-per-cent and is revered by Latvians as the medicine to be taken for every ailment. One member of the Ealing team who will remain nameless - what happens on tour stays on tour - took a great liking to the special Latvian medicine and had to be carried back to the hotel unable to speak. It seemed certain Ealing would be a man/woman down against a strong side from Finland, who took their herbal liqueur rather better and were encouraging 'just one more' round of numerous Balsam toasts to our super generous hosts. Somehow all the Ealing team were present and correct at breakfast and went on to secure a memorable victory against Tolkis, the team from Finland, who must have been expecting an easy passage to Roehampton judging by the state of their opponents just a few hours earlier.

Such was the camaraderie formed over the weekend that ad hoc friendly matches took place after the end of competitive play on both days - also meaning that those foolhardy promises to jump into a river that flows very swiftly into the Baltic Sea were conveniently forgotten. Hopefully other teams will follow little Ealing's lead in travelling to beautiful Ikšķile in future editions of the European Golf Croquet League. The experience of playing croquet on foreign soil made the cost worth every penny. And it makes a refreshing change competing against names such as Silvija, Maris, Andrejs, Priska, Reinhard, and Lars rather than the same old Tom, Dick and Harry year after year on the domestic circuits. Roberts Stafeckis's ambition of further establishing the sport in Latvia by putting on regular international tournaments deserves every possible support from UK croquet players, as does Ian Burrige's grand vision of a vibrant Golf Croquet European League. Fittingly Ikšķile were the other side to qualify for the Roehampton final and it should be mentioned just in passing that Ealing's one loss was against the Germans from Hamburg.

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