

# EUROPEAN SLOWPITCH CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE FIRST TEN YEARS

By Bob Fromer

The idea of holding a **European Slowpitch Championship** (in a continent that almost exclusively plays fastpitch) began to be promoted to the ESF by the British and Irish Softball Federations in the mid-1990s. The ESF finally agreed to the idea in 1997, with the first tournament planned for 1998 – but many ESF members were cynical and predicted that it would be difficult to achieve the minimum number of countries (four) required for a European Championship to be held.

Great Britain, as the main proponent of the idea, had little choice but to put their money where their mouth was and volunteer to host the first edition.

And so, in August 1998, the first European Slowpitch Championship was held on a distinctly makeshift field at Brunel University on the outskirts of London, with Great Britain, the Czech Republic, Ireland and Guernsey as the competing teams. Early that year, both The Netherlands and Israel had signed up for the tournament, but both withdrew in the weeks before the competition, with the Israelis citing religious concerns about having a mixed team and playing games on Saturday.

Fortunately, the **Czech Softball Federation** pledged from the very beginning that they would support the concept, and they have been true to their word: there has been a Czech team at every one of the five tournaments played to date, and only Great Britain and Ireland can say the same. The fact that the Czechs came from the continent of Europe to play in the first-ever tournament (while the three other teams all came from this side of the English Channel) gave the event a credibility that has been vital to its continued existence.

And so five European Slowpitch Championships have been played to date, and here are the bare statistics – the dates, places and competing countries:

## **1998 in Uxbridge, London, England**

Great Britain, Czech Republic, Guernsey, Ireland

## **2000 in Maynooth, Dublin, Ireland**

Great Britain, Czech Republic, Germany, Guernsey, Ireland

## **2002 in Mlade Buky, Czech Republic**

Great Britain, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Slovakia

## **2004 in Linz, Austria**

Great Britain, Austria, Czech Republic, Ireland

## **2006 in Ljubljana, Slovenia**

Great Britain, Croatia, Czech Republic, Ireland, Slovenia

Great Britain has won the competition on all five occasions, and there is a perception that it's been easy – that of course Britain will win every time because we play more slowpitch and have more slowpitch teams by far than any other country in Europe.

The reality is very different. Great Britain **did** win easily in Ireland in 2000, when a dominant team swept all opposition before it and had only one close game in the whole competition.

But GB only won in 1998 and 2002 by the skin of their teeth, and the team faced serious challenges in 2004 and 2006.

So the European Slowpitch Championship is certainly a competition worth playing – and with interest in slowpitch growing in Europe, it shouldn't take long before more countries will have medal aspirations. The fact that a **European Slowpitch Cup** got off the ground in 2007 is another good sign.

But European slowpitch competitions will be perpetually under threat while only a small number of countries enter and even fewer are prepared to host them. What money there is in European softball on the Continent – and this will of course diminish following Olympic exclusion – still goes almost entirely to fastpitch, with slowpitch as an afterthought. This makes international slowpitch competition difficult to sustain.

But there are hopes that the 2008 European Slowpitch Championship, when the tournament “comes home” to Britain, might see as many as eight countries competing and mark the point when slowpitch becomes genuinely established as a viable competition format in Europe.

Meanwhile, let's look back at the five tournaments held over the past decade:

## **England 1998**

“This slowpitch – it is very competitive, but at the same time it seems so friendly! We are not used to this in fastpitch in Europe!”

The words came from ESF Secretary General Patrice Bienfait, who was seeing competitive slowpitch for the first time as a member of the ESF Technical Commission at the first-ever European Slowpitch Championship, played at Brunel University in Uxbridge, outside London, from August 18-22, 1998.

Although only a four-team affair played on a grass field, the tournament was attended by then-ESF President Jos Gieskens, who had championed the idea of the competition, and by International Softball Federation President Don Porter. Speaking to teams at the Closing Ceremony, Don Porter said, “You have started something here this week that will certainly expand into a World Slowpitch Championship in the very near future.”

That World Slowpitch Championship still hasn't happened – but the ISF did hold a **Slowpitch World Cup** in Plant City, Florida in 2002 (won by one of two GB teams that took part) and re-staged the event in 2005, won this time by a pick-up team from Britain, The Clan.

But back to Uxbridge.... The BSF ran the tournament on as much of a shoestring as possible (though it still cost around £15,000), and there was a distinct lack of both volunteers and spectators, with Bob Fromer and Mike Jennings doing most of the planning and organising. Except on the final Saturday, a band of lively Irish supporters from Dublin outnumbered spectators from the British softball community. The big breakthrough in paying for the tournament was a £5,000 grant from The Economist Group, where then GB-player Harriet Hughes worked, while the ISF donated £1500, Major League Baseball £500 and slowpitch teams around the country pledged £1700 in voluntary £25 donations (not all of which were paid). The London Indoor League donated £365 and T-shirt sales at the tournament raised £400. Gate income on the Saturday was £170 – and the BSF covered the rest.

There was no recognition of the tournament or GB's success in winning it from Sport England or UK Sport, both of whom were given notice and invitations. But Bernie Cotton from the BOA was there for the whole of the final day and the team received warm letters of congratulations from BOA Chief Executive Simon Clegg and then-Chairman Craig Reddie. Some things never change!

On the field, with GB, Ireland Guernsey and the Czech Republic the competing teams, GB strolled through a double round-robin with a 5-1 record, losing only to Ireland 12-10 in a game in which GB Head Coach Micha Verhagen played mostly a second team (earlier in the week, GB had beaten Ireland 16-0). The Czechs finished pool play at 4-2, Ireland were 3-3 and Guernsey lost every game.

GB's round-robin wins against the Czech Republic were close affairs (14-10 and 16-11) and were a harbinger of things to come when the two teams met in a best-of three Final. The Czech team was full of players from their national fastpitch and baseball squads, plus two British-based exiles including Milada Zolobova, and those earlier games had shown the Czechs to be excellent technical players – though the British thought they could always out-hit them. They almost didn't!

Unexpectedly, the Czechs took the first playoff game 8-6, when a British rally in the bottom of the seventh ended in confusion over an umpire's delayed dead ball call. GB runners, who thought they had been told to advance to the next base, found themselves tagged out instead. Suddenly, GB's backs were against the wall.

Head Coach Micha Verhagen made just one key change for Game 2, replacing Game 1 starting pitcher Mike Ashley with the left-handed Colin Hamilton. This was a stroke of genius as Colin held the Czechs to just five hits and a single consolation run in the seventh inning as GB cruised to a 14-1 win to set up the deciding game.

Initially, things looked bad in the decider, as the Czechs scored seven runs in the second inning on four hits and five GB errors(!) and held a 9-3 lead after three innings. But the Czechs never scored again, GB fought back, and a clutch two-out hit by Gail Inkpen in the sixth inning tied the score at 9-9. GB then broke the game open in the top of the seventh on hits by Paul Bullock, Shaun Findlay, Clare Butler and Steve Quickfall and took a 13-9 lead. The Czechs went down in order in the bottom of the seventh and the GB Slowpitch Team had its first European title. But it certainly hadn't been easy!

GB dominated the individual awards, as Colin Hamilton was Best Pitcher, Danny Price was Best Male Batter (he hit an astounding .786) and Gail Inkpen was the Female MVP. Best Female Batter was Milada Zolobova, and she also made the catch of the tournament, diving full length in foul territory in left field to snare a curving line drive and in the same motion managed to flip herself over the construction fence that marked the dead ball line.

## **Ireland 2000**

This was the only European Slowpitch Championship that Britain dominated almost from start to finish, but that domination – with the exception of just one game – was convincing and complete, and a triumph for Head Coach Micha Verhagen and Team Manager Maurice Baker. GB literally steamrolled everything and everyone in its path.

The tournament was played from September 4-9 at the suburban campus of the National University of Ireland at Maynooth, outside Dublin.

The GB team went 8-0 in pool play, where they outscored the opposing teams – Ireland, Guernsey, the Czech Republic and newcomers Germany – by 193 runs to 47, including an embarrassing 59-0 win over a hapless German team. GB then won both Page Playoff games to finish the tournament undefeated.

The key ingredient was power, as Brett Gibbens blasted 16 home runs over the outfield fences in going 25-for-30 and Steve Quickfall pounded 11 round-trippers. But the team also played brilliant defense, especially Clare Butler at second base, and hit up and down the line-up. GB batted .528 as a team and there were only seven innings in the whole tournament in which they failed to score. Steph Jardine hit .688 (22 for 32), an astonishing feat for a female player against outfielders playing shallow, and was on base for almost every one of Brett Gibbens' home runs.

The only game in which GB was challenged was their first pool game against Ireland. Britain had a comfortable lead, but the Irish came back, cut the British lead to 16-15 and would have won if Steph Jardine hadn't made a diving catch on a liner to right field to end the game. After that, it was plain sailing for the British.

This was the first European Slowpitch Championship in which the Czechs made their philosophy explicit of "it doesn't matter until the playoffs." An ambitious Irish team beat the Czechs twice in pool play, but then were ambushed 26-7 by the Czechs in the Page Playoff and had to settle once again for third place.

## **Czech Republic 2002**

The rain poured down for most of the week in the small town of Mlade Buky in the central mountains of the Czech Republic from August 12-17, 2002 – the same rain that was causing devastating floods in Prague. Left field was full of puddles; right field was often a lake.

The usual suspects – Great Britain, Ireland, the Czech Republic and Germany (but minus Guernsey) were joined by Austria and Slovakia, giving the tournament a total of six teams – a total that has not been matched since. And Austria, with players from their national fastpitch and baseball squads, gave the tournament another competitive team – as they showed with a 14-2 win over the Czech Republic during pool play.

As the week began under lowering skies, a GB team much changed from 2000, with new coaches (Dave Owen and Gary Crock) and a new manager (Pearl Bramhall), struggled to find its way. Meanwhile, a seasoned and talented Irish team were confident that this time the crown would be theirs. They had trained and prepared relentlessly, and they were supported by a strong group of fans that had followed them into the heart of Central Europe. And right up until the final denouement on Saturday, nothing suggested that the Irish would fail.

Thirty-six hours of rain wiped out all play on Tuesday, and GB then experienced a devastating “Black Wednesday”, first committing 11 errors in a crushing 18-6 defeat by Ireland and following that with five more errors and four appalling baserunning blunders in a 9-4 loss to the Czechs. Altogether, GB committed 35 errors in eight games, and the weather was only partly the problem. GB morale was low on Wednesday evening, with coaches and players alike wondering how this could happen and who was to blame.

But a GB recovery started with a shaky win over Austria on Thursday in which a key change took place: Mark Saunders, who had been the #3 pitcher in Ireland in 2000, took over the pitcher’s spot from David Lee. Still, GB could only finish third in the pool standings, behind Ireland and Austria, and that meant that every game in the Page Playoff was sudden death – starting with a game against the Czech Republic on Friday afternoon, played at last in welcome sunshine in front of a large home crowd.

GB stayed with Mark Saunders on the mound, and they still had one huge asset that none of the other teams could muster: home run power. Fence-clearing home runs by Brett Gibbens, Shaun Findlay and David Lee and a wonderful running catch by second baseman Paul Bullock that choked off a Czech rally turned a tight game into a 16-7 GB win. And a more routine 11-0 win over Austria put GB into the Final. But a supremely confident and undefeated Irish team was waiting for them.

Afterwards, when the Final was over, long-time Ireland stalwart Brian Connolly said wistfully, “We were certainly the team of the week out here. But not on the day when it mattered...”

GB coaches Dave Owen and Gary Crock had studied the Irish batting line-up in minute detail, and they laid out the plan at a lengthy team meeting on the morning of the final day. The plan was based on the fact that the Irish hit well throughout their line-up, but had little power. Even more important, many of their hitters were one-dimensional, unable to hit to all parts of the field. So each hitter was analysed: where to pitch the ball to negate their strengths or preferences, and where the defense should play as a result. The defense was told to crowd in, to take away singles and prevent singles becoming doubles, so the force play at second would always be on. It was a plan that could strangle the Irish – but it depended crucially on execution by the pitcher. Finally, the undefeated Irish had earned the right to be home team in the final – but Dave and Gary reckoned that this could work against them if GB could get out of the gate with a lead.

Sometimes, plans go astray. Sometimes they work so well it sends shivers up your spine. GB scored four runs in the first inning (two of them on a triple by Bruce Saunders), and then brother Mark went to work, pitching carefully, always aware of location, and the Irish managed nothing except the odd run here and there. GB was still committing errors, but so were the Irish, crumbling under the strain, and GB bats were booming. A long two-run homer by the inevitable Brett Gibbens off Ireland reliever Drew Hennessey in the fourth inning took the heart out of the Irish, and in the end it was easy: GB took the game and their third straight title by a score of 16-3. But it was a long and improbable comeback for Britain, and a stunning loss for the Irish, who were without doubt the best team there.

## **Austria 2004**

The European Slowpitch Championship played in August 2004 in the pleasant provincial town of Linz in Austria had less melodrama than there had been in Mlade Buky in 2002. But if anything the softball was even more compelling, as two mature, confident and well-coached teams – the British and the Irish – met five times in all during the week.

Sadly, the tournament was back down to only four countries – GB, Ireland, the Czech Republic and Austria. But all four teams were competitive, the tournament was very well staged by the host club Askoe Linz and a great spirit of respect and friendship prevailed among the teams. GB Head Coach Gary Crock (Dave Owens had gone back to the States) marshalled a group of international veterans and novices – and got the best out of absolutely everyone.

After three straight one-run games between GB and Ireland during the double round robin and the first playoff semi-final, the teams met again, inevitably, in the Grand Final. And while Britain came from behind to defeat the Irish by a score of 6-2, don't let that score mislead you. This game was almost as close and every bit as tense as the ones that had gone before it.

And the tournament was tense all the way through – especially after GB lost their first two games before coming back to win seven straight. In the little mini-tournament between Britain and Ireland that was at the heart of this European Championship, GB won three times and Ireland twice, and the total difference between the teams over five games was just nine runs.

The scores of those GB-Ireland games -- 9-7 and 4-3 to Ireland, and then 5-4, 5-4 and 6-2 to Britain -- will tell you that this was not the Slowpitch Softball seen week in and week out in British domestic tournaments. This was Slowpitch where every play mattered, where every pitch was considered and where every run and every out was worth its weight in gold.

This was a European Championship utterly different from the three that had gone before it. The field, the wind, the fence distances and the dead fastpitch balls the ESF chose to use removed power from everyone's game, but most of all from Britain's. Not a single home run was hit over the outfield fence during the tournament by any team. In the Czech Republic, in 2002, more than 20 home runs had flown over fences, and in Ireland in 2000 it was well over 30.

So this was Softball totally about defence, pitching, base hitting, baserunning and keeping your head together. In the end, and especially in the Grand Final, the GB team kept their heads a little better than the Irish and won the game that mattered most. The result was a fourth straight Championship for GB and another long, dark night of the soul for Ireland.

And GB had a hero -- Lazarus risen from the dead -- in the person of Brett Gibbens.

On Wednesday night, Brett was in shock and in the hospital after a fierce throw from Austria's shortstop had hit him directly on the elbow. On Thursday, he couldn't move or bend his right arm. On Friday, the sling came off, but swelling from a massive blood bruise was still a terrifying sight. But on Saturday, to the consternation of the Irish, Brett was back in the line-up.

In a must-win game against the Czechs on Saturday morning to decide who would play Ireland in the Grand Final, Brett went two-for-three, with a double, a triple and three RBIs.

And in the Grand Final itself, he went four-for-four, with two doubles, a single and a solo inside-the-park home run in the top of the seventh inning that drove the final psychological

nail in the Irish coffin as Brett dived headfirst into home, heavily strapped arm notwithstanding.

For the second straight European Championship, the Irish had come expecting to win, certain they had the better team before the tournament started -- and still believing it after the tournament ended. After the first day's play, they were relishing the fact that GB home run power would not be able to batter them into submission as it had in Dublin and Mlade Buky. On a more level playing field, they were sure they would prevail.

But they didn't. "Once again," said Irish coach Pat Reddy, afterwards, and sadly, "the better team didn't win." But the GB players and coaches were happy to take the gold medals and the first place trophy and leave that judgment to others.

## **Slovenia 2006**

By 2006, GB Head Coach Gary Crock had stepped down and the first GB player ever to make the move to the Head Coach position, Mark Saunders, took over – with brother Bruce as Assistant Coach.

For many long months, it seemed that the 2006 European Slowpitch Championship might not happen at all because no country had stepped forward as host. But then the small ex-Yugoslav Republic of Slovenia contacted the ESF to ask for help with Slowpitch development, and

Bob Fromer, who holds the Slowpitch brief as a member of the ESF Development Commission, responded with a range of suggestions and a question: “Er ... by the way, would you be interested in hosting a European Slowpitch tournament?”

The rest is history, as Slovenia, with the help of a £2000 grant from the ESF via BSUK, proved to be excellent hosts in the last week of August in the country’s capital, Ljubljana. And two new countries – Slovenia and neighbouring Croatia – joined the competition, raising the total of competitors this time to five (though Austria dropped out and was missed and Israel once again signed up and then withdrew).

### ***GB’s new Head Coach, Mark Saunders, summed up the story of GB’s fifth straight European title:***

GB went to the European Championship with the UK softball community expecting nothing less than the Gold Medal. After all, GB had won every other European Championship so why should this be different?

The squad selected only had seven members from the 2004 team remaining plus two other players with previous European experience. With nine players (half the squad) making their European debut, plus a new Head Coach, this was a very different team to the one that had won the 2004 title in Austria.

Due to the domestic schedule, we had the unexpected luxury of being able to arrange two training weekends for the squad in August, including warm-up games against some of the best UK-based players, before heading for Slovenia at the end of the month. This, added to the fact that we were able to train with the actual make of balls that were going to be used in the tournament, meant that this was the best-prepared GB squad to go to the Europeans.

The tournament schedule (at last the ESF was beginning to draw up schedules suitable for slowpitch rather than fastpitch!) gave us eight group games over three days, which meant I had the opportunity to give plenty of game time to all the players and get them prepared for the tougher games they would face during the Page Playoff round. Right from the start we knew our main rivals would be the Irish and the Czechs, and although we won all the group games against them I knew that didn’t mean anything unless we were able to beat them in the knockout stages.

The second group game against the Czechs really showed the character and the depth of the GB squad. Even though we were one run down in the fifth inning we were able to use all our bench players to eventually win the game by five runs. What this showed the other teams was that we always had options and weren’t afraid to use them. And this stood us in great stead for the semi-final against the Irish where again we came under pressure.

Two runs down with two out in the bottom of the seventh, we again turned to the bench. Martin Cartledge came in to run for Steve Patterson and Fiona Hunter was put in to pinch-hit.

Fiona belted a line drive to left-centre that gave Martin the chance to move from first to third and, by drawing the throw, Martin enabled Fiona to get to second. This gave our top batter, Dan Spinks, the opportunity to knock in the crucial two runs, which he did with ease.

This win gave us the confidence to turn it on in the final against the Czech Republic (who once again ambushed Ireland in their semi-final matchup) and we did the one thing we hadn't done all tournament: score in every inning and also win every inning. The Czechs were tough opponents but in the end GB was too strong and finished with the Gold Medal.

The key to GB's performance was the balance between talented new players and seasoned veterans, a great team spirit and the ability of everyone in the squad to contribute in clutch. With two new teams in the Europeans Championships and a good discussion between GB, Ireland and the ESF about the format next time, I'm hopeful that the 2008 European Slowpitch Championship should be even better.

## **Southampton 2008...?**

And so, after a decade of successful competition – especially for Great Britain! – the European Slowpitch Championship will come home in the summer of 2008, returning once again to a university venue at Southampton from July 8-12.

The hope is that Southampton 2008 will be the biggest and best European Championship yet, and fingers are crossed that as many as eight teams or more might attend – especially as Jersey and Guernsey are only a short flight away, France hosted this year's inaugural European Slowpitch Cup, Austria would like to return to the competition, Switzerland and Belgium are both starting to develop Slowpitch, Croatia and Slovenia are both keen to build on their first appearance in 2006 – and of course GB, Ireland and the Czech Republic will definitely be there.

A new feature of the 2008 European Championship will be a domestic slowpitch tournament – the Solent League-organised **Euroball** – running alongside it on the final Saturday and providing what should be a large crowd for a Grand Final in which GB will hopefully be trying for a sixth straight European title.

Mark Saunders will be back for his second Europeans as Head Coach, but as always, there will be new faces in the GB player pool that will be selected in December 2007 and then trimmed to produce a competition squad in 2008.

The BSF, who are organising and financing the tournament, have already put out a call for volunteer help, which will be needed from now through and beyond the tournament itself. The 2008 European Championship will only achieve its aims with active support from the British softball community – and as the leading slowpitch country in Europe, it's in our interest to make sure the competition succeeds.

To offer your help, contact BSF Slowpitch Officer Roger Grooms  
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