

## With Urmel on ice on cloud nine

Guess what – unbelievable but true - I had been selected for a 10 day's *volunteer* job at the ice hockey world championship 2010. Considering the probability of participating at such an event I was very proud of attending this tournament as an ambassador of Germany. After successfully mastering a mandatory casting session in Cologne early December 2009, I was invited to a kick-off meeting in the SAP Arena, located in the "Quadratstadt" - the nick name of the city of Mannheim, where this sports tournament took place. There, I was sufficiently briefed together with 9 other participants for the sector of *press & media*, my favorite field of application due to my personal inclination with regard to writing articles about the topic of ice hockey. Upon arriving at this gigantic stadium encompassing about 13,000 spectators, I firstly had to acquire my necessary *accreditation* enabling access to such high level areas like Administration, Media Center, Mixed Zone, Radio & TV Area, Media Tribune and Volunteers Area; temporary upgrade badges even guaranteed entrance to the gym where I could closely walk by the skating heroes watching them at their daily work out. My major areas of work ranged from *information desk*, *mixed zone*, *press conference*, *runner*, *copy center* and *photographer support*. Most of my time I spent at the info desk where I was in charge of providing vital statistics needed from the journalists working nearby in the press hall; there I always had to keep an eye on the completeness of all kind of information required from the media hosts and press representatives. Two high standard copy machines from Kyocera thankfully supported us volunteers in obtaining those papers in time and on time. It goes without saying that sometimes specific pieces of information had to be prepared immediately in order to keep the media machine running. The positive side effect of working at the info desk, also called the "secret brain" of the games due to the incredible amount of data available there, was the perfect shift plan which made it possible for me to almost watch all games of this tournament. That way I felt adequately reimbursed as volunteer compared to the financial burden in terms of managing my accommodation during those 10 days in Mannheim. As most thrilling moments turned out to be the Live interview of Urmel, the official mascot of the games with the Montreal Canadian Times, which happened to be a real blast: this fairy dinosaur proved to be a terrific marketing gag which greatly performed via gesture and mimicry throughout the days even entertaining the crowd whilst the matches were going on. One time about 6,500 school kids around the region of Mannheim had been invited to the game between France and Kazakhstan demanding every effort from Urmel to cheer them up and give the people a chance of taking unforgettable pictures. According to insider know how Urmel was performed by high professional artists from overseas who had already proved as perfect role models for this event. I gladly made it to obtain a snapshot with the mascot upon watching the classic between CAN and CZE; thus one personal goal had primarily been achieved. Additionally, I was happy to get a hold of signatures from the head coach of team Canada, the Olympic Gold Medalist of Vancouver and one of the most famous and talented players, Mark Messier, who once was the congenial partner of goal getter Wayne Gretzky, the ice hockey legend of former times. The 'dot on the i' happened to be "volunteer of the day" in local Urmel's breaking newsletter created by the volunteer management and spread out in midst the arena for everybody interested in retrieving the latest background information about the tournament. Besides, part of my job activities including elements of my Vita had been published in the regional newspapers "Rheinpfalz" and "Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung" which were both content of the daily press research to be carried out every morning.

As a matter of fact, this publication was another partial victory in my pursuit of eternal souvenirs. The media tribune served as our location for the live games to be watched upon own disposition regarding the job schedule. Here, the national and international press people acted out their job. From this perspective we could see numerous great games such as CAN vs. SUI or SWE vs. CZE and last but not least the historic game between Germany and Switzerland which changed the SAP Arena into a madhouse. There I accidentally met the journalist of my birth city Straubing, the smallest club in the DEL, whom I gave perfect match tickets for his team of "Eishockey News", a famous sports magazine in Germany. In the mixed zone I got the unique opportunity to almost touch the players after they departed the ice rink shortly after the match and finished the official ceremonies; the brave hearts had to use a specific gangway once the door opened leading them to particular spots where the media already waited for starting the question and answer session. In fact, everything was perfectly organized and the ritual of realizing the obligatory interviews could take place according to a strict rule of prioritizing TV before radio and print media grasped their chance. Beforehand, the volunteers had to prepare this sacred room by arranging kind of commercial side boards to optically separate the area in terms of showing respect to the teams. Basically, the attention towards the Olympic gold medalist Canada turned out to be extraordinary but appropriate. Whilst daily choosing my way to the volunteer catering room I literally stepped over the feet of Jaromir Jagr, who was used to work out in the nearby gym. During his practical session on ice I could gladly admire my idol and even take a few pictures for the ancestors. Adjacent to the press area the press conference was held about 20 minutes after the end of each match. My task was to coordinate the questions via handing over the microphone to the journalists always being alert regarding any potential finger movements in the crowd. During my stay in the SAP arena I planned to attend nearly every second press conference since I considered the cosmopolitan atmosphere fairly exciting, in particular when the coach of Germany, Uwe Krupp together with some of his most valuable players decided to show up late afternoon May 20<sup>th</sup>, the day when another fairy tale had come true in the history of German ice hockey. The job as runner happened to be a bit stressful, because essential statistics needed to be spread to all relevant sections in the arena on time - in particular media centre, media tribune and mixed zone were involved. In addition, the business lounges and other V.I.P. areas sometimes required spontaneous feedback as well, which had to be fulfilled ASAP. This was basically true for the latest line ups of the teams and changes of team rosters to mention only a few essential aspects. The copy center was closely connected with the info desk and contained two sophisticated high tech machines running all the time, punctually delivering the necessary '*food for thought*' to the media representatives. Last but not least, I could discover the photographer areas which were highlighted throughout the stadium – there I was reminded of my inclination towards technical gases in my real life: Zambonis and cooling aggregates won't work effectively without using the right kind of gas. Upon getting to know the different areas I spotted such famous media agencies like dpa or Reuters which were allowed to stay at exposed positions. Mostly, I accompanied a colleague from Switzerland carrying out his tour through the arena and monitoring the work stations of the press in terms of maintaining the location agreed upon beforehand. Overall it was a rule of thumb for media service volunteers, to behave patiently towards the journalists, always trying to creatively and quickly provide them with all kind of needed information. That way the positive image to the outside world was conveyed to its best. Statements concerning own motivational reasons could be easily expressed, however any criticism or backstage discussions with journalist were forbidden.

Besides, any intention to aggressively chase after signatures was regarded negatively. As a volunteer I had to figure out the most legal way in order to obtain my favorite personal trophies. By exchanging ideas amongst each other a smart strategy soon crystallized without being considered a typical autograph hunter. Eventually, I succeeded in getting the most precious autograph of Jagr, the super star of these games, especially because he surprisingly won the gold medal with the Czech team against Russia, the all-powerful defender of the title and permanent rival. Additionally, I managed to have signed my Tigers cotton jersey by all players of team France and I could proudly present one of my volunteer t-shirts with the names of the Swedish heroes engraved on it. The 'cross on the t' happened to be the professionally looking volunteer certificate which will be properly archived at home. Participating in the local volunteer party – organized by the volunteer management as an act of gratitude - gave me a feeling of being a solid member of the volunteer family throughout the games in Mannheim – the neat side effect was taking home the official puck thanks to the tombola offered at this venue on Wednesday, May 19 when there was no game scheduled. Nevertheless, I was responsible for the info desk that day though only few journalists had gathered in the media hall.

Summarizing this world championship 2010 I would definitely recommend such a pro bono engagement to everybody, who likes to greatly benefit and acquire a lot of insider know how regarding press & media tasks, which turned out to be rather diverse and myriad. Besides, it was worth while working there since I could actively utilize my languages every day. The official Skoda booth, as the main sponsor of the tournament, was located in the press area as well, giving me the opportunity to even talk Spanish with one of the ladies from Columbia. Another linguistic highlight was supporting the team host of Kazakhstan, who was desperately searching someone to speak Russian in order to solve a problem concerning the photographer positions – this was *the* perfect chance and I took advantage of it. '*Variety is the spice of life*' – this is the best way to describe those ten days which I almost spent completely in the SAP arena, since I predominantly left the stadium around 11 p.m. – in other words the arena happened to become my castle for that period making this experience even more sustainable and valuable in terms of intense communication and extended support amongst the other press volunteers. My intention was to take my job seriously, i.e. I tried to always help out and give advice whenever it was necessary taking into account the fluctuation of volunteers scheduled for the press & media section; in case new volunteers showed up at my desk, they had to learn the ropes as quickly as possible in order to satisfy the needs of the customers appropriately. To put it bluntly, I was in my element without any doubt. Having participated in this venue surely hit the bull's eye - I happily called the shots at the information desk.

Symbolizing as an ambassador of the host country meant a lot of pride and appreciation – acting out this representative function I was lucky to memorize unforgettable moments and long lasting friendships that might even build a bridge for further upcoming events like the tournament in Slovakia next year. You never know what happens – so it might help clinging to those linking pins I gladly approached in May 2010. As a matter of fact, I have been touching base with a journalist from the Czech Republic, Lidovych Novin, who has promised to send me a jersey of the national hockey team with numerous signatures of world famous players from the NHL. I was thrilled by this unexpected offer presumably coming true during the summer months.