

## Interland report – 2023 – Belgium

I remember being very excited on the day I received my selection email (the fact that I was going to Belgium without any member of my family slightly overshadowing the fact that I was representing my country). The rest of the weeks flew by in anticipation and eagerness. The fact that I was going to be on a coach from 12 – 9 pm didn't once deter my feeling of excitement, mostly because quite a few of the athletes were also from my region of South West. We departed the rendezvous in air of enthusiasm and we managed to keep it up all the way on the long drive, ferry crossing, and another long drive.

Interland was also a great opportunity to meet with orienteers my age who would no doubt be going to Lagganlia in the summer. However I was quite scared as well because all of them were regularly seen on the podium.

On the ferry crossing, I felt like Harold Abrahams in Chariots of Fire, him leaving Dover to make the same crossing I was taking when he was embarking to sail to the Olympic Games in Paris (minus the singing of "He is an Englishman!").

The ferry crossing flew by, and we were in Calais before we knew it. We then had to remember where abouts on board the coach was, get on it and drive to Oostduinkerke YH. That was another 2 hour drive, and I made sure to look out the window as we drove, as we look the scenic route along the coast. We arrived around 9pm, and crawled into our rooms to debug ourselves. We then headed downstairs to collect our England top and hoodie, the hoodie of which I lived in in the following weeks to come. After figuring out how to put the sheets on the duvet, we retired to bed, exhausted after a long day of travelling.

The next day was the training day at Lommel. We awoke around 7:30 and left the hostel around 9. We visited Turnhout on the way to the training to pick up the rest of the team that did not get the ferry with us. We took this opportunity to explore this Belgium town, and was delighted to find that there was an active market in the town centre! We bought many Belgium delicacies including waffles and chocolate. We then got back on the coach to continue our journey to Dommelhof Sportcentrum. We even drove through the Netherlands, which I was very pleased to discover! The area we trained in was a gorgeous forest situated right next to the town of Lommel. The courses were challenging but short, and it was great to stretch my legs before the big race the next day.

After the training, we walked to our next accommodation which was 5 minutes away from the sports centre. We settled in to the hotel, however me and Charlotte Chapman were slightly disappointed to find we would be sleeping on sofa beds ...

After dinner, most of the juniors all went out to the park which we had scouted earlier in the day. The park boasted a super long slide, a huge swing, a round-a-bout and even a stage which we made use of when we did our group dances! We returned to the hotel at around quarter to 10, exhausted after doing many, many dances.

The next day was met with heavy rain and nerves. The drive wasn't as long as the day before, however it did start to rain as we pulled up to the assembly. Thankfully, it was dry by the time I got out. I remember me and Marcus Perry arriving ridiculously early for our start and consequently saw the first started go off! As usual on any major orienteering race, I was dead nervous in the minus one box, but as soon as I picked up my map, all the nerves melted away. I hit the first 6 nice and cleanly,

however made a mistake heading towards the 7<sup>th</sup> one. But for the rest of the course I was clean, and was more than happy to take 4<sup>th</sup>!

England won the junior category but fell short to Orienteering Vlanderan on the overall category.

We all returned to the coach to start the long journey home. The ferry crossing was pleasant, and all the 14s hung out together. The drive from Dover to London was slightly more subdued than it was on the way there, everybody realising that the weekend was over and that we had to return to boring old school the next day. I made it home around midnight, but my concern was for the Sheffield kids who wouldn't make in home until 3 am, having to go to school that day as well!

I'm very grateful to the contributions made by SWOA and Wessex, who helped fund my once in a lifetime trip.

All in all, I really enjoyed Interland, and loved every second of it; it was without a doubt one of the best weekends of my life.

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