

The New Zealand team triumphs at the Universes

After placing 2nd in the New Zealand NABBA Nationals 2013, I was overjoyed to be selected as part of the team to travel to Hamburg Germany to represent New Zealand at the Universes!

Although I have previously competed as part of the team, receiving a selection letter becomes no less exciting. I had no doubt in my mind that after such dedication this year in my training and nutrition that this is what I wanted to do!

One of the most exciting things I learned about this trip was the size of the team: this year there would be 11 athletes heading to the event. Within the team there was also a range of athletes who had previous experience overseas, some who had not (but had been competing for years), and some who were in their first year of bodybuilding. This made for quite a dynamic and exciting trip for all of us, and we worked well and learned from each other: for me, there were many different perspectives and approaches for me to learn from and appreciate.

Travelling overseas to compete presents extra challenges beyond the usual strict preparations and training. Furthermore there is an extra element of excitement given that it is a top level international competition, with some important differences! For my category (Shape) there is an evening wear dress round (instead of the routine), and there a symmetry round (with no compulsory poses).

Once I had booked flights (planning to arrive no later than Wednesday night before the competition to allow any swelling from the >30 hours of flights to go down), I trained with extra excitement and each meal preparation, workout, and check-in became more like one of those 'Christmas advent calendars'. I would count down 'how many more of each' until the big day which I got on the plane, and how many before I stepped onto that international stage.

Many who compete find it more taxing in preparation as they get closer to a competition, but since it is such a huge privilege to be part of a NZ representative team, I was finding each day more and more exciting as the competition approached! On speaking to my fellow team mates they agreed, and spirits remained high despite the fact that usually NABBA Nationals marks the end of competing for the year and the start of the 'off season' for the majority of your bodybuilding friends.

In the lead up to departing for Germany, I prepped enough meals for my entire journey (which was to be a total of 45 hours of travel). I packed and labelled each meal for placing in my hand luggage and mentally prepared myself for the journey. Under the expert advice of Marianne, I also packed my bikini, dress, tan, and other items for the stage in my hand luggage in case my checked baggage become lost. Can you imagine getting all the way to the other side of the world and your bikini and dress being delayed in transit: that was certainly not a risk that I wanted to take!

After the almost two-day journey, which involved many flights, and also crossed paths with fellow team mate Shane, we arrived in Hamburg and were fortunate to be greeted by the president of the NAC in Germany, Harald. The temperature difference (it is winter in the Northern Hemisphere) and time zone difference (12 hours) was quite a shock to the system, but at this point determination really takes over, and our spirits were high!

Harald kindly took us to the delightful hotel where we would be staying for the duration of the competition. Not a single thing had been left to chance by the German federation who organise the

huge event that is the UNIVERSES. Gym access had been negotiated for us, the hotel was happy to accommodate our picky meal requests, and everything was so close by and local to us! This is certainly so helpful and thoughtful when you are days away from your biggest competition, with attendant stress levels soaring. On Friday there was a team meeting held by Rachel, our official: here we got a complete run down of the event, and Rachel also inspired us to bring our best to the stage. Timing for this pep talk was perfect and we headed to check in for the competition.

One of the greatest things about check in for me, was to not only get the chance to see many of the best athletes from across the world, but there was the athletes there that we had met from previous competitions! Ali, the official from Cyprus, was at check in with team Cyprus at the same time as us, and they even gave me a Cyprus sweet treat to enjoy after the competition!

That night the NZ team all assisted each other with the necessary preparations: helping each other with tans and also talking through those 'pre stage' nerves. The sense of camaraderie in a NZ representative team is like no other!

On the day of competition we arrived at the venue first thing, prepped and ready to go! We took it in turns to watch each other on the stage, look after each other's belongings, and even assist each other to prepare and pump up for the stage.

Looking around the venue it was also so very reassuring to see that despite a plethora of different languages and cultures, each competitor was doing similar things in prep for the stage in terms of pumping, carbing, and mentally prepping up. If this is something that you have not seen before I assure you that it is a real sight to behold! Not to mention that competitors from different countries who did not speak English were able to communicate and interact with us: everyone was so welcoming, happy to pose for photos, and joke (despite the language barriers!)

Once my category had been on stage, watching the rest of the line ups really helped me to learn more: both about my own category but also about the many other categories involved in the sport. Owing to the fact that all of the NAC shows are run with complete smoothness and impeccable organisation (just like our own NABBA shows in NZ), I always feel completely at home when I compete. This show was no different, and it certainly was cool to see NZ bringing such talent in the lineups!

After my second line up (the evening wear round), our category was called to appear once again in our bikinis on stage. We were told that if our number was called, we were to leave the stage. My number got called and I instantly forgot that they had explained that this meant that I was in the top 6. A smile on my face from the experience, I was not discouraged by my misconception, and I was so happy for Bec, my team mate who still remained on stage. I knew that I done everything in my power in preparation and discipline, and I had brought my best to the stage.

It was then that all 6 of us were called back to the stage: I was a little confused, but started to work out what was happening in a complete level of shock and amazement! Firstly, 6th place was called and it wasn't me.... Next 5th Next 4th and then there it was! I placed 3rd! I was presented with an extra-large and heavy trophy (around half the size of me!) and there was \ huge applause for all of the prize winners!

Grinning from ear to ear I walked backstage and got hugs and applause from my beautiful fellow team NZ mates! I was shaking with excitement and even happier for all of us representing NZ at the top level! Later on, I was even happier to see Donna placed 6th and also receive a huge piece of silverware to bring back to NZ!

The next day we all had a team breakfast and discussed the previous day's competition. We all agreed that it was a completely outstanding and fantastic show to end the year on, and we were more than determined to earn the chance to do it all again! The hotel put on a large buffet for us all, and it was great to see the other teams who also were staying get into the spirit of celebration.

I really enjoyed the whole experience! I certainly have to say thank you to everyone who supported me, and for the chance to represent NZ again as part of the NABBA NZ team. Representing NZ at this top level is something that I will never forget and I do hope that I get the chance to one day do it all again. But for now: it's pre-season time, and time to schedule my calendar from the NABBA competitions held next year! I know that from this trip I have made lifelong friends and I cannot wait to catch everyone again at the next show!

Susan Baxter