

Athlete report: Susan Baxter Universe championships

After a whirlwind of excitement leading from the Christchurch classic, the Dunedin South Island championship; and the New Zealand Nationals (also the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary) it was with great pleasure to be qualified to compete internationally once again with the New Zealand NABBA team.

A journey of 1000 miles starts with a single step they say, and despite my journey being immensely longer than 1000 miles to get to Germany (and 47 hours transiting to there) it started no differently.

The first step on the journey of course was the check – check - and double check to ensure that I had my passport and my meal prep, and of course my bikini, dress, heels and tan all in my hand luggage! Whilst arguably there are even more things that you can include as essential on a long haul trip, the items that I could not replace with such short notice in the event that my luggage got lost en route!

The journey commenced with a drive to Christchurch from Dunedin (a nice relaxing 4.5 hour long drive before catching the flight to Sydney, Dubai, Thailand and finally Hamburg. I think the best part that I had mentally prepped myself for was watching all the movies in a marathon on the plane! The harder part to mentally prep myself for was the amount of offers of food (in the form of lollies and chocolate) that I was so politely and frequently offered on the plane journeys. Now I am not generally sugar inclined, but the tiredness that overwhelms you from travelling such long distances, and jetlag which asks you to adjust to the opposite (as in its day when you feel as though it is night time) has your body in a constant state of survival mode and definitely craving some high incentive foods to spike your energy levels!

Of course I resisted: after a year of preparations non stop right from the moment that I got off last years Universe stage, a few moro bars and Memphis meltdowns could not break me: I was determined and focused!

Next step after all of these temptations was to find the official hotel (which thankfully Marianne in HQ organized transfers to for us!). We were greeted at this hotel with a huge hug from the ladies who obviously recalled us from last year! What a welcome.

After such a long commute, sitting down on my hotel bed momentarily resulted in a deep filled sleep to which I woke up entirely confused: winter darkness after being used to long days of daylight can really throw a person! However it turned out that I had slept for 4 hours (despite it feeling as though I had just closed my eyes for a second).

Experience told me that despite better feelings of more sleep, that it was important to exercise and try to adjust to a more normal hour in line the with country. So in a half daze me and some of the team headed to the gym and got a bit of a light weights workout on in order to awaken the senses. I can tell you now that this was one of the most taxing workouts that I had done (my balance was very much silly at times) however it was perfect for what I needed, and that was to reset my body clock and also to get blood moving so that my pressure-swollen ankles could settle down in size quicker!

Next up was the team re-union. With all of us coming from all around the country there had been different connections and direct routes to get to the same

destination. The team re-united and headed to athlete check in and to weigh in (for some).

Being such a large competition, you can appreciate that this potentially a massive undertaking: each country with many athletes and different classes. Thankfully the NAC run a tight ship and as always were meticulously organized. Since our team travelled the furthest it seemed that potentially we were the smallest country in numbers but certainly not in passion!

After checking in, there was one dilemma: Andrew hadn't yet made weight! He therefore resigned himself to a sauna for the next few hours whilst the rest of us headed back to the hotel to tan, prepare and relax before an extremely early start the next day.

We waited with baited breath to hear that Andrew (thankfully) made weight and learned about just how crucial it was that he had got it right: there are only 3 attempts at weigh in, and he had used 2 in the first instance... This aspect makes me a little thankful for the lack of restriction in my class.

The next day after little sleep (I was far too excited) I commenced getting ready and headed to the venue with the team. Going from summer to winter immediately has an effect on the body, but to be lean at the same time: that is certainly a bit of a challenge. I'd come well prepared with layer upon layer of ice breaker, hats, gloves and scarves!

Myself and the other shape girls were first up for round one: this was the bikini round and unlike the New Zealand stage there are no compulsory poses, just symmetry. Furthermore, the second round that was in the evening show, required a dress (and no routine!).

The NZ team was a flurry of jumping in tanning, sharing 'carb up' delights and resistance bands. It was honestly the coolest thing to be part of once again. Looking around outside of our little 'nook' that we had found to prepare in, there were many other countries and teams around us: whilst all of them were communicating in a plethora of languages, it was oddly reassuring to see each person doing the familiar: pumping up, tanning up and carb-ing up!

During this time it was also great to meet and see the athletes who I had met previously in other years Worlds and Universes competitions. After a year the difference in physiques, and in fact the change of classes for some was nothing short of inspiring. I enjoy touching base with each of these athletes: and there is a lot of fun in tanned up hugs with competitors that are in the heavyweight class (I feel so minuscule!). These shows are such that they put a 'thud' in my chest of excitement for what is to come, and also reaffirming how much that I love this sport!

After each of us taking the stage the first time, there was a little gap between the two shows, which was a prime opportunity for learning more about the kind of differences and similarities in preparation there are between my team mates. I always enjoy this opportunity to bond and learn more within the sport.

Night time show soon was underway (time really flew that day!) and we paraded in our dresses on stage. As we did quarter turns in our dresses we were informed that it was the model look and not to tense (which always feels a little strange when all you want to do is show your hard earned muscle!).

We rushed off quickly to get into bikinis for the presentation of awards. Whilst I didn't make the top 5 this time, I know in my heart that I have worked hard and

am presenting an even better package than I did last year. This is what I aim to do and makes me entirely proud.

This is one of the amazing things about this sport: (I believe) it has taught me morality beyond my years. It is all too easy to get caught up in placing (which certainly yes is a huge part of the sport and what we do compete for), but I believe that no matter your placing, nothing should detract from the amount of hard work, effort and dedication that you have put in to be your best.

The New Zealand team put our best foot forward, and created long lasting friendships and memories, and I feel honored, blessed and proud to have been considered to represent NZ on that international stage.

A massive thank you to all the NABBA volunteers, officials, judges and HQ who put time and effort into supporting us all.

Since reaching NZ once again, I have reaffirmed my passion and commitment to doing my best, and I look forward to what next year brings (with even more improvements from me through hard work and persistence).