

2006 Continental Championships



Continental Championships - Gobelsburg/Langenlois

24 - 27 August 2006

Vienna is in the east of Austria and there are not any mountains. It is pretty flat and northeast of Vienna towards the Czech Republic it is as flat as a pancake, it is here that you will find the main producers of vegetables in Austria (including excellent asparagus during the season, unfortunately not in August!). Nor will you find many sheep. If you are thinking of doing some travelling, then Hungary (Budapest) and the Czech republic (Prague) are not far away and well-worth a visit. The Czechs, as readers will know, are very much new-comers to the trialling scene and, like Austria are associate members of the ISDS.

Lower Austria, the biggest province of Austria, is sub-divided into "quarters": the Weinviertel, the Mostviertel, the Waldviertel and the Industrieviertel (and Vienna - which is a province in its own right and capital city). The Weinviertel is situated in the north-east of Lower Austria and as the tell-tell name suggests it is here and also in nearby "Wachau" that one can expect to find some of the best wines in Austria (and as far as I am concerned in many parts of Europe). The wine industry has more than recovered from that terrible wine scandal in the 80s. Wine growers have worked hard since then to re-establish themselves both on the home and international market. There are now strict if not rigid controlling, monitoring, registering practices; local producers can be very proud of what they produce. It is the white wines which prevail in this region - which does not mean to say you cannot get any reds, but the more full-bodied reds are to be found in Burgenland down towards Hungary. Nor will you find those mild wines typical for, say, Southern Germany eg Rhine and Mosel, white wines here are drier, but fruitier with lots of character.

vineyards on the sloping hills rising up out of the valley where the Danube flows. In this sheltered valley there are hundreds and hundreds of apricot trees and in season (mid-summer) people come from far and wide to buy the local produce. The winters here are mild - as you would expect for apricots to grow - and summers are hot. Historically, as every one knows, the Danube has always played a vital role in trade and politics and the ruins of fortresses along its banks bear witness to that fact. One such fortress will be known to English readers (perhaps); Dürnstein where Richard the Lion Heart was held captive until his faithful servant Blondel found him - by chance - after singing his favourite song under his prison window. The British taxpayer had to dig deep into their pockets - yet again - and come up with a ridiculously high ransom to free him and for some reason he did not immediately return to England, but now I really am digressing!!

Leaving the Weinviertel and some of the big names in wine growing behind one now travels north - uphill - to the Waldviertel and although Langenlois does not always like to

admit it, it is in fact - geographically at least - in the Waldviertel, but only just which means it can still enjoy the mildish winters and hot summers enjoyed down on the Danube, the further north you go (towards the Czech Republic) the less wine there is and in winter it can log up some of the lowest temperatures in Austria (despite there being no mountains!). Wine growing here is perhaps not so easy and therefore even more competitive. Many have given up and have left their land to lie fallow or have given it over to other things; it is here that Willi and Ingrid (and Anna) Klaffl have their sheep and where the Continental will be held in 2006.

Although there are no mountains here, it is not flat as in the far east but gently undulating and usually (but not always) there is a gentle breeze. In summer it can be very hot and there is little rainfall meaning there are no lush green pastures here and the sheep have to be constantly "shifted" to new grazing sites - impossible without a Border Collie. Willi and Ingrid's sheep are rather scattered about due to the constant need to find new grazing and the new landscape management practices similar to GB, where sheep are being used to literally manage the landscape, keeping the re-growth of trees and shrubs at bay and allowing indigenous flora to survive and flourish. This work is demanding for both Willi and Ingrid and they drive miles every day checking fences, water, sheep, etc. Sheep are left outside for as long as possible, but even here winter does eventually hit and then as is typical in Austria, the sheep have to "come in" until spring. However, it is not these hardy Waldschafe that will be taking part in the trial. Sheep will be "flown in " (not literally!) from 2 hours to the west from Upper Austria/Salzkammergut from Franz Secklehner, one of the largest sheep farmers in his area if not Austria.

Twenty years ago, Franz took the daring leap from large-scale dairy farmer to large-scale sheep farmer; I say daring because at that time "lamb" was not the favourite of meats and the demand was low. However, Franz saw potential here and was also one of the first Austrian stockmen to own and use a Border Collie in his work. He got his first Border Collie from Andrew Mc Gregor. His Border Collie was to prove useful in more ways than one: not only in day-to-day farm work but also in advertising. Franz wanted to market his lamb directly and used his Border Collie to do so, that he was successful is not only due to his dog but to his sheer determination and hard slog. Since then, interest has grown not only in lamb but also in Border Collies with more and more farmers realising that dogs can actually help them in their work. The farm is a "family business" with Franz and Maria working full-time. They have 17ha (plus 34ha which they lease) including mountain pasture where, again, the sheep are part of a land-management programme. Franz started off with Merinos but is now gradually changing over to African Torpas. At present he has 200 Merinos and 180 Torpas, plus cross-breeds. His objective is to have a flock of Torpas. They have excellent meat and the additional advantage of not needing to be sheared. An adult ewe can weigh 70kg and although stronger is quieter than the Merino (which doesn't mean to say they are not lively!).

Although Franz would LOVE to walk with his sheep to Langenlois (a secret dream), the sheep will be driven down to Gobelsburg a few days before the actual trial for apart from the miles and the weeks it would take to walk, there might also be a problem getting the sheep across the motorway!!!

In fact the further west you travel, the more sheep you will find. Upper Austria does perhaps have the most and largest sheep farms, although compared to GB the numbers of

sheep kept are relatively small probably due to there being limited grazing dependent on the short hot summers and winters which can be very long with lots of snow and sub-zero temperatures. And, of course, the further west you go the more and higher the mountains you will find. In fact our first trial of the season (first weekend in June) is in the Lungau (Province of Salzburg) and is organised by Michael Mayr who has a flock of "Bergschafe" which he puts out to graze on Alpine pastures for the summer months; the trial is held - logically - before they go with patches of snow still on the ground and if you are lucky (or unlucky) there might even be a snow storm while you are running your dog!!! However, snow will not be a problem in Lower Austria in August!!

Back to Gobelsburg/Langenlois. Gobelsburg is a small village (not offering much accommodation since tourism is not a main source of income - yet!) and relies on wine growing, whereby local growers supplement their income by doing other work. Langenlois is larger and could be described as a small town with roughly 7,000 inhabitants. If you are looking for accommodation you should be quick if you want to get something nearby because again, although the B&Bs are of a high standard and suit every pocket, there are not that many. Should you want info then phone 0043 2734 20000 or log on to www.langenlois.at or www.ursinhaus.at . The nearest larger town is Krems (on the Danube); a beautifully picturesque town with lots of character and still very much "in-tact" meaning you find "real" local shops and not just those international retail outlets you find everywhere else in Europe. The pedestrian precinct is very much alive and buzzing with shops, restaurants and cafes (with cakes for the less figure-conscious!). Krems is also home to the prestigious, much sought after and highly competitive Tourism Academy offering degree courses and training for the next generation of tourism managers. Krems is well worth a visit and perhaps taking a boat cruise on the Danube or for the fitter amongst you this is the place to go on cycle trips or outings. You can cycle for miles and miles along the Danube east to Vienna and beyond, or west back as far as Linz (the main industrial city in central Austria) and further; ideal for families with children.

Lower Austria also offers at least one major exhibition every summer which is always worth a visit. Unfortunately, no info yet.

ere, we are all very much looking forward to the big event in August, meeting up with old friends and making new ones. Hopefully, lots of you will be able to make it - with or without your dogs!!