

Minnesota ODP Germany Tour: Feb. 28–March 10, 2019

Journal by Zach Susee (2002)

Day 1: (3/1/19)

After the long, long plane ride we had finally arrived in Germany, and everyone was exceptionally excited to be there. Walking through the airport a few of us noticed a police officer armed with a fairly large assault rifle, and we were quickly reminded that we were no longer in America and that things were different here.

After we got everything sorted, we boarded the bus and were offered water by the bus driver. With everyone excited to rehydrate after the long flight, we all took long swigs, and I can only imagine the few from the front of the bus as so many kids faces quickly turned to panic after they realized the water was sparkling, which is a much more common thing in Europe than in the States.

Following that experience, everyone was much more cautious with their water consumption to assure that they didn't end up with a mouthful of sparkling water again. Unfortunately, the weather was extremely foggy, and visibility wasn't great, so just about everyone slept on the bus ride except for Chris and I. The bullet train passed us 5-6 times, which was pretty cool.

We arrived at our hotel, Sportschule Wedau Complex, after a long bus ride. Lunch was ok, but late so everyone was hungry and ate pretty vigorously. Soon afterwards, we practiced on the turf fields, which was nothing too intense, but a good way to shake off some of the inevitable jet lag that comes with a 9-hour flight. Later, we also tried to go to the game at the local stadium which happened to be about a 5-minute walk from our hotel, but the coaches wanted us to get some rest, so they politely declined, and we went off to bed mildly disappointed but understanding as we had a game the following morning.

Day 2: (3/2/19)

We awoke with a lot of nervous energy, as that was the day of our first game. I myself was quite excited for the opportunity, and really looking forward to the chance to play against a top German academy side. Although we went out there and worked hard, we got beaten pretty bad by the Borussia Monchengladbach U16 team, but our play improved significantly as the game went on and I even pinged the crossbar in the second half with a shot. Overall the game was a great experience, as we got the chance to play against a really good foreign side that challenged us with a different style of play than what we're used to playing against back in the States.

Afterwards, we got the chance to attend a Bayer Leverkusen game, which happens to be one of the best teams in the Bundesliga and features some top players such as Julian Brandt and Leon Bailey, as they faced off against SC Freiburg. The stadium was beautiful, and the game was entertaining, with a world-class volley being scored just minutes into the game, and Leverkusen taking home the win 2–0. Myself, and a few others used the opportunity to buy some authentic jerseys, which turned out to be pretty expensive (£95, or about \$108!!) but probably worth the price as we'd never get the opportunity again. Overall a really fun and full day.

Day 3: (3/3/19)

We kicked off the day with an early morning practice in the rain, which was a little cold but still fun and refreshing. Following training, myself and a few other kids from the '02 squad headed out to watch the '03s and '04s play against a local side called RSV Ratingen. We stayed for around the entirety of the first half, but the rainy weather and growing winds motivated us to return inside and find something else to do,

which ended up being basketball and futsal in the gym on the complex. We played for quite a while and had a great time.

Soon after we finished, we departed for a tour of Schalke 04's arena. As they had just gotten beat 4–0, I can't imagine the tour guides were too happy to come out and talk about their team for two hours, but I thought that they did a very good job of covering not only the stadium but the history of the team and other interesting fun facts as well. The stadium was quite large, and unfortunately a bit of a mess in spots as the cleaning crew hadn't removed some of the residue from the previous night's game, but it was an absolutely unbelievable experience regardless.

One of the most astounding things to me was that they had their own church inside of the stadium, in which supporters of the team often had their kids baptized at! Alongside that, the walkout from the tunnel, which was designed to look like a coal mine to honor the history of the team, and then getting to stand on the side of the field and stare out at the tens of thousands of seats around you really puts into perspective how important and big soccer and the team that you support is in the lives of the people from Germany. The experience at the stadium was one of the coolest I've had and probably will ever have as a soccer player, fan, and human being in general.

Day 4: (3/4/19)

We woke up bright and early to a rather pleasant looking day in comparison to the rainy and wet weather we had seen to that point, and this at least got our hopes up that we would be practicing in nice weather that morning.

However, things took an interesting turn when we were told that we were getting the chance to play some futsal in the gym. As everyone arrived at training, we noticed that numbers seemed a little short, but we proceeded with warm-ups and such without thinking too much about it. When we finished warm-ups 15 minutes later, we were still missing a handful of players, who had, unfortunately, dozed off without notice after

breakfast. After some help from the coaches, they were retrieved, and futsal commenced. We all had a blast, despite a few of us not being properly equipped with indoors and slipping around the floors a bit.

Afterwards, we ate lunch and departed for the Centro Shopping mall, a large shopping mall in Oberhausen. Upon arrival, our team quickly split off into different groups depending on what we were shopping for. I found myself roaming all around the mall with two other teammates, Owen and Chris, mostly just looking but also on the hunt for a unique souvenir shop. Eventually, we ran into what was essentially a German Barnes-and-Noble on the other side of the mall and picked out some great souvenirs for ourselves and our families, including some authentic German Pokémon cards!

Our search around the mall also led us to the food court, which to our surprise, was full of American fast food restaurants. We quickly cashed in on some KFC and devoured it as quickly as you'd expect four teenagers that had gone far too long without American food to do. Our time at the mall eventually came to a close, and Chris, Owen and I all felt pretty content with our purchases and we all had a good time roaming around the mall. We went back for dinner, and then off to bed in preparation for our second game the next day.

Day 5: (3/5/19)

We departed for Cologne early in the morning and when we arrived everyone took at least 10 minutes to stare and gawk at the giant cathedral that we had parked aside. It is undoubtedly the biggest church that I have ever seen, and the beautiful architecture lining the spires and walls of the outside was like nothing I had ever seen back home.

Upon entry, we realized that the inside was just as stunning, with stained glass windows and multiple exhibits and ancient artifacts lining the inside of the church. I took the opportunity to stop and take some pictures, both of the church and of myself and those who I was traveling with at the time, as many parents (mine included)

had been nagging about taking more pictures of ourselves. After we exited the church, we proceeded to walk down the main shopping street of the area, which was lined with all sorts of stores and restaurants, for quite a while without really stopping to buy anything, although we again took plenty of pictures and explored stores where we could.

After about an hour of just walking and searching for a real souvenir shop, I pointed out to my companions, again Owen and Chris, that we were horribly lost. Chris had a strong belief in his navigational skills and proceeded to tell us that if we continued to walk down the road that we were on we would make it back to the church. Fortunately for us, I wasn't too convinced that we were headed the right direction, and after five minutes of loading, Google maps told us to make a complete U-turn and walk the other direction for about 20 minutes, as we had almost completely left downtown Cologne and crossed into a more suburban housing area.

Along the trek back, we came across a street that had about 10 souvenir shops. Astounded with our luck, we each made another purchase and made our way back to the main street to order some food. Owen and I opted for Subway, something I would soon regret. After beginning my order, I realized that the employee did not speak English. I did my best to point out the things I wanted and try to break an unbreakable language barrier, but one way or another I ended up with every single topping that Subway had to offer on my sandwich. Not wanting to hold up the line, I simply made the purchase and thanked the cashier, who probably was now convinced that the typical American was indeed a gluttonous eater.

Soon after that debacle, we returned to the meeting point and boarded the bus back to the hotel. Following lunch, we boarded the bus once again, this time to a game against Wuppertaller SV. As we were the later game of the 2 being played, we watched the '04s put up a valiant effort and earn a tie against the Wuppertaller side. Infused with confidence ourselves, we

went out and worked hard, in the first half, and went into halftime with an even score. Unfortunately, things didn't quite crumble our way in the second half, and the game was extremely tight and really could've gone either way, but it ended with a 2-1 defeat. After the game, we got to eat dinner on site, which was absolutely fantastic chicken and rice, alongside some really good sparkling apple juice. After eating, we returned home on the buses, and again everyone was out cold aside from Chris and me.

Day 6 (3/6/19)

There was quite a bit of excitement this morning as we were getting the opportunity to watch a professional training session of one of the top German clubs, Borussia Dortmund. After eating breakfast, we loaded up the buses and headed off to training.

Upon arrival, only the goalkeepers were training, so many of us took off to the concessions to purchase something to be signed by the players. While many bought jerseys, I went with a scarf, knowing that I wouldn't ever wear a jersey had it been signed by the Dortmund players. Soon after our concession stand visit, the reserves from the previous night's game stepped onto the field and began to warm up. This group of players included Christian Pulisic, arguably the best American player in the world right now. We cheered loudly as he jogged past, which drew some weird looks from the multitudes of Dortmund supporters that had come out to watch them practice.

They progressed from the warm-up into some passing patterns, and finally a possession game, which was one of the coolest parts of the training for me. The way that they pinged the ball around, always knowing their pass before the ball came to them and the executing flawlessly was unbelievable to witness firsthand and in the moment. The passing was precise, the movement off the ball was timed to perfection, and everyone always seemed to be in sync at all times. Hands down the most impressive thing I've seen on a soccer pitch in my lifetime.

After the possession drill finished, the Dortmund starters came out to sign items for the fans. A few world class players were there, and many of us were lucky enough to grab an autograph or snap a picture with them. It felt surreal to be so close to some of the people that you play with on FIFA and watch in the Champions League on television.

Around 10 minutes after the starters finished signing, the reserves wrapped up their practice and also came and signed for us. Obviously Pulisic was a fan favorite, and fortunately enough for us, he stuck around for about 10 minutes after he finished signing and talked to us firsthand about his soccer experience, among other things. Getting to hear advice from a professional player that you have cheered on yourself in the past is a surreal experience, and I'd like to sincerely thank Christian for taking the time to talk to a bunch of random kids from Minnesota.

Finally, we departed back to the hotel and had a much-needed meal. We returned to the pitch later that day, and had a couple of friendly competitions, in mini-games involving juggling and other technical skills. At the end of practice, we had a horseshoe competition, which myself and Evan came out on top of after pulling off two incredible comebacks towards the end.

Following training, a small group of boys (including myself) from the '02 team approached Julius, one of our spectacular guides (shout-out to Martin also!), about ordering some pizza that night, and he happily obliged. We ate the pizza quite quickly, as our general affinity for American food had only grown since we had arrived in Germany. The night was capped off with some intense champions league fixtures on the television, and the German commentary only made Kimpembe's handball an even more intense and nerve-wracking situation.

Day 7 (3/7/19)

Another morning, another training session, except this time we departed for Fortuna Dusseldorf, another Bundesliga side, instead. The weather was absolutely bone-chilling, but

we braved the 75-minute session the best we could considering the conditions. The practice mainly consisted of fitness and dynamic movement and was capped off by another gorgeous display of possession for about 25 minutes.

Many of us also started pickup games on some small futsal courts that were adjacent to the training field, which was a good way to not think about the 40-degree weather and 20 mph winds that seemed to be constantly blowing. Following the session, we got the chance to talk to two more professional players, Dodi Lukebakio and Aymen Barkok, through our other tour guide, Martin. This was another absolutely special experience, and although they both spoke remarkably quietly I was able to strain my ears and catch most of what they said.

Following the training session, we returned to the hotel to prepare for a game that night, against another local side in RW Oberhausen. The weather was still quite chilly, but we were mentally prepared for anything and had some serious ambitions to win the game.

We got on the board early with a nice finish from the top of the box from Owen, but they responded quickly with a finish from the top of the box of their own. We once again went into halftime tied and were determined to come out on top this time. About halfway through the second half, we won a free kick about 35 yards out. One of our center backs, Evan, chipped a cross into the box which I got my head on and scored to give us a 2-1 lead. Soon after, I was able to take the ball off of one of their center backs and put away the following breakaway to make the score 3-1, which we would not relinquish thanks to some heroic goalkeeping from Ben.

We were super excited after the great performance, and we were all definitely pumped to get a win that we felt we deserved. After the game, we caught dinner and prepared ourselves to leave for the H4 Hotel in Frankfurt the following morning.

Day 8 (3/8/19)

Following breakfast, I returned to my room to pack, which I had neglected doing the previous night as I absolutely despise doing it. After around an hour of rearranging things, I was able to get everything back into my bags and ready for departure.

However, we got the chance to have one final practice before we left, which consisted of a tournament on four different fields that mixed all of the age groups. Although my team started off slowly, once the playoffs came around we picked it up a notch and managed to take home the championship, which consisted of a quick celebration and then a heavy jog back to the locker rooms to escape the rain.

After we cleaned up and collected our items, we again boarded the bus and prepared for the 3-hour journey to the H4 Hotel in Frankfurt. Once again, due to our failure to sleep on buses, Chris and I were about the only ones awake, which gave us the opportunity to snag some humorous pictures of sleeping teammates.

We stopped at a pit stop about halfway, and excited to buy some food and use the restrooms everyone rushed in. The food did not disappoint; however, the restrooms were not free to use, and you had to pay money to enter and use them. I resigned to using the bus restroom and returned to the bus for the last hour or so of the trip.

When we reached Frankfurt, we came across an extremely thin road that a bus of our size was clearly not meant to go on. Our driver, Axel, carried on anyway, and in one of the most impressive displays of driving I've ever seen managed to snake his way down the road and onto that next street, to the applause and cheers on the bus. Soon after, we arrived at the hotel and checked in. The dinner that night was fantastic and filling, and afterwards we prepared for the next day, which was unfortunately the final day that we had in Germany.

Day 9 (3/9/19)

We got up extremely excited to visit the tall towers of downtown Frankfurt, which were visible from the upper levels of our hotel. After breakfast, we made the short bussing journey from our hotel to the city center and were again free to walk around as we pleased. This time around, Owen and I chose to not let Chris navigate in any way, shape, or fashion, and it worked out wonderfully as we didn't get lost in the slightest this time around. We enjoyed walking through the town and discovering all of the little quirks about the city, such as the elevator from the subway system up to the main street, or the hidden shopping mall that contained a sweet Eintracht Frankfurt fan store.

After exploring the shopping district for around an hour and a half and making a few purchases here and there, we chose to head over to the more historical district, which was full of old buildings, many of which had been rebuilt after World War II, and another stunningly large cathedral that we chose to visit. After touring a large part of this area, we stopped by a McDonald's, mainly out of hunger but also because we could order on the screens here so we wouldn't have to interact and possibly mess up an order with a German cashier, like the Subway incident that was described earlier in this journal.

After eating, we made a final stop at a large bridge with many locks on it, and snapped a few photos and overall took in the experience. Soon after, everyone was rounded up and we took a couple of team photos, and also a couple with Julius and Martin, as this was the last day we had with them as well.

We returned to the hotel briefly, but soon after departed for another Bundesliga game, this time featuring FC Mainz and Borussia Monchengladbach, who's U16 academy we had faced back on Day 2. The atmosphere was wonderful, and the stadium was beautiful, and the game was a good one to watch, even though it only ended 1-0. Unfortunately,

Owen, Chris and I went to buy food around the 55th minute, after the halftime rush, and missed the all-important goal. The experience was still amazing and following the game we had time to reflect on the trip on the bus ride home. Some of us were excited to head home, but I would've stayed for another 10 days if I had the opportunity to.

Overall, the trip was undoubtedly the best experience of my life thus far, and I'd like to extend a huge thank you to Minnesota ODP,

John, Chato, Martin, Julius, Kelly, Jeremy and everyone else involved behind the scenes that made this trip possible for us. I sincerely appreciate all the effort that was put in to make this experience a good one, and it really paid off as I think I speak for the entire group that this was an incredibly good experience, and the memories, souvenirs, and stories that we'll take home from this trip couldn't be traded for anything else in the world.