

# Friendship and competition in the midnight sun

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The main hall in Tampere

As Finnish Table Tennis President, Esko Heikkinen, proudly announced at the opening ceremony of the European Veterans Championship 2015, for the next week Tampere in Finland is the heart of European table tennis.

About 100 English players aged from 40 to over 80 joined nearly 2,000 European competitors for the week-long tournament for veteran players. These tournaments take place once every two years, with the World Championships in the intervening years.

They have increased in popularity and the standard is exceptionally high with some legendary names like Ding Yi and Claus Pederson entering into the spirit of the event which manages to combine friendship and competition.

The participants enter one singles in their age category – divided into 10-year categories for the ‘younger’ veterans and then five years at the more senior end of the scale. There are similar age bands for doubles, often linguistically challenged events as some participants elect to play with a player from another country for an international feel to the event. After the group stages, the competition divides into the knockouts in both main and consolation events.

It would be wrong to think that professional organisation is sacrificed for camaraderie. The event is expertly managed – and with 2,000 competitors from 34 countries in a single venue of 90 tables with over 30 separate events to co-ordinate, it needs to be. This is possibly the biggest playing arena ever seen in Europe.

Proceedings were officially opened in a ceremony on the centre of Tampere, which is incredibly warm considering we are in the frozen north. The Finns even arranged good weather for our event.

There is also a music festival this week, so the table tennis fraternity took over the vast marquee in the centre of the city with about 1,000 players, coaches and partners participating in the official opening ceremony.



Veterans player, John Ryan, and Susie Hughes, ETTU Veterans Committee

President of Finnish Table Tennis Association, Esko Heikkinen, welcomed the visitors from home and abroad to Tampere. He expressed his pride in hosting the biggest table tennis event ever to take place in Finland, and wanted everyone not only to enjoy the table tennis, but to experience the midnight sun and the unique atmosphere from this united veterans table tennis community. (What he didn't tell us was the sun sets at about 2.14am and rises again at about 3.14am, so there were a fair number of zombie-like Brits trying to buy eye-masks the first few days).

Dr Zdenko Kris, Chairman of the ETTU's Veterans' Committee came straight from the airport to add his thanks, support and best wishes to the European table tennis family. He spoke of renewing old friendships and making new contacts, experiences and memories.

Entertainment was provided by a male voice choir, who served us some typical Finnish ballads and a few foot-stomping, hand-clapping numbers. The artistic gymnasts also performed a few twists and turns and had everyone sharing the mood in their last number of 'And I'm feeling good . . . '

Finally, the deputy mayoress told us about the sporting traditions of Tampere, mainly as a city united by sport and divided by two ice hockey teams . . . and then declared the event officially open to a spontaneous round of applause.

Now the competition begins, a united veterans table tennis community still have a good feeling of 'love-all' as drinks and stories and pictures are shared in the Finnish sunshine.

As the serious play gets under way, a different 'love-all' will take over in the competitive side of the tournament, when players begin the road to medals.

More details and photographs are available via the VETTS TABLE TENNIS Facebook site – [click here](#)

**Susie Hughes**

**Deputy Chairman, Table Tennis England**

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