

Memorable and action-packed week as a volunteer at Stockholm Open

In July 2016, while preparing for the Rogers Cup tennis tournament in Toronto, I received an email from our newest member of the Guest Services Committee, Anders Wahlfridsson, a SALK member. This was the first time our committee would have a visiting volunteer during the tournament and I felt quite honoured (and curious) that someone from Sweden would travel all the way to Canada to volunteer at our tennis tournament.

The more I heard of his story, the more fascinated I became. The idea of volunteering at another tournament was brilliant. I had visited many other tournaments in the past, but had never thought of volunteering. In 2018, the Stockholm Open would be celebrating its 50th anniversary and there would be no better opportunity to be apart of such a special tournament. Now, it was my turn! Booked my flight, accommodation and now just had to wait until October for everything to happen. Oh right, I should learn some Swedish before going...I signed up with Duolingo and off I went. Mycket bra!

A month before the tournament, I was introduced to Henrik Stenmo and Anton Johnson to finalize scheduling details. The first request from Henrik was to have me help out with a Pro-Am at the Salkhallen. It would include a “couple of Swedish legends like Pim-Pim Johansson, Mats Wilander, Robin Soderling, Magnus Gustafsson and Joakim Nystrom. ”OMG, this is going to be AWESOME!

I didn't leave much time to get adjusted to the new time zone. I arrived in Stockholm on Sunday evening after 27 hours of being awake, a cancelled flight in Munich, and an added flight to Vienna before landing in Stockholm for total flying time of 17 hours. I had expected to be tired and ready to sleep, but I was way too excited and couldn't fall asleep until the wee hours of the morning.

My alarm goes off Monday morning and the start of the Stockholm Open was finally here. My first shift wasn't until 14h00, so Anders and I decided to do some sightseeing before our shift. The day was full of sunshine and 20 degree weather. I was quickly introduced to the Stockholm transit system before heading to a museum to learn about a boat that took 2 years to build and sailed for a total of 20 minutes. Now, it was time to head to Kungliga Tennishallen for my first shift. Anders took me for a tour and introduced me to everyone that was willing to accept an English-only speaking volunteer before meeting my colleagues at the courtesy desk and learning what needed to be done. I was quickly schooled in the Swedish tradition of fika. What a cute name for a coffee break! I don't drink coffee, which apparently is a tip-off to not being Swedish; however, I do love the idea of chatting with others.

Tuesday was my first sighting of something Canadian. Denis Shapovalov was practicing. I looked over to the court and found myself doing a double take as something didn't seem quite right. That wasn't Denis. I walked around the court only to find him at the other end. Hmm, did he bring his little brother to be his hitting partner? Didn't give it much thought and we finished our shift before heading out to the old town where I was treated to an authentic Swedish dinner at Den Gyldene Freden by Anders and his good friends Johan and Katarina. When I retold the story, Katarina suggested that the hitting partner may be Leo Borg. Leo Borg?... You mean baby

Borg? Looked him up on google and sure enough, that was him! Nice to see the next generation of Swedish tennis up close and personal. After dinner we walked around Stockholm. Seeing the Big church lit up, walking through the palace grounds, then strolling around before heading to the subway. What an incredible evening and couple of days. I started to digest everything and it was overwhelming (in a good way). Next up was the Pro-Am at Salkhallen! Thinking of THAT allowed me to get a whole 2 hours sleep that night. I couldn't get over how all these tennis legends were going to be in one place.

We arrived at Salkhallen nice and early and received such a warm welcome from Pim-Pim. After learning I'd been at the Roger's Cup for 18 years, he immediately remembered his result in '94 followed by going to the semi-finals at the US Open. (I remember watching that match.) An addition to the Pro-am was Mikael Pernfors who won the Rogers Cup in 1993. So many connections between Canada and Sweden, but now it was time to get ready for the Pro-Am. There would be six-15 minute matches and I was to collect the scores from each of the pros at the end of each match. I stood on the top level, looking down at all the matches. I couldn't believe how good the amateurs were and the pros even let them win sometimes. On the 5th round, I'm looking down at court 2, where Pim-Pim was playing. I noticed his serves were quite a bit faster than the previous rounds. And when I say "quite a bit faster" I mean, he cranked them up! Knowing that he won all previous rounds, I wondered if he was losing and wanted to ensure he won that game. After the match, when I was collecting the scores, sure enough, he had his first loss of the tournament. He recovered nicely to win the final round and was 5-1 for the tournament. Even as a retired player, the competitiveness came out.

One evening, I was introduced to Stefan Edberg. Once he heard that I was a volunteer visiting from Canada, he commented that he heard of the exchange program between Canada and Sweden. Both Anders and I chuckled and responded that we were it. We're the entire exchange program, but he might be onto something!!

Saturday was another action-packed day. We started the day by participating at what we affectionately call the Am-Am, organized by Resumé. I fulfilled my dream of being a (very old) ball girl and I think I did ok. The players liked not having to pick up their own balls, so it worked out well. I was even awarded a wild card entry for next year's tournament. Thanks Mathias Kallio! Back at the Royal Hall, after the semi-finals were played, we had our volunteer party to get ready for. We were greeted by the four amigos; Henrik Stenmo, Jonas Elmlblad, Jamie Perry and Simon Aspelin. I congratulated them on running such an amazing event. After having a bite to eat, Simon thanked the volunteers for their commitment to the tournament. Anton came over to say hi and we chatted for a bit. Next, Victoria was going to present the prestigious Bjorn Sturens Minne award. Ah, this is the award that Anders won and what started this "exchange" program. She was speaking in English and I just thought "oh, how thoughtful, they wanted to make sure I was able to understand what they were saying." Victoria talked about how this volunteer travelled across the world. My thought was "oh, someone else came to volunteer at the Stockholm Open." As she continued to describe the volunteer, it sounded more and more like she was describing me. Me? No! I didn't do anything special, but sure enough, she finally said my name. I was so thrilled, it felt like I won an Oscar. I hugged those around me and worked my way to the stage. Due to being surrounded by very tall Swede's, Victoria couldn't see me and she thought I wasn't even in the room. Anyway, I finally emerged and accepted the award. I was in

disbelief. Walking back to my table, everyone was congratulating me. I just kept thinking how much of a risk the organizers took giving the coveted award to a visitor.

The final Sunday is always bitter-sweet. Yes, it had been a long week, but it's always sad on the last day of the tournament. The day began with the ball kids practicing their choreography that would take place just for the singles final. It was a tribute to Avicii. Classy! The tournament crowned a first time winner, Stefanos Tsitsipas. It was his first ATP win at the Stockholm Open's 50th anniversary. He was so thrilled and it was fun to watch as he took pictures with tournament organizers, volunteers and his parents. After the celebrations ended, as is tradition, the volunteers gathered on centre court to take a final picture with the tournament organizers. After the picture, I was saying my thank yous and goodbyes to all the amazing people I had met during the past seven days and just when I thought I would be going home, Jonas came up to me and said he had one more gift. We walked back out to centre court and he starts explaining how the prince was walking along this path. He kept walking until we were in the doorway to the private royal dressing room. He continued to tell me how the room is only ever used when royalty is present. Makes sense. He then says to go in. Really??? As we're standing in the entrance, Jonas continues to explain that it will be the 75 anniversary of the Royal Hall the next day. He pointed out the radio from 1943 that was playing music from the era. He points around the corner to the tea room and invites me in. He introduced me to a gentleman, Mats, who looked after the room when royalty was present. Jonas (speaking in Swedish) explains to Mats that I was the winner of the Bjorn Sturens Minne award. He offered me champagne. Those who know me, know I don't drink, but I wasn't going to pass up having a drink in the royal dressing room! We continued on the tour and once we were finished, I was invited to sign the guest book. I looked down at the book and saw the signatures of prince Daniel and this years champion, Stefanos thanking all those he met that week who made his day, year, his everything. I felt the same way and echoed how being apart of the Stockholm Open's 50th anniversary was such an amazing experience. As we left the Kungliga Tennishallen, Anders told me that Bjorn Sturen was Mats' best friend. What an additional honour to have met someone who personally knew him.

The week was action-packed. I had so many once-in-a-lifetime experiences and it's impossible to write about everything in one article. I absolutely loved being part of a award-winning tournament and learning about Swedish history, culture and traditions. However, my most cherished moments will always be the genuine warmth I received from the volunteers, patrons who I gave reflectors to, and the organizers for making it all happen. They say tennis is a life-long sport, no one ever talks about the life-long friendship that come from complete strangers sharing the same passion for the greatest sport.

Joanne Perrier

