

### 6. 12. 2008 ÖRNSKÖLDSVIK, Sweden - by George Karrys

The Le Gruyère European Curling Championships 2008 have roared to life with opening day action involving 51 teams from 29 European countries.

Hosted in this "hockey town" 600 kilometres north of Stockholm, two venues are being used to handle the crush of over 350 athletes and coaches, including the spectacular two-year-old Swedbank Arena.

In first draw men's action, the pressure of this final qualification season before the 2010 Olympic Winter Games is obvious.

In one match, Switzerland's Stefan Karnusian - a veteran squad with little experience in the Swiss national uniform - outslugged host Sweden's Mathias Mabergs 8-4, breaking open a tight game with a count of four in the ninth end.

Both teams are surprise entrants in the competition, after earning qualifying victories in their home countries.

One sheet over, Denmark showed off a radically different lineup from the one which won the Bronze medal at last year's Euros in Fuessen, Germany.

Former coach Ulrik Schmidt, who skipped Denmark at the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City, is back on the ice at skip position, replacing Johnny Frederiksen. Frederiksen now plays third, with former third Lars Vilandt dropping all the way to lead position, with Bo Jensen remaining at second.

The Danes had an easy time with Spain's Antonio de Mollinedo, beating him 13-1 in seven

ends. The Spaniards are a new qualifier for the Euro A division, which will determine the top seven countries for April's 2009 Ford World men's Championship in Moncton, Canada.

The Danish men sit in 11th place in the Olympic qualification race, and need to perform in Örnsköldsvik to give them a shot at the Olympic berths.

"We had a meeting and I said if we want to go to the Olympics, we have to play more," said Schmidt, who is an average of 13 years older than his teammates.

"I told them we had to do more. Three of them wanted to, the fourth did not. And now I am back in business."

The lure of Olympic gold burns brightly throughout the curling world. With the 2010 Vancouver Games taking place in Canada, curling's strongest nation, the athletes are desperate to take part in what might be the sport's shining moment.

The Swiss are just one country spending funds dolled out by their domestic Olympic Committee.

"We took the teams to three events, and we had two training days per week plus weekends," said Swiss national coach Heinz Schmidt, who oversees Karnusian and the women's team, skipped by two-time Olympic silver medallist Mirjam Ott.

"Basically they are practicing every day, ever since they qualified in late October."

In other men's matches, defending European champion David Murdoch of Scotland - who leads a team of full-time, fully-funded curling athletes - lost 6-3 in an extra-end to Germany's Andy Kapp. The Germans scored three points over the final three ends, including two steals, to grab the victory.

Norway's Thomas Ulsrud, the 2007 European silver medallist, crushed Jiri Snitil of the Czech Republic by a 9-1 count, while Ireland's Peter J. D. Wilson edged Thomas Dufour of France 6-5 in an extra-end.

In opening women's action, Sweden's superstars led by skip Anette Norberg steamrolled Denmark's Angelina Jensen 8-2. The Danes won world silver in 2007, but Norberg has dominated women's curling throughout the decade, capturing three world championships and the Olympic gold medal at Turin 2006.

Norberg is also trying to win her seventh Le Gruyère European Curling Championship in a row, dating back to 2001, for a possible eight titles overall.

Scotland's Kelly Wood, who lost the 2007 Euro final to Norberg, thumped the Czech Republic's Katerina Urbanova 10-3 while German veteran Andrea Schoepp ground out a tight 7-6 win over Switzerland's Ott.

In a battle of surprise 2006 Euro finalists, Russia's Liudmila Privivkova repeated her win over Italy's Diana Gaspari, this time by an 8-7 count.

In a battle of A division rookies, Shari Leibbrandt-Demmon edged England's Kirsty Balfour by the same 8-7 scoreline. The top seven women's teams will qualify their countries for the 2009 World Women's Championship in Gangneung, Korea in March.

Action continues with two more Saturday matches, one broadcast in High-Definition on Eurosport and two others webstreamed at the Eurosport Player, available at [player.eurosport.com](http://player.eurosport.com)

A total of 10 matches will be televised, including the championship finals on December 13, with a total of 24 matches webstreamed on the Eurosport Player. Curling fans can receive special discounted Eurosport Player subscription codes listed at the World Curling Federation website (at [www.worldcurling.org](http://www.worldcurling.org)) and the event website (at [www.ecc2008.se](http://www.ecc2008.se)).

Live scoring can be viewed at [www.cuponline.nu](http://www.cuponline.nu)

Game feeds and highlight packages are also available from World Curling Television (WCTV).

Meanwhile, 30 teams representing countries such as Latvia, Wales, Poland, Russia, Finland, Hungary, Greece and Croatia - among others - began play in the Euro B division.

The top two men's and women's teams will qualify for the A division at next year's Europeans in Aberdeen, Scotland. In addition, the top finishers will play a best-of-three challenge series against the eighth-place A division teams for the right to compete at the 2009 world championships.