

## **Historic Encounter in Brussels – July 2025**

Belgium took a decisive step towards joining those countries with an Over 80 team when they entertained England O80 at Wolu Sports Park in Brussels on Wednesday 23rd July. With a team that included five over 80 and with an average age of 78 Belgium showed that they will soon be challenging Netherlands, Germany and England, the three established Over 80 national teams who will compete for at the Masters European Championships at Ludwigsburg, Germany in August this year. A few weeks earlier, on the 14th June, the Netherlands Over 80 had entertained Germany Over 80 at Drachten in a return fixture after their first meeting in Germany in 2024. Australia have yet to select an Over 80 team but is expected to join these three to contest the Over 80 division at the Masters World Cup in 2026.

The England team were delighted when Belgium took up their challenge to play a first international match between England O80 and Belgium O75 in Brussels. Eurostar provided the transport for most of the England team who stayed a night in Brussels ahead of the game having enjoyed their team bonding in a restaurant near the Grand Place. The game was set for 11.00 on the morning of Wednesday 23rd July and a warm sun welcomed players to the excellent facilities provided at Wolu Sports Park. The playing of national anthems for both teams endorsed the significance of this first encounter and England dominated the first quarter of the game with their strong midfield regularly feeding the ball to their eager forwards. A skilful reverse stick lob by David Gill was parried by the Belgian goalkeeper but was already spinning back towards the goal before Tony Jones provided the finishing touch just to make sure. The Belgians adjusted their line-up for the second quarter and gave England much less time on the ball, gaining more possession themselves and putting pressure on the England defence with strong running from Thierry Bingen and Francis 'Tich' Frère. Belgium might well have equalised before the next break had it not been for a goal-line deflection by Roger Lomas after a strong strike from a penalty corner. At the other end Belgian goalkeeper Anthony Leidensdorf marshalled his defence who made it more difficult for the England forwards to find space in the D.

The score remained 1-0 at half time and the second half provided opportunities for both teams with England 'keeper John Ingram-Marriott making one or two critical interventions and clearances. Two well balanced teams battled it out to the end without either adding a goal leaving England winners by the slimmest of margins. It was a day for the defenders who managed to soak up whatever was thrown at them and the forwards on both sides will have been disappointed not to have found the killer touch. A Belgian television news channel was on hand to record the event and the players enjoyed lunch together after the game before the England team headed back on Eurostar. It had been a successful adventure and both teams agreed to a return fixture in England in 2026.

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