

Moldova Versus Comic at Tennis

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August 08, 2012



After his first visit to Moldova, Hawks founded a charitable center in Chisinau. The center works to help young people diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

It all started with a bet. Disputing the idea that all athletes are naturally talented at every sport, British comedian and writer Tony Hawks wagers that he can beat the entire Moldovan national football team at tennis. It should be easy pickings since he was "the number two junior player in Sussex."

His forfeit if he loses is to sing the Moldovan national anthem in his local pub. Naked.

That may strike you as a funny idea, stupid maybe, or possibly a bit insulting to one of Europe's poorest countries, but the comedian's trip to Moldova was the start of a serious long-term relationship with the former Soviet country.

The book, "Playing the Moldovans at Tennis," which came out in 2000, is funny and poignant as Hawks blunders into a poverty-stricken country and has many of his preconceptions and jokes shattered by the experience.

Twelve years after the book, Hawks has made a film of the book that maintains that balance between typically blunt, sarcastic British comedy and the more serious issues concerning Moldova.

On his original trip, Hawk's moment of revelation comes when he visits the school of the daughter of the family he is staying with, realizing that his story should be more about helping the country.

"The story is about Moldova, so in a sense I'm taking from that country," Hawks said in a phone interview. "It seems only fair that I should give back."

Some preconceptions did remain intact after Hawk's journey, however.

In one scene in the book and the film, Hawks has to persuade the owner of a Moldovan club to let a football player take him on at tennis.

The owner — this is the 1990s — is a wealthy businessman from the breakaway state of Transdnestr, a region known then for its smuggling, illegal arms trade and general lawlessness, and Hawks heads to the mansion of this overweight, almost certainly quite dangerous, businessman, where he is given a tour and shown the businessman's proudest property, a trampoline that he then proceeds to jump up and down on. Hawks gets his match against the player.

The royalties from his original book went toward founding the Tony Hawks Center in Chisinau, Moldova, which helps children with cerebral palsy. All profits from the independent film will also go towards this cause as Hawks looks to develop a new center.

For more on the film version of "Playing the Moldovans at Tennis," see
www.moldovansmovie.com

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