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WTO chief has always been in negotiating business

By Noelle Knox, USA TODAY

GENEVA — It's hard to imagine Pascal Lamy as a 10-year-old boy, scrapping for food at the dinner table with four or five girls.



Pascal Lamy at a July meeting of the World Trade Organization.

By Jean-Pierre Clatot, AFP/Getty Images

But the month he spent with distant relatives in England was "a very tough time," he recalls, and his first hard lesson in the art of negotiation.

Since then, Lamy has sat across the bargaining table with the best of the best and with billions of dollars at stake.

Now, he must bring all his lessons to bear as the new director general of the World Trade Organization, an alliance of 148 countries that sets and enforces the rules of global trade.

Lamy, who started his job Sept. 1, will be in Washington today and Tuesday for meetings with members of Congress, as well as U.S. Trade Representative Bob Portman. But most of the men and women who will be shaking the Frenchman's hand already know him, at least by reputation.

About Pascal Lamy

Born: April 8, 1947, near Paris

Education: Graduate of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris; postgraduate diploma in advanced legal studies and university certificate in general literary studies.

Career highlights

1985-94: Chief of the cabinet to the president of the Commission of the European Communities

1994-99: Credit Lyonnais, member of the executive committee; director general 1999.

1999-2004: Commissioner for Trade at the European Commission, Brussels.

2005-present: Director general, World Trade Organization, Geneva.

Family: Married to Geneviève Luchaire, a lawyer, with whom he has three children: Julien, David and Quentin.

Hobbies: Running, bicycling, tennis.

Favorite books: *The Bible*, *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, *Le Rivage des Syrtes* by Julien Gracq (published in English as *The Opposing Shore*).

Source: USA TODAY research

Until last year, he was the chief trade negotiator for the European Union, and helped force the United States to back off on steel subsidies and take away some tax breaks for U.S. businesses.

"Who knows where the skeletons are in the closets of (WTO) member states better than Pascal Lamy?" says John Audley, a trade expert in Brussels for the German Marshall Fund, a trans-Atlantic think tank.

On this trip, he'll be laying the groundwork for international trade negotiations in Hong Kong in December.

The last round of talks, in Cancun, Mexico, in September 2003, ended in disaster when a group of developing nations walked. The WTO negotiations in 1999 in Seattle also collapsed, while an anti-globalization protest turned into a street riot.

The Doha trade talks are named after the capital of Qatar where they were started in 2001. The negotiations are aimed at promoting freer and fairer trade by cutting government subsidies and import taxes and opening agricultural markets for poorer countries.

"He's the right guy for the right moment," says Audley, who has met Lamy many times.

"It's going to take a lot of pushing and shoving in the U.S. and Europe to get the concessions from rich countries that will keep poor countries involved in the negotiations."

Success in Hong Kong will be critical for Lamy.

"Whichever goal I may have, this is the main one. It is the one that will decide whether I have water under the boat or not to sail to other horizons," said Lamy in an interview at the WTO headquarters here.

Lamy can often be spotted running around Lake Geneva in what is a form of meditation for him. He usually runs the Paris marathon in April and the New York marathon in November.

"Running is a very predictable thing. If you're trained, you'll be quicker and suffer less. If you're not trained, you will suffer more," he says.

His previous jobs look like practice for his new job as head of the WTO.

"He's been preparing for this moment for along time," Audley says.

Lamy was born in 1947, by coincidence the year of the first international trade rules (called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). His father was studying to be a doctor when he was sent to Germany as a forced laborer during World War II. After the war, his father decided to become a pharmacist like his mother. His parents ran their own drugstore in the Normandy area of France. He has two younger brothers, both now doctors.

"The rest of the family is pretty much in the doctor business, I'm the exception. Assuming I'm not in the doctor business now that I'm here, and I have doubts about this," he jokes.

Lamy has always been in the negotiating business.

Before working at the European Commission, he was in charge of restructuring French bank Credit Lyonnais. He negotiated with France's notorious labor unions as well as other bankers.

He has held several key government posts, including deputy to French Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, and deputy director of economic and financial affairs — both positions honed his bargaining skills.

In 1990, at age 43, he became one of the youngest ever to be awarded the Legion of Honor, France's highest medal for public service, then won it again in 1999.

He is clearly intelligent (finished second in his class at the prestigious L'Ecole Nationale d'Administration) and driven. But what drives Pascal Lamy?

"A strong belief that the world is globalizing formidably rapidly," he replies. "The jury is still out whether it's good or bad. This is one of the places where you can try to tilt the balance in the right direction, which is, to put it presumptuously, my own contribution to trying to make this world a bit less bad for many people."

Though a member of the French Socialist party, Lamy believes in free trade. He knows more-open countries develop better than closed countries, but he also knows that not everybody gains in trade negotiations.

"There is no discussion about this," he insists. "There are more winners than losers, but there are losers. And you need to care about the losers."