

## **NEW SEASON VIEWPOINT** by *OLLY CROFT, OBE*

I am pleased to say that the past twelve months have seen more positives for BDO/WDF darts. First of all there has been a significant increase in television opportunities and extra exposure for our sport on satellite channels. From January 2006 we have in place a 3 year contract with Eurosport for the Lakeside World Professional Darts Championships to be seen through even more outlets around the globe.

We have subsequently seen this global sports channel extending its commitment to BDO/WDF darts by screening several of our tournaments live this year. This additional coverage has included the BDO British Internationals from Wales and the BDO England Open from Pontin's, Brean Sands. I am happy to say that there is likely to be more BDO/WDF darts on Eurosport in the future. It represents a significant development and step forward in televised darts worldwide.

At this year's England Open weekend at Brean Sands we also introduced a new televised invitational tournament on Eurosport – the BDO Champions Pro Challenge. This was between eight top players and the first ever winner of the trophy was Scotland's Gary Anderson, who has now turned full time professional and is enjoying the best ever year of his career.

Amazingly, considering the huge number of talented Scotsmen in darts, Gary is the first ever World No.1 from Scotland – and he really is a great ambassador for his country and our sport.

We have also worked closely with Challenge TV, who have brought Bullseye back to our TV screens this year. This cult darts/entertainment show is now being re-discovered by a new generation, and that has to be good for the game. We have now followed this up with a new Challenge series called 'Showbiz Darts' filmed at Lakeside Country Club and re-creating the World Pro atmosphere.

This series of 15 one hour programmes will combine darts, celebrity and reality TV and will be seen this October. It will go out from 10.30PM to 11.30PM every weekday night for three consecutive weeks from October 2<sup>nd</sup> and provide massive exposure to our darts. Forget the old concept of Pro-Celebrity darts, this is a unique format that features two teams, each made up of four celebrities, who are captained and mentored by Bobby George and Andy Fordham.

These two huge darts characters are no strangers to television entertainment shows. Both have added to their own popularity and the popularity of our sport in the last couple of years by being featured in the top rating ITV series 'Celebrity Fit Club'. They have also been guests in many high-profile shows in recent years and I mention this to emphasise just how the BDO and its players have worked in unison to improve the image of our sport, and to raise its profile by taking darts to a much broader audience.

Not that we have been slouches in taking competitive darts to ever increasing global audiences! Eurosport is available on 104 million TV sets globally, and we enjoyed record-breaking audiences for the 2006 Lakeside World Professional Darts Championships in both this country and The Netherlands. BBC figures were a healthy 14% up on 2005, with 4.2 million tuning in to the final. On top of this, an incredible one in three of the Dutch population enjoyed Lakeside – producing the best audience figures in the history of Dutch broadcaster SBS-6, who return to 'the home of world darts' for the 10<sup>th</sup> successive year in 2007.

It is a proud fact, that collectively with BBC-1, BBC-2, BBCi, BBC Worldwide, SBS-6 and Eurosport, the World Pro and BDO/WDF televised darts, enjoy the biggest audiences for darts anywhere in the world.

And this year we proudly present our 30<sup>th</sup> consecutive World Pro on BBC TV, and Bob Potter and Lakeside have ensured that we celebrate in style with a £290,000 attainable prize fund that is the richest ever in the history of the greatest Championships in World Darts.

With history comes the inevitable anniversaries, and we were delighted to celebrate 21 years of staging the World Pro at Lakeside in January of this year. To mark the occasion and the wonderful support of Bob Potter, Barbara Leitch and their superb staff, I was delighted to present Bob with a special 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Key' on behalf of everyone at the BDO.

In keeping with so many new projects, particularly on TV, the BDO has also updated some of its stage settings and introduced new indicator equipment to enhance the overall presentation of BDO darts for the benefit not only of broadcasters, but also for the players and fans.

More positives have been gained through the BDO's involvement in government initiatives like the high profile 'Get On' campaign, and the BBC's Sport Relief, both of which were featured at Lakeside. Darts gave great support to Sport Relief in 2004, and has once again surpassed itself in 2006. Top players like Bobby George have played important and pivotal roles in raising the profile of the fund-raising activities. Bobby launched our involvement at Lakeside this January and in July made two high-profile TV appearances on behalf of our sport.

It goes without saying that darts, its players and officials probably contribute more to charitable causes and fund-raising initiatives than any other sport. Those within the BDO/WDF systems are extremely proud of that fact.

When Andy Fordham became the first ever Lakeside World Pro Champion in 2004 he lent his name to the government 'Get On' campaign, which has successfully used the mental arithmetic skills of darts as an aid to numeracy in young adults in particular. Since then, Andy, the BDO and top players like Martin Adams, Trina Gulliver and Bobby George, have helped make this one of the most successful ever campaigns to improve numeracy levels in the UK.

So much so that we have now had two government Ministers at Lakeside. The most recent was Skills Minister Phil Hope, who showed the gratitude of the government by presenting the BDO with a commemorative plaque as an official thank you. It now occupies pride of place in the BDO's HQ in Muswell Hill.

Showing responsibility is nothing new to the BDO, its players and officials. During this year we have signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU's) with Betfair and the Association of British Bookmakers to cement our responsible stance in regard to betting within darts. In future we will be able to consult and liaise with these leading organisations for the overall benefit of our sport, its players and its overall image.

Such positive initiatives like the ones I have already described illustrate the BDO commitment to the WHOLE sport of darts. As everyone knows, thanks to the efforts of the BDO, darts is now an official sport. So what difference will recognition make?

Most importantly, our players can officially describe themselves as sportsmen and sportswomen, and be on a par with other sports people worldwide.

It also gives the BDO future opportunities to apply for sports council funding and lottery grants. This will be particularly beneficial to our grass roots players, and could also assist us in many other areas – not least of all, the possible funding of our national teams and perhaps the setting up of academies of excellence to encourage our young players.

The BDO/WDF commitment to youth cannot be doubted. All of our counties have youth sections, and major tournaments like the Winmau World Masters are proud to stage Boys and Girls Finals every year. Then there is the annual British Teenage Open, the BDO British Youth Inter-County Knockout Cup and, of course, the WDF Europe Cup Youth. All are a major source of young talent.

It gives me the opportunity to congratulate all the British youngsters who did so well in this year's WDF Europe Cup Youth in Germany, where I have been told the hospitality and organisation was fantastic. Our boys and girls from England, Wales and Scotland also did fantastic - with the talented Kimberley Lewis of Wales winning the Girls Singles title and helping her team win the overall Girls Team title. She also won the Girls Pairs title with Kylie Murphy, and not to be outdone Jamie Lewis and Jon Kinsella of Wales reached the Semi-Finals of the Boys Pairs. England Boys were runners-up in the Boys Team event and Ricky Evans of England reached the Semi-Finals of the Boys Singles.

The Scotland teams played exceptionally well and finished 4<sup>th</sup> overall, but the important thing is to recognise that these youngsters are the key to the future of our sport and we must invest in their talents from county level right through to national, international, world and professional levels. I can't possibly name all the talented youngsters out there, but I am certain that some (or all) those mentioned will do exceptionally well in the future.

Like 13 year-old Keegan Brown, who earlier this year became the youngest England player to represent his county when he played for the Isle-of-Wight. Jamie Lewis, who did so well in the WDF Europe Cup Youth, was only 12 when he became the youngest Welsh player to represent his county and then went on to represent Wales in the WDF World Cup in Australia last year!

There have been two Scottish players who made their county debuts at an early age – Kirsty Burns was just 12 and Lynsey McDonald 13. All are an essential part of our investment in the future and a cornerstone of what the BDO/WDF systems are built upon. To this end I would like to congratulate the BDO Young Players of the Year – Kirk Shepherd of Kent (winner of the 2006 British Teenage Open) and Rebecca Rose of Cambridgeshire.

Young Richard George, the 16 year-old son of the legendary Bobby, is following in his father's footsteps by displaying natural talent. A couple of months ago he proudly made his England debut in the WDF Europe Youth Cup, and this month he is the only British player in the Bavaria World Darts Trophy Youth Tournament (Ross Smith has that honour at the IDL earlier this year).

It is also worth reminding everyone that in reigning Lakeside World Pro Champion Jelle Klaasen we can boast the youngest ever World Professional Darts Champion at just 21 years of age! We have also seen the rise and rise of another Dutch talent this year – 17 year old Michael van Gerwen. He won the WDF Europe Cup Youth Boys Singles and Pairs titles, also helped his talented Dutch side win the overall Team event. He will be at Lakeside next January and is no doubt already dreaming of becoming an even younger World Pro Champion than Jelle!

Such is the 'magic' of our sport and Lakeside, and I can guarantee that there are lots more talented youngsters out there thanks to the BDO/WDF systems. They are proof positive that our youth systems work to the benefit of our sport, its players and its future.

We can boast many world class players – men and women - but our real remit as responsible darts bodies, is for the BDO and WDF to provide opportunities for ALL darts players, regardless of their sex, age or ability.

The BDO was formed in 1973 to meet the important criteria of DARTS FOR ALL, and I am proud to say that it continues to do just that some 33 years later. Yes, we are proud of our top players and those who are in the public eye and earn a professional living from the sport, but we are equally proud of all those – men, women and youth - who play and enjoy this game at pub/club, national, international and world levels.

The BDO proudly fosters, promotes and organises darts events for men and women, from youth to County, National, International, World and Professional levels. We are without doubt the biggest, finest and leading organisation for darts in the world – not just for a few, but for all.

I have been delighted with the success of another new BDO initiative that I personally championed this year – the BDO's 18-25 Young Player Challenge 2006. I have always considered this to be an age group that has been largely overlooked over the years, and I am delighted to say that I have been proved right! The take up has been remarkable, with over 500 entries being received through our counties. The ultimate reward for men and women in this key 18-25 age group, is entry to the International Play-Offs for the 2007 World Pro in Bridlington next month (October) and with it the chance to get to the Winmau World Masters Finals and of course the Lakeside World Professional next January.

Continuing its forward planning, the BDO has been discussing the London bid for the 2012 Olympic Games with media, politicians and decision makers for quite a while now. We even welcomed members from the International Olympic Committee to Lakeside in January.

Is it possible that darts could be included as an Olympic sport? There are a good many pessimists who say not, but thankfully we will continue lobbying on behalf of our sport and its players. Those same pessimists said that we would never get darts recognised as a sport, but we proved them wrong! I would like to think that we can do so again!!

Certainly we have the experience and the history to make it happen. In October the Winmau World Masters will be played for the 33<sup>rd</sup> consecutive year (1974 to 2005) and in January 2007, the World Professional Darts Championships will celebrate its 30th consecutive year (1978 to 2007) on BBC television.

These are the oldest established tournaments in world darts and they enjoy all the history and kudos that go with them. They are the two most important titles to darts players the world over and have proudly dominated the history of darts over the last four decades.

Indeed, there can be no doubt that the World Pro is the premier Championship in world darts – it has produced every top player in the sport and is the one title that every player wants to win. In sporting history to be crowned World Professional Darts Champion is as important to a darts player, as winning Wimbledon is to a tennis star, and winning the World Snooker title at Sheffield's Crucible is to a snooker player. All are pinnacles of a sporting career.

It should never be forgotten that the BDO is responsible for the only world-class darts shown on nationally-networked terrestrial television watched annually by audiences of millions, and despite the gloom and doom peddled by some, what I have already written provides proof positive of what the BDO is doing for the whole sport of darts and its players.

The 2006/2007 BDO Inter-County Championships and the internal County Super Leagues season get under way this month and remains the very lifeblood of our sport. The consistently high averages produced by the players year after year in the BICC and County Super Leagues is a credit to them, the system, and the officials who make certain that everything happens smoothly and without a hitch.

Trina Gulliver was back to her best last season playing for Warwickshire and had a single dart dynamic average of 33.32 to top the county averages for women. She also won just about every title going! She remains unbeaten at Lakeside and will be going for her 7<sup>th</sup> consecutive Women's World Pro title next January. There has never been a better or more successful women's player and, above and beyond all that, she is one of the nicest ladies you could ever wish to meet. An ambassador for our sport and a real credit to it.

For the men, Ian Jones of West Midlands topped the averages for men by winning all of his nine games to record an outstanding single dart dynamic average of 38.70. Ian is not a household name (yet!) but he reached the Semi-Finals of this year's BDO British Classic and is proof positive of the strength and depth of talent in our county system.

Congratulations to him and also congratulations to Yorkshire on winning the Premier Division. In fact, my heartfelt congratulations to all Divisional winners from 2005/2006, and very best wishes to everyone for a highly successful 2006/2007 Inter-County Championship season.

It goes without saying that the quality of play produced within the BDO Inter-County system continues to create an exciting and highly competitive calendar of major tournaments. In fact, we now enjoy BDO/WDF darts all the year round! The 'season' has become virtually twelve months of continuous darts available to all BDO/WDF players. Not only do we have the largest and most comprehensive calendar of events in World Darts to offer BDO/WDF players, but as I have already pointed out, we also attract the biggest television audiences for darts anywhere in the world. FACT!

Yet another 'Super September' gets under way with the fifth staging of the Bavaria World Darts Trophy in Utrecht from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>. The BDO has recently signed an agreement with broadcaster SBS-6 and promoter Ad Schoofs for both the Bavaria WDT and Topic IDL until 2010.

This year's WDT is followed by the BDO British Open in Bridlington (15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>); the WDF Europe Cup in the Republic of Ireland (20<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>); the opening of the BDO Inter-County season (23<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup>) and the French Open (Sept.30 to Oct.1<sup>st</sup>).

Then in October everyone returns to Bridlington's Leisure World for the Lakeside World Professional International Play-Offs (12<sup>th</sup>) followed by the Winmau World Masters (13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>).

I am absolutely delighted to report yet another positive here, because the BDO has recently signed a new five year agreement with Winmau in regard to the World Masters and BDO British Classic and, of course, the continued endorsement and use of the very best dartboards in the world.

November sees the Northern Ireland Open in County Down (11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup>) and the Swedish Open (25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>) followed in December by the Leendesk Masters in The Netherlands (9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup>).

The BDO Grand Slam title for Men's and Women's darts involves its four biggest televised darts tournaments in the UK, Europe and the World:

- **LAKESIDE WORLD PROFESSIONAL DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP**
- **TOPIC INTERNATIONAL DARTS LEAGUE**
- **BAVARIA WORLD DARTS TROPHY**
- **WINMAU WORLD MASTERS.**

Of course, the continued success of our youngsters in top competitions is wonderful news for the growth and future well-being of our sport, and proves that BDO/WDF darts are not just alive and well, but thriving and growing year in year out. And remember: Just as the BDO Inter-County and County Super League systems benefit the major events, so the major events and their ongoing success on TV and in the worldwide media, benefit the County system by attracting more and more players – men, women and youth – to our wonderful sport.

I am proud to say that the BDO/WDF share something that no other darts organisation in the world can come close to: They are national and global bodies that consist of a true family of like-minded darts people, who genuinely share a love and passion for this great sport of ours.

These family values are mirrored throughout the BDO Counties and WDF Countries and then carry on right through to our major events nationally, internationally and worldwide. A commonly heard theme from our players – Men and women – particularly those who travel to the major tournaments, is the unrivalled camaraderie that they enjoy as players and friends.

A prime example of this is the fact that a troubled country like Iran has become one of the newest members of the WDF. The Islamic Republic of Iran Darts Association represents an incredible half-a-million men players and, perhaps even more incredible 220,000 women! In a country with a reputation for nuclear proliferation, isn't it refreshing to know that darts is helping to keep the 'ordinary' people of Iran together? In the July issue of Darts World there was a lovely picture of children aged from 4 to 7 enjoying playing our sport.

There was a meaningful quote from a UN Special Adviser which said: "Politics, religious gender and race barriers have been broken down when people play sport together". It is something that darts has achieved in one of the most volatile countries on the world – and we should all be proud of this achievement. Perhaps the world's problems could be solved by the decision makers playing darts? It's not likely to happen, but is a nice thought nevertheless.

But then, as I have already said, just as our systems produce a true sporting worldwide 'family' and unrivalled success on national, international, world and professional stages, it also provides competitive darts for players – men, women and

youth - of all abilities, colour and creeds worldwide. In other words, BDO/WDF darts is there for everyone to enjoy and compete in.

With that thought uppermost in my mind, I wish all players – men, women and youth - competing at every level during the 2006/2007 season every success.

I once again applaud all the BDO Directors and the hard-working BDO executives and officials for ensuring that not only do we stage the very best tournaments in world darts, but also that the BDO Inter-County and County Super League systems work for the overall benefit of the sport and all who play in it. The same applause goes to our friends and colleagues in the International Darts Players Association (IDPA), whose comradeship and support is greatly appreciated.

Without those who give up so much of their time voluntarily for darts, the sport would not be able to operate at such a high, successful and committed level.

Finally, with that sentiment in mind, I would like to offer sincere thanks to long-serving BDO Chairman Sam Hawkins for everything he has done for the BDO and the sport of darts. Sam has decided to retire after 18 years as BDO Chairman and more than 30 years with the BDO and darts, and his commitment as a respected BDO official will be missed. I am delighted that he has accepted the office of Honorary President of the BDO.

Also, our grateful thanks to Pete Murray, who has decided to step down as a BDO Director due to the ill health of his wife Marlene. Like Sam and Marie Hawkins, Pete and Marlene Murray have devoted their lives to the BDO and the sport of darts, and they are held in high esteem by all who know them.

What more can I say, other than here's to yet another successful season of BDO/WDF darts!

Yours in the Sport of Darts:

**OLLY CROFT, OBE**