

All those snobs who looked down at darts, they are the ones now ringing me up for tickets!

■ BY HARRY CRICHTON

RAUCOUS fans, fancy dress, packed arenas. A sport once tied to local pubs is now prime time, global entertainment.

And behind it all is Barry Hearn, the largest-than-life promoter whose Midlands touch elevated darts from smoky boozers to the Ally Pally stage.

No stopping this sport, says the ringmaster of darts

British Darts Organisation (BDO) was struggling, and in a transitional phase for the sport, the PDC broke away, determined to carve out its own path.

They approached Hearn, already a successful promoter of snooker, boxing and football, hoping he could work his magic on darts.

"You never know when an opportunity is going to slip you in the face, and the good Lord smiles," Hearn jokes.

He recalls meeting trail-blazing figures who were passionate about darts, with a vision of where it should be and frustration that it wasn't there yet.

It was at The Circus Tavern, a local venue in Essex, where Hearn saw the potential of darts and was immediately hooked.

"You couldn't see across the room for smoke," Hearn recalls.

There were bookmakers in the corner, people betting on 180s, which but a 170 check-out the big fish. They were having a few beers and chatting with their mates.

But in front of them, through all this atmosphere, was world-class sport. And I thought, if I wanted a night out, I'd come here."

For Hearn, it was more than a business opportunity – darts was a passion project. He was drawn to the people, the stories, and the atmosphere surrounding the sport.

"I could see in darts, even back then, I liked the customers," he adds.

"They were ordinary people from where I came from, just wanting a good night out. Nothing complicated."

That sentiment holds true today, with the fan culture and atmosphere preserved as darts has ascended.

For Hearn, it was more than a business opportunity – darts was a passion project. He was drawn to the people, the stories, and the atmosphere surrounding the sport.

at him, and he thought it was hilarious, knowing he'd got to them.

"When you put together great shows, you're a ringmaster. You need an angle, you're selling tickets, you're trying to get ratings, you're talking about it."

"You need those characters because they're priceless," Hearn adds.

With TV in mind, Hearn knew that while darts had a marketable raw product, it needed exposure.

When Sky offered a deal, brought quips like "fancy dress and signs, giving everyone their moment of fame."

Hearn recalls a fan, famous for dressing as a chicken, calling him for a ticket.

"I said, 'I've got a greeter on the phone saying he's the chicken', and the team said, 'uh, the chicken hasn't got a ticket? We'll get him in. He was the first I remember in full costume.'"

The atmosphere became as much a part of the darts experience as the matches. Fans weren't just spectators, they were part of the show, whether through wild costumes, signs, or chants.

Hearn understood that this sense of inclusion, where everyone had a role in the spectacle, was key to building a loyal following and an experience people wanted to come back to.

Hearn's success isn't winning, with demand driving tours in countries such as Poland, Australia and the Middle East.

"Whether it's New York or Auckland, they can't get enough. Broadcasters are coming in, paying more," Hearn says.

With increasing revenue, Hearn views this as a chance to improve competitiveness and the sport's quality.

"You've got to give kids a chance. If they can earn money, they'll put in more hours, make sacrifices, and the snowball starts," he says.

He's delighted players from humble, working-class backgrounds can benefit from the growth in the game.

Recalled Hearn: "I remember Nathan Aspinall, he got to the semi-finals, and he won £100,000. He said, 'my house cost me 30 grand! It's the most unbelievable day I've ever had.'"

With money and TV deals, Hearn believes darts will only improve for players, adding: "Soon, they won't just be millionaires, they'll be multimillionaires."

Hearn's commitment extends to the sport's future through youth programmes such as the Junior Darts Corporation (JDC), which starts on December 15. Hearn is proud of his legacy. He said: "I'm building something for when I'm gone. I'd like darts players in 50 years to raise a glass to me. Is that big-headed? I don't care. I'm doing a good job."

To any doubters, his message is clear: "All those snobs looking down their noses – 'fat blokes pot boilers, smoking, drinking darts?' Look at them now. They're the ones phoning me up, begging for a ticket. And I love it."



Crowds in fancy dress have become a huge part of events



Barry Hearn spotted the potential in the sport and has helped it grow to the popular monster it is now



The likes of Eric Bristow, top, and Jocky Wilson, bottom, were among the sport's early great characters



WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

THE ALLEY PALLY

MICHAEL SMITH

ODDS: 16/1
NICKNAME: Bully Boy
PDC RANKING: 2
DARTS: 246 Shot
HOMETOWN: St Helens (2023)
ALLY PALLY BEST: Winner (2023)
MICHAEL Smith has been a force on the oche since his teenage days in the PDC, and after capturing his first World Championship title in 2023, Bully Boy has firmly established himself among the darting elite, with three World Series titles to his name.

This year has brought a mix of highs and lows. His title defence at Ally Pally fell short in a disappointing fourth round exit to Chris Dobey, suffering a 4-0 whitewash. And it wasn't until May that he reclaimed a ranking title, his first in nearly a year. Teaming up with Luke Humphries for England, Smith delivered a standout performance to win the World Cup of Darts, brushing aside Austria in the final.

Smith nearly secured another major title at the World Series of Darts final, only to be outplayed by PDC new boy Luke Littler. Despite some setbacks, Smith's resilience and unforgettable nine-darter at Ally Pally two years ago keep him up there as a fan favourite. As he heads back to the Palace, he'll be determined to add another chapter to his already storied legacy, and you'd be a fool to write him off.

MICHAEL VAN GERVEN

ODDS: 6/1
NICKNAME: The Green Machine
PDC RANKING: 3
DARTS: 21.5g Wilman
HOMETOWN: Vilijnden, Netherlands
ALLY PALLY BEST: Winner (2014, 2017, 2019)

IT'S hard to argue that any player embodies the meteoric rise of darts more than its poster boy, Michael van Gerwen. PDC chief executive Matt Porter

■ Bully Boy
Michael Smith



has even remarked that "more people in the UK know who this darts player from the Netherlands is than the fastest British man and woman."

MVG has become a symbol of darts' transformation from pub pastime to global spectacle.

Despite being a three-time champion at Ally Pally, recent World Championships have been less fruitful for the Dutchman.

In 2024, he fell to unseeded Scott Williams in a shock quarter-final exit, and his last two finals saw losses to Michael Smith in 2023 and Peter Wright in 2020.

The 2024 season has been a mixed bag. He shone early in the Premier League, winning three consecutive nights in Berlin, Glasgow and

LUKE HUMPHRIES

ODDS: 5/2
NICKNAME: Cool Hand
PDC RANKING: 1
DARTS: 22g Red Dragon
HOMETOWN: Crewe
ALLY PALLY BEST: Winner (2024)

LUKE Humphries has had a whirlwind 2024, stamping his mark on the darts world and clinching the ultimate title at Ally Pally. Last year, many felt Cool Hand was destined for glory, but a

certain Cheshire rival named Luke Humphries, however, came out on top in the battle of the Lukes, earning a trip to Downing Street to give then-PM Rishi Sunak a few darts tips. Humphries has only added to his silverware since and last month beat Littler 11-7 to win the Players Championship.

After a near-miss at the UK Open, with an 11-10 loss to Dimitri Van den Bergh, he quickly redeemed himself by partnering up with Michael Smith to win the World Cup of Darts for England. He didn't stop there. In July, he claimed the World Matchplay title,

defeating Michael van Gerwen and becoming only the second player after Phil Taylor to hold both the World Championship and World Matchplay titles in the same year. Despite a rocky start in the Premier League, by night six Humphries hit his stride with consecutive wins in Brighton, Nottingham and Dublin, reaching top ten plus averages for fun.

Wrapping up the season as runner-up, Humphries has shown the bling of the top. After swapping his walk-on tune to I Predict a Riot this year, he's set to bring the noise to Ally Pally this festive season.

ROB CROSS

ODDS: 20/1
NICKNAME: Whetage
PDC RANKING: 4
DARTS: 21g Target
HOMETOWN: Hastings
ALLY PALLY BEST: Winner (2018)

FEW players in the PDC have had a journey as electrifying as Rob "Voltage" Cross. Rising struggled to compete against new rivals Humphries and Littler. However, MVG's impact on British sports culture is undeniable.

His popularity and aggressive style have cemented his status as an icon, comparable to footballers and Olympians. Heading back to Ally Pally, he's aiming to write another chapter in his

CONTESTERS

■ Flying Scotsman
Gary Anderson



GARY ANDERSON

ODDS: 14/1
NICKNAME: The Flying Scotsman
PDC RANKING: 20
DARTS: 23g Unicorn
HOMETOWN: Burnham-on-Ssea
ALLY PALLY BEST: Winner (2015, 2016)
SCOTTISH darts legend Gary Anderson joined an elite group of players to win back-to-back World Championship titles in 2015 and 2016, forever cementing his name among the sport's all-time greats. Since joining the PDC tour in 2009, he's amassed a stellar collection of titles, including two Premier Leagues, the Champions League and a World Cup victory in 2019 alongside Peter Wright. In 2024, Anderson's consistency continues to shine. He opened his World Championship campaign with wins over Simon Whitlock and Boris Kercher before a close loss to Brendan Dolan.

But The Flying Scotsman has proven his form in other competitions, capturing his first PDC European Tour title since 2014 at the European Darts Grand Prix, where he powered through top-tier opponents Gerwyn Price, Josh Aspinall and Rob Cross to lift the trophy. Anderson has also enjoyed impressive results on the Pro Tour, reaching multiple finals and securing his second Players Championship title in

final win against Gerwyn Price, clinching victory in the deciding leg, despite never leading up to that point. Although he later fell to the unstoppable Luke Littler, Littler in the Poland Darts Masters final, Cross remains a threat on any stage, as proved by defeating Michael van Gerwen en route to his third straight World Series final. Cross will be keen to try to repeat his 2018 heroics which saw him lift the trophy.

LUKE LITTLER

ODDS: 5/2
NICKNAME: The Nuke
PDC RANKING: 18
DARTS: 23g Target
HOMETOWN: Warrington
ALLY PALLY BEST: Final (2024)

THIS time last year, hardly anyone had heard of Luke Littler. Fast forward 12 months, and the 17-year-old from Warrington is a household name. Littler's meteoric rise has been nothing short of astounding, already stacking his trophy cabinet with titles that

seasoned pros spend entire careers chasing in his debut year on the PDC tour.

He's the reigning Premier League, World Series and Grand Slam champion and has claimed the Junior and World Youth Championships, the Bahrain and European Tour titles in Belgium and Austria.

Still very much a teenager, Littler is as likely to be found playing FIFA with his mates as he is throwing darts. His record-breaking facts this year have turned heads. Not only is he the

youngest player to lift two televised nine-dart finishes, but he also set records by reaching the World Darts Championship final at just 16.

His efforts at Ally Pally last year drew the audience that made the final the most-watched non-footballing event ever broadcast on Sky Sports, and although Littler was defeated by Luke Humphries that day, he'll be back this year with that experience under his belt. He has rightful claims to favouritism, and expectations will be high for The Nuke at Ally Pally.

MIKE DE BECKER

ODDS: 22/1
NICKNAME: The Real Deal
PDC RANKING: 25
DARTS: 22g Bulls
HOMETOWN: Mechelen, Belgium
ALLY PALLY BEST: Last 64 (2022, 2023, 2024)
NOBODY would have predicted Mike de Becker to be a contender this year, but his recent triumph at the World Grand Prix has made him impossible to ignore.

The underdog stunned all with his sensational 100/1 victory over Luke Humphries in the Grand Prix final, marking a major milestone in his career and making him only the second Belgian to win a PDC major title, following Dimitri Van den Bergh. De Becker has been quietly persistent in his journey to the top.

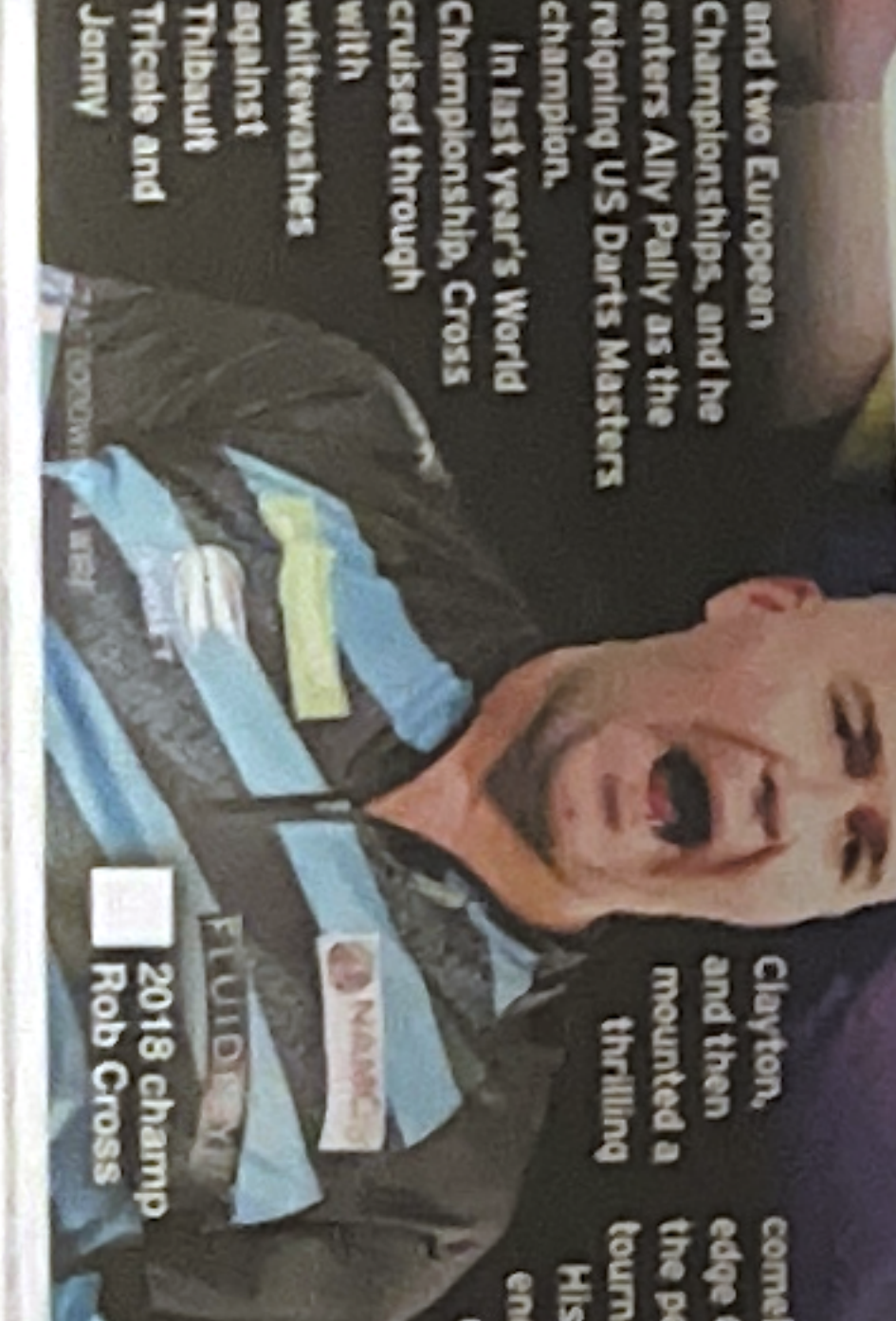
After first making tracks on the Youth and Development Tour, he finally secured his tour card in 2020. His career highlights have included a handful of strong runs on the Players Championship circuit and a debut at the World Championship in 2021.

Though early exits often marked his outings, he began to build momentum with his maiden title at Players Championship 16 in 2024. Despite never making it beyond the second round at Ally Pally, De Becker demands attention and he must surely be looking to stage another upset here.

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NATHAN STIRK/GETTY IMAGES



■ 2018 champ
Rob Cross



WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

DAVE CHISNALL

ODDS: 50/1
NICKNAME: Chizzy
PDC RANKING: 6
DARTS: 22q Final Dragon
HOMETOWN: Macclesfield, Cheshire
ALLY PALLY BEST: Semi-final (2021)
DAVE Chisnall is part of the furniture on the PDC circuit. Like a trusty armchair, he's always there, comfortable, steady and loved by everyone. Chizzy has been a formidable presence in the darts world since his PDC debut, with six major TV finals and 26 PDC ranking titles to his name.



For years he's been a top-20 staple, a Premier League regular, and has represented England at the World Cup on three occasions. Ally Pally hasn't been the luckiest stage for Chizzy, with a half-century of defeats at the hands of Gary Anderson in 2017, 2019 and 2021.

NATHAN APSTON

In the 2024 World Championship, he reached the quarter-finals before being outclassed by Luke Humphries. This year, Chisnall has shown he's still got plenty of firepower. His season highlights include a strong run in the UK Open and two Pro Tour titles in September, including a victory at the Players Championship 23 in Leicester.

JONNY CLAYTON

ODDS: 66/1
NICKNAME: The Ferret
PDC RANKING: 5
DARTS: 21q Final Dragon
HOMETOWN: Penkridge, Staffordshire
ALLY PALLY BEST: Quarter-final (2023)
JOHNNY "The Ferret" Clayton's journey to the top of darts has been nothing short of inspirational. The Welshman's rise began when his World Cup victory alongside Gerwyn Price in 2020 catapulted him into the mainstream of the sport. From that

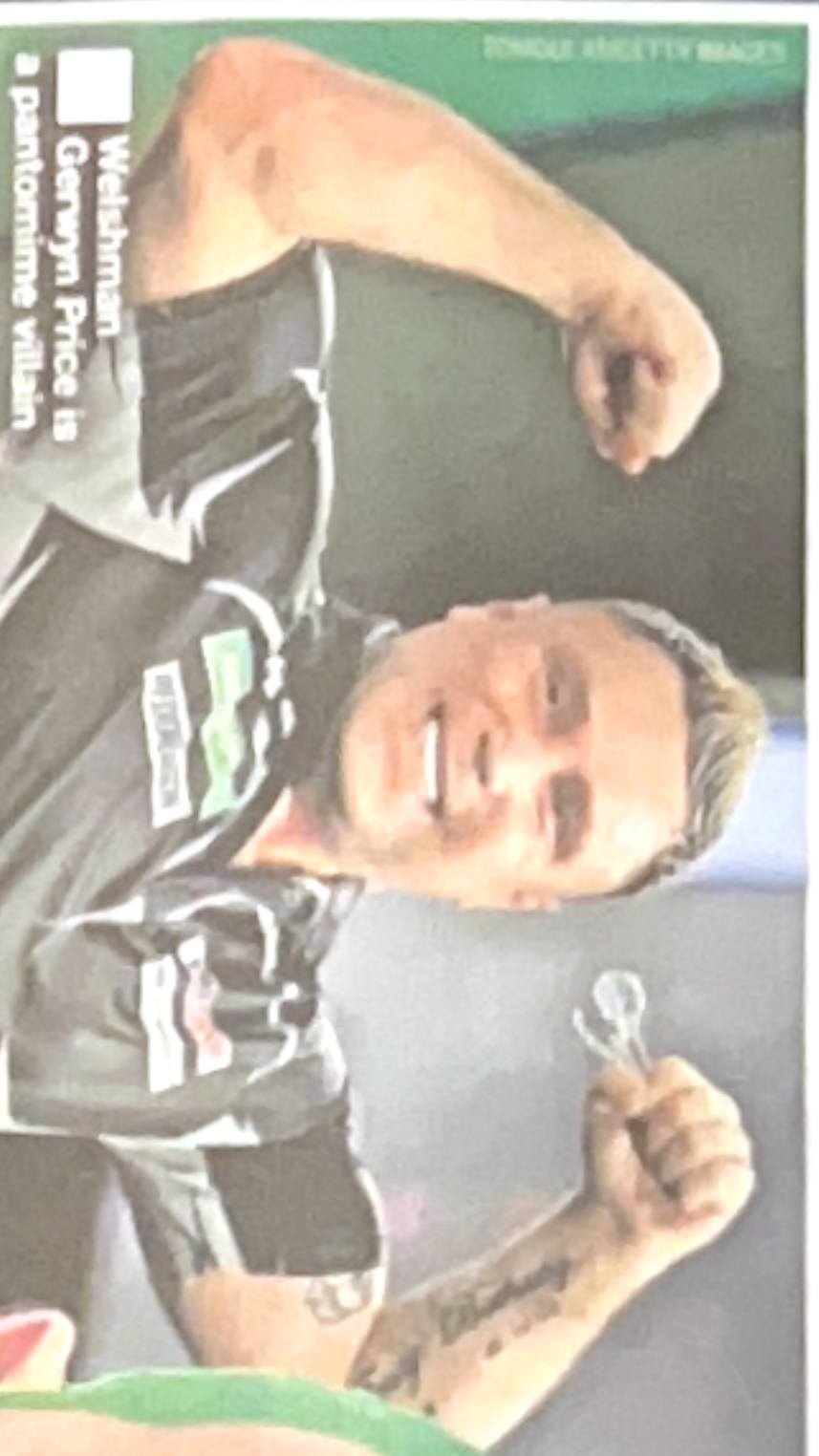
moment, Clayton unleashed a 2021 filled with triumph, capturing titles at the Masters, World Grand Prix, World Series Finals and clinching the Premier League in his debut season.

At his best, the Welshman can be unstoppable, and his 91 per cent checkout success rate against James Wade in the 2024 Masters is believed to be a PDC world record. But Clayton has since struggled to find the form that made him one of the tournament favourites at Ally Pally three years ago.

At the 2024 World Championship, he advanced to the fourth round before a tough 4-0 loss to Rob Cross.

It has been a quiet year for The Ferret, but his recent win at the Players Championship 14 in Milton Keynes saw Clayton declare, "I've got my mojo back" - as he returned to victory with an impressive 105 per cent checkout in the final against Wesley Pringle.

With confidence restored and his famous smile back, fans will be hoping Clayton is ready to prove he's still got plenty to offer on the big stage.



Nathan Aspinall opted for a pantomime villain.

semi-final finish at the World Championship as a 500/1 outsider and a series of major titles, including the 2019 UK Open and the 2023 World Matchplay, his crowning achievement. Working out to Mr. Brightside, The Asps might be looking to keep the momentum going to see the bright side of a challenging 2024 season.

A shock second round exit at the World Championship, a close loss to Dennis Aspinall at the UK Open, and a victory and a 105 per cent checkout in the 2024 World Matchplay have all helped to build a reputation for Asps as a resilient and determined player.

Frustations bubbled over at the Players Championship 22, where he threw his darts in a moment of anger after a tough loss, making headlines for the wrong reasons. Despite the setback, he is the determined type, known for his intensity and grit. Aspinall's return to Ally Pally promises drama and the potential comeback story is a compelling one for the fans to get behind.

GERWYN PRICE

ODDS: 10/1
NICKNAME: The Iceman
PDC RANKING: 8



Nathan Aspinall opted for darts ahead of football.

PETER WRIGHT

ODDS: 40/1
NICKNAME: Snakebite
PDC RANKING: 14
DARTS: 22q Final Dragon
HOMETOWN: Huddersfield
ALLY PALLY BEST: Winner (2020, 2022)
THE term icon should not be thrown about lightly, but for Peter Wright, one of darts' most colourful characters, the term is fitting. Bad looks, vibrant dress, he really is a legend of the Ally Pally stage.

A two-time world champion and a former world No. 1, Wright has claimed 14 televised titles, including the UK Open, World Matchplay, and two World Cups with Team Scotland. Snakebite is no stranger to the stage, and he has plenty of life left in him yet.

He finished bottom of the Premier League and crashed out in the first round of the European Championship with one of his lowest career averages of 74.81. Despite the poor form, Wright remains one of the sport's most compelling players. He has a knack for big-stage performances, and Snakebite will be out to prove he has plenty of life left in him yet.

His 2021 World Championship win came behind closed doors during the pandemic, with no crowd to rattle him. In 2022, he famously denied our defenders after being heckled at Ally Pally, proof that Price, as much as he fuels the crowd, fuels the crowd, sometimes. Struggles to handle the loss.



Stephen Bunting is a consistent performer at the top level of the sport.

STEPHEN BUNTING

ODDS: 32/1
NICKNAME: The Dullst
PDC RANKING: 10
DARTS: 12q Target
HOMETOWN: St Helens
ALLY PALLY BEST: Semi-final (2021)
FOR some this might be considered a bit of a breakthrough year for Stephen Bunting. A former BDO world champion, Bunting has spent years as a respected confederate on the PDC circuit, but 2024 marked a massive shift with his victory at the Masters.

Bunting returned to the title, defeating reigning world champion Luke Humphries, before sealing the deal with an 11-7 triumph over Michael van Gerwen in the final. His win marked his first PDC major title.

Even whispers of retirement emerged, especially after missing out on the Grand Slam of Darts for the first time since his debut. But Price isn't one to back down easily. Victories at the Nordic and Australian Darts Masters this year show he still has fire left as he targeted Luke Littler 6-1 to secure the latter title. Bunting is in the mix, his competitive edge and ever-rising antics captivating the atmosphere everyone loves in this sport. As he returns to Ally Pally,

CHRIS DOBNEY

ODDS: 40/1
NICKNAME: Smudge
PDC RANKING: 22
DARTS: 22q Underdog
HOMETOWN: Dover
ALLY PALLY BEST: Last 32 (2022, 2024)
DOBNEY has been a mainstay on the PDC circuit, with his reputation soaring after winning the 2022 European Championship, his first major televised title. Although Smudge has never been beyond the last 32 at Ally Pally, he has shown he belongs on the stage, hitting 19 maximums in his 2022 tour against Smith has continued to impress in recent years, securing multiple PDC Pro Tour titles in both 2023 and 2024.

Smith reached his first European Tour final at the 2019 World Grand Prix and Players Championship, surviving 10 match darts before losing 8-6 to Gary Anderson. He bounced back with a title at Players Championship 12, his first of the year.

At the World Grand Prix, Smith averaged 101.79 in a dominant 2-0 win over Gerwyn Price, setting the highest match average in the tournament's history, further proving his ability to be devastating at his best. Smudge will be hoping to improve on his previous best of reaching the last 32 at Ally Pally. In 2022, he missed the match darts in a narrow 4-3 defeat to Van Duynhoven and he'll be aiming to erase that memory with a deep run into the latter stages.

WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

DIMITRI VAN DEN BERGH

ODDS: 50/1
NICKNAME: The Dream Maker
PDC RANKING: 11
DARTS: 23q Target
HOMETOWN: Antwerp, Belgium
ALLY PALLY BEST: Semi-final (2023)
SHOWMANSHIP: Is a must-have for a successful darts player, and in Dimitri van den Bergh, we have one of the best.

The Dream Maker has brought both talent and flair to the PDC stage, making a name for himself with animated walk-ons and clutch performances.

Hailing from Belgium, Dancing Dintiri introduced himself in style with a memorable win at the 2020 World Matchplay, a breakthrough victory that capped off years of hard work including back-to-back World Youth Championships in 2017 and 2018.

Van den Bergh's World Championship journey has been consistent and impressive, with quarter-final appearances in 2018 and 2020 before his historic 2023 run to the semi-finals, making him the first Belgian to reach that stage.



Josh Rock has quickly made a name for himself on the PDC tour

Although he was hailed by a red-hot Michael van Gerwen, his rise to the last four cemented his status as one of Europe's most promising players. He will be hoping to wipe the slate clean after his surprise second round defeat last year.

In 2024, Van den Bergh has shown signs of fading his game to the next level, winning his second major title at the UK Open. In a thrilling final, he clinched victory over reigning world champion Luke Humphries in a deciding leg, proving he has what it takes to win under the highest pressure.

Under his belt, fans can look forward to Dancing Dintiri showing off some of his best moves on the Ally Pally stage.

2018, Noppert quickly landed his first PDC title at a Players Championship event that same year and later made an impressive run to the semi-finals of the Players Championship Finals.

for Noppert, with him never having progressed past the last 32, a barrier he now needs to break to cement his reputation as a true contender.

In 2019, he was runner-up at the World Series Finals, only leading to Michael van Gerwen, and he's represented the Netherlands alongside MvG at the World Cup of Darts.

In 2024, Noppert started strongly, claiming the Players Championship 8 title with an 8-6 victory over reigning world champion Luke Humphries, showing he can go toe-to-toe with elite players in one-day tournaments.

Any Pally, however, has not been a happy hunting ground for Noppert, with him never having progressed past the last 32, a barrier he now needs to break to cement his reputation as a true contender.

last. In 2024, he claimed his first European Tour title at the Dutch Darts Championship, where he beat Jonny Clayton in the final, and his steady success on the Pro Tour, including finals and quarter-final finishes, show he's got the chops to compete with the best.

Rock's debut at the World Championship in 2023 was impressive, reaching the fourth round, but a second-round exit in 2024 will have left him hungry for a better performance this time out.

While the attention of the media will no doubt be on the PDC scene with the kind of energy and talent that makes him one of the hottest young players, and if it weren't for fellow rising star Luke Littler, he'd likely be the name everyone was talking about.

The 23-year-old from Northern Ireland, already a World Youth champion, made a huge impact by throwing a nine-dart finish against Michael van Gerwen in his debut year at the Grand Slam of Darts, which quickly put him on the radar.

PANMAN HETA

ODDS: 50/1
NICKNAME: The Heat
PDC RANKING: 9
DARTS: 23q Gram Harrows
HOMETOWN: Perth, Western Australia
ALLY PALLY BEST: Last 16 (2024)
DAMON: "The Heat" Heta has been setting the darts world ablaze since joining the PDC circuit in 2020.

Heta burst onto the scene with a remarkable 2019 Brisbane Darts Masters victory, topping James Wade and Gary Anderson to become only the second regional qualifier to claim a World Series title.

Since then, he's solidified his place as Australia's top player, including multiple titles, including the historic 2022 World Cup of Darts major.



Damon Heta is looking to turn up the heat at the Ally Pally this winter

with Simon Whitlock, a first for the Aussie. Heta has stayed close to the action throughout 2024, picking up two Players Championship wins, a Masters quarter-final, along with a World Series final against world champion Luke Humphries in New Zealand.

His season has been full of close calls, including a nail-biting World Grand Prix match against 100/1 underdog Mive de Decker, where Heta narrowly missed match darts. As The Heat returns to Ally Pally, fans can expect eccentric walk-ons and his bold moustache to work his Aussie charm on the crowd.

Building on last year's run to the last 16, Heta has his sights set on breaking new ground, and maybe even capturing his first PDC major.

year, he quickly established himself as a force. Wade's record at Ally Pally has seen multiple deep runs, but also surprising early exits in a competition where he has never made the final. In recent years early exits have become more frequent, including back-to-back second-round losses in 2023 and 2024.

The 2024 season has been up and down for Wade. He enjoyed a solid showing at the World Matchplay, reaching the semi-

finals after strong wins over Danny Noppert, Nathan Aspinall and Ross Smith, only to fall to Luke Humphries. With a steady hand and unshakable focus, The Machine heads back to Ally Pally looking to remind us all why he is one of the best to do the PDC circuit.

Although he may look the part of his heavy metal nickname with his flowing locks, Searle is anything but intense in character, known instead for his laid-back demeanour and steady approach.

Since earning his Tour Card in 2017 through two Challenge Tour wins, Searle has steadily built a reputation as one of the PDC's most consistent players.

His breakthrough came in the 2019 World Championship, where he reached the last 16 on debut.

Career highlights include topping Michael van Gerwen to capture his first Pro Tour title in 2020 and pushing Peter Wright to the limit in a thrilling 11-10 final at the 2021 Players Championship Finals.

While 2024 has been quieter, he bounced back from two early-season final defeats to capture a title at Players Championship 3, showcasing he has the resilience it takes to bounce back.

This year, he'll be aiming to surpass his regular third and fourth-round finishes at Ally Pally and make an appearance in the latter stages of a major tournament, but his triumph in Dortmund saw him defeat Gary Anderson and Michael Smith on his way to the final.

His success earned him £120,000 - almost doubling his career earnings to this point.

With his new-found confidence, Searle has dedicated respect ahead of the World Championship at Ally Pally where he has never progressed beyond the last 64.

The question now is whether lightning can strike twice as Exhouse follows back to cause another shock.

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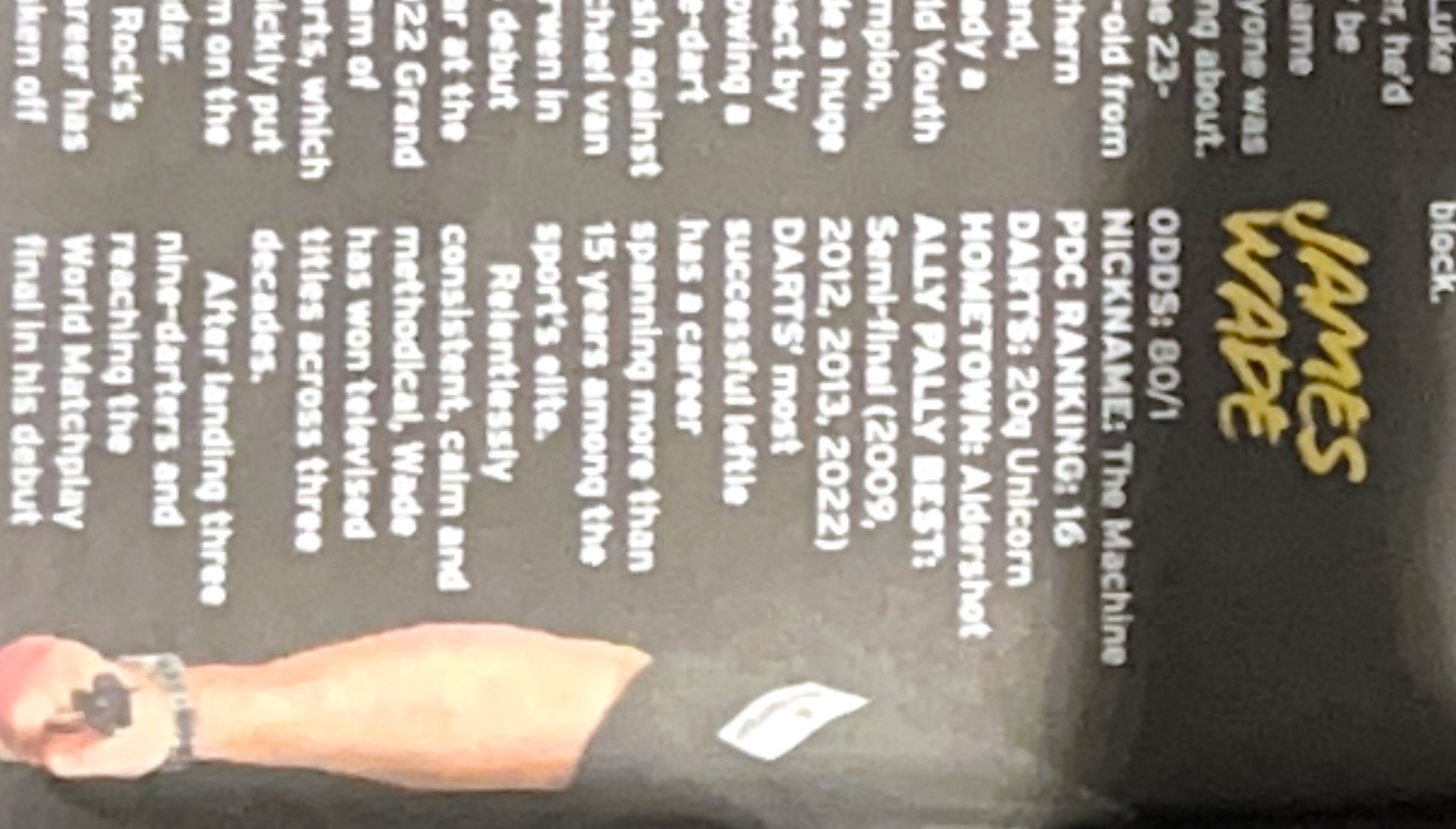
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Belgian Dimitri van den Bergh



Heavy Metal Ryan Searle has never made it past the last 16 at the World Championship



James Wade and, right, Danny Noppert



RYAN SEARLE

FROM LEFT: GETTY IMAGES, ALEX PAIN, GETTY IMAGES



WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

WILL CHAMP KEEP COOL AND JOIN LEGENDS?

BY HARRY CRICHTON

COOL. Hand Luke is back. The world champion has had a year to savour - and he's ready to do it all over again. And what a year it has been. From claiming the sport's biggest prize at Ally Pally to capturing the World Matchplay and Players Championship titles, showcasing remarkable consistency across the

Humphries relishing chance to retain his world crown

calendar, Humphries has firmly established himself at the top of the tree as the world number one. But as the festive season approaches, all eyes turn once

again to the World Championship, and there is only one question on everyone's mind: can he do it again? "This year has been a

success regardless of what happens," Humphries reflects. "I've won a major - the second biggest one that you can win - I have won the World Cup, I have made major finals in the UK Open, Grand Prix and Premier League. Arguably, I have been more consistent and better than I was last year."

That consistency has set Humphries apart. A stellar Premier League campaign saw him overcome a slow start to finish runner-up, and his Players Championship Finals victory just a handful of weeks ago shows he is finding his best form at the perfect time - just as he did before last year's Worlds.

For a man nicknamed 'Cool Hand', the heat of competition only seems to make him sharper. Time and again, Humphries has proven he thrives when the stakes are at their highest, fully justifying his status as the worthy favourite for the biggest prize in darts.

For Humphries, though, while everyone else's mind is firmly fixed on Ally Pally, at 29, it's about more than titles.

It's about consistency. It's about legacy. It's about proving, again and again, that he belongs at the top. "I think my game is in a good place, and if I can keep this level of play up over the next five years, I can definitely pick up another five, six, seven or even eight majors," he says. "But that's all down to me and how much I put in."

Defending the World Championship is one of darts' toughest tasks. Only a handful of players - Phil Taylor, Adrian Lewis and Gary Anderson - have managed back-to-back titles. But Humphries embraces the challenge. "It's the best time of the year for me," he says. "You have the Grand Slam, the Players and the Worlds. All the media hype that comes with it gets you excited. It's the best part of the darting calendar."

Humphries knows the competition will be fierce. While fans dream of a repeat clash with Luke Littler - which is set for the semi-final due to

Two-time world champion Gary Anderson defended Humphries this year



Luke Humphries seals his World Championship victory with a kiss



A triumphant Luke Humphries raises the trophy in front of the Ally Pally crowd after his World Championship final victory against Luke Littler in January

average in any of those games and that separates top-ranked players and the lower-ranked players. "Could we see an upset? Yes. Will we see an upset? Probably not. I think there is a smaller group of players who can win world titles than can win majors, but if there was a world No.26 or something that won't, it wouldn't shock me too much."

With the year he has had, Humphries' ability to dominate high-pressure moments has made him the player with a target on his back - the one to beat, but perhaps one others fear to face.

There is no greater compliment in sport than to be feared as an opponent. You hear stories of teams seeing Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo in the tunnel at Old Trafford during the Ferguson era, knowing the game was over before it even started. "When you are a 'Michael van Gerwen' of the sport, you have got a fear factor,"

Humphries says. "At the moment there are a few players that have it. Obviously, Luke Littler has got it. I think I've got it because I've seen a lot of people that are not at their best against me. "I don't think there's just us three, there's a group of players that have that fear factor. But in a way, I don't think the players really look into that fear factor situation. I think that's a little bit cliché, to be honest."

In the months since last year's World Championship, much of the media attention has centred on Littler, whose meteoric rise has captivated casual fans and brought unprecedented attention to the sport.

The "Battle of the Lukes" may have been the tournament's defining narrative, but it was Humphries who walked away with the trophy - and he did so in his trademark, unflappable style. Yet, despite his victory, it's Littler who has dominated

headlines ever since. As a result, Humphries has quietly gone about his business this year, almost flying under the radar. You could even argue he's been somewhat overlooked.

Gary Anderson certainly thought so, stepping in to defend Humphries earlier this year with some choice words about the perceived favouritism toward Littler, before James Wade reiterated the point.

"It's nice to have their backing," Humphries says. "I don't think they were being negative toward Luke or any other players. I think they were just saying you can push two players, not just one. "It doesn't bother me. I'm 29 and I have a family. All I care about is being at home with my family, enjoying myself and winning major tournaments."

For Humphries, it's not just about trophies but sustained excellence. "You are not going to see me winning five majors a year - although you never know what could happen - but I am a realist," he says. "I kind of get more of a buzz from winning world championships than I would from winning half a million. It's what I thrive on - winning titles. Everything else comes with it as an extra."

With his confidence high and his form impeccable, Humphries heads into Ally Pally as the reigning champion and a player at the peak of his powers. Cool, composed and clinical, he has become the consummate champion. The target on his back may be bigger than ever, but Humphries wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's been a great ride regardless of what happens. I have done myself justice, and I have done myself justice over the year," he says. Now, it's time to see if he can do what only the greatest sportsmen have achieved - cement his place in darting immortality.

Darts campaign is a Smart move, says Humphries

■ by HARRY CRICHTON

WORLD champion Luke Humphries has thrown his weight behind "Darts on Your Doorstep" - a new initiative launched by the PDC in partnership with Smart Energy GB.

The campaign aims to revolutionise grassroots darts by equipping venues with professional-grade facilities, inspiring the next generation of players.

As part of Smart Energy GB's role as the Official Energy Partner of the PDC, makeovers will reach more than 250 clubs in the first year, with venues across the UK invited to register for their chance to participate.

Reflecting on the campaign, Humphries shared how it resonates with his own experience as a young player.

"When I was 13, my darts board was battered, the oche was just a piece of tape, and the light was broken," he recalled.

"Hopefully, this initiative will create perfect conditions for young players. A fresh board, proper lighting, a real oche, all in a safe and supportive environment."

Humphries hopes to inspire up-and-coming players, and sees the initiative as the perfect way to keep young people engaged in darts.

"This is a great initiative, and it's important for me as the current world champion and world No.1 to promote it," he said.

"It's about inspiring the next generation and giving them opportunities I didn't have."

The campaign comes at a pivotal moment for the sport.

With a growing number of young players accessing professional pathways like the Junior Darts Corporation (JDC) academies, the future of darts is brighter than ever.

"Darts is becoming increasingly popular," said Humphries.

"It's easier to pick up than other sports. You can play darts whenever and however you want."

"For young players, there's so much opportunity now. If I'd had this at 13, I could have reached my level maybe three or four years earlier."

"And it's good for the sport. In the next 10 years, a lot of those players are going to get good, and they're going to make a career out of it."

"With the money in the sport nowadays, it's a great opportunity for a lot of youngsters."

The partnership also introduces the Smart Energy GB Darts Challenge, where clubs can compete to win a bespoke dart-fitting experience with official equipment supplier Winmau.

The initiative also aims to improve the playing experience at grassroots clubs, ensuring that players of all levels can enjoy a more professional set-up.

Humphries is optimistic about the impact this will have on young players, describing it as a potential game-changer for the sport.

"In my opinion, darts will be the second-biggest sport below football in the next five years in terms of participation and popularity," he said.

"It's great to be part of an era where there's such a massive want for it."



■ Darts on your Doorstep is aimed at attracting the next generation of players



IT'S THE TALENTED TEEN FACE OF DARTS

Luke's gone from a nobody to the future of the game in 12 months

■ **HARRY CRICHTON**
LUKE Littler's pre-match routine wouldn't look out of place in a school canteen. A chicken katsu curry before the game, a Boost bar, and a handful of Squashies during it – hardly the fare of a typical sports superstar.

But then, Littler is anything but typical. At just 17 he's already a millionaire, a darts prodigy, and tipped by many to dominate the sport for years to come.

Last year at Ally Pally, Littler walked onto the stage as a virtual unknown, a teenage wildcard seemingly

destined for a steep learning curve.

You all know what happened next. He became the youngest player to reach a PDC World Championship final, delivering one of the most compelling sports stories in recent memory. Around 48million people turned in to watch the final against Luke Humphries, making it the most-watched

non-football sports event ever on Sky.

Littler's rise has sparked a wave of media attention and a buzz around darts that hasn't been seen in years. The Nike is now a household name, the 2025 tournament favourite, and we can't stop talking about him.

Despite the weight of expectation that comes with his meteoric success, Littler handles it like a professional. He's been doing this for years.

Speaking on talkSPORT, he said with casual confidence: "I feel I can beat anyone. I've played most of the people competing this year, and most of the time, I've got the better of

them." It's hard to argue with that. In the past 12

months, Littler has climbed from a virtually unknown 16th in the PDC rankings to fifth in the world. Along the way, he has amassed 10 titles, including two major championships, and crossed the £1m mark in prize money.

Most seasoned pros spend a lifetime chasing those achievements.

For Littler, it's been one whirlwind season. His most recent triumph at the Grand Slam of Darts encapsulated everything that makes him special. In a stunning 16-3 victory over Martin

Lukeman in the final, he rattled off 15 consecutive legs, winning the match in just 35 minutes.

That kind of dominance is rarely seen at this level, let alone from a teenager. Yet Littler takes it all in his stride.

"I always carry confidence," he says. "When I went 2-0 down against Martin, I just told myself, 'I'm in a real game here', and then, to be honest, I ran away with it."

It's hard to believe that, just a year ago, Littler was a name only die-hard darts fans might have recognised.

Now, he's being talked about as the future face of the sport – a player whose trajectory could see him transcend darts in the way Tiger Woods did for golf or Roger Federer for tennis.

the great Barry Hearn have made their stance clear: Littler could dominate for decades.

And Littler himself is under no illusions about his potential. "I know I'm going to be in the darts game for years and years," he says. "I'll back myself to win at least one World Championship."

That kind of self-assurance doesn't come without hard work, but Littler's talent has been apparent since childhood.

His journey began humbly, with a pound shop magnetic dartboard his dad bought when he was just 18 months old. By six, he was hitting 180s. By 13, he nailed his first nine-dart finish. At 16, he became the youngest player to reach a PDC World Championship final.

His debut at the tournament saw him break records with a 106-12 average in his first match and a run that took him to a showdown with Humphries – the Battle of the Lukes. Humphries came out on top that day, but Littler is

LUKE AT LARGE
Luke's stunning 2024 triumphs

Premier League
World Series of Darts
Grand Slam of Darts
Bahrain Darts Masters
Poland Darts Masters
Belgian Open
Austrian Open
Players Championship 1
Players Championship 15
Players Championship 20



Luke Littler with the Premier League trophy

"I'll practise when I get down there and then just before the match."

Away from the oche, Littler enjoys the spoils of his success. He recently upgraded his family home. He's also secured a lucrative modelling deal with BeethoMxN, further cementing his status as darts' new golden boy. A darts player model – you don't hear that often.

Even British acting star Millie Bobby Brown

admitted on The Jonathan Ross Show that she's a huge fan, a revelation Littler casually shrugged off with his trademark ease.

For all his success, Littler remains disarmingly grounded. When he's not playing darts, he's just a teenager enjoying FIFA with his mates or tucking into a kebab.

"I'm actually sat in my mates' car now," he laughs during the interview. "Life on the road can be tough, but you've got to get out of the hotel room and just go out for a bit."

Littler's charm and natural talent have won him legions of fans, and his walk-ons have become a spectacle in themselves. "The walk-on plays a big factor in your game," he says. "Seeing the fans, signing stuff, seeing your friends and family – it gets the crowd on your side, and you just get ready to go."

A lifelong wrestling fan, Littler even revealed his walk-on inspiration came from attending WrestleMania 33 with his dad.

prompting WWE legend John Cena to post a cryptic Instagram tribute to the young darts star.

As he prepares for this year's World Championship, Littler knows the challenges ahead. Rivalries with established Michael van Gerwen, Michael Smith and Humphries are heating up, and the competition is fierce.

Yet he relishes the prospect of going toe-to-toe with the sport's best. "There's always nerves," he admits. "The big lights, you're on TV, loads of fans, but it always takes that leg or two to get involved in the game."

Then you can just throw with freedom. "There's always a factor in your game," he says. "Whether it's his rapid rise or his record-breaking achievements, he plays with a fearlessness that sets him apart."

At just 17, his story is only just beginning, but one thing is already clear: Luke Littler is here to change the game.



■ Luke Littler took Ally Pally by storm last year as he reached the final of the World Championship. This time he is out to go one better



LUKE LITTLER: TOM JENNINGS/CITY IMAGES



WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

LUKE CAN TAKE MY WORLDS RECORD

Legend Taylor insists Littler has ability to top his tally of 16 titles

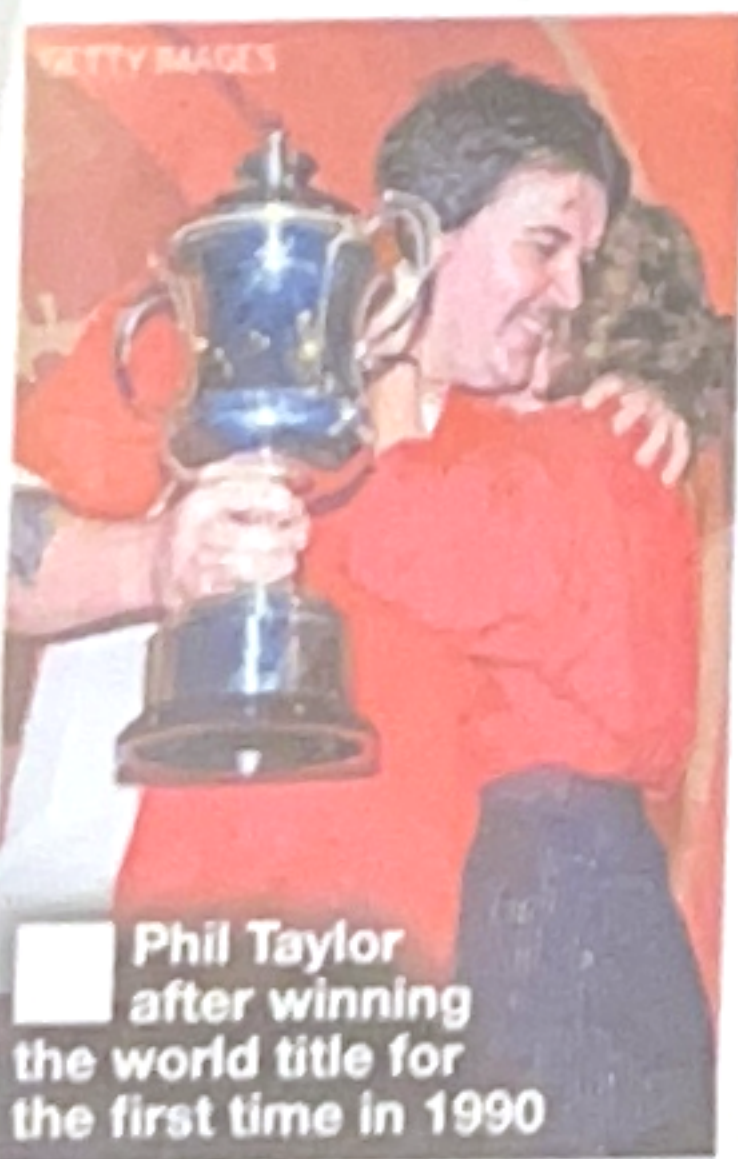
■ by HARRY CRICHTON
PHIL Taylor reckons his record of 16 world titles might not be safe as the sport he helped transform continues to evolve.

The Power needs no introduction. He is the undisputed greatest of all time with 16 World Championships to his name, 16 World Matchplays, a staggering 214 professional tournament wins and an unmatched 85 major titles.

His dominance in the sport is unparalleled.

When he speaks, the darts world listens.

And he has plenty to say



Phil Taylor after winning the world title for the first time in 1990

about the sport's newest superstar, Luke Littler.

"I hope not!" Taylor says on talkSPORT with a chuckle when asked whether the teen can take his World Championship record tally.

"I tell you what though, if there was anybody that could do it, it's this young lad now. He's got the age on his side, and he's got the ability. So you never know."

Taylor has spent time with Littler and couldn't hide his admiration for the teenager's poise and attitude.

In an era where money often drives ambition, the 17-year-old seems to be cut from a different cloth.

"I was with him a couple of weeks ago, and he just plays his game. He is a typical teenager, you know. And he isn't motivated by prize money," Taylor said.

"It's great, don't get me wrong. He's more interested in looking after his mother and father. It's lovely to see, because I've seen so many players where they start earning money, and that ruins their career."

"But this lad, he just sits there. He's quiet as a mouse. He's lovely company to be with, to be honest."

Taylor believes Littler's success is part of a broader evolution in the sport, one that has changed dramatically since his heyday.

"Without a shadow of a doubt, the sport's improved all round to be honest with you," Taylor says.

"The main thing for darts is the equipment's changed."

"When Eric Bristow was playing, they had round wires on the board. You had a lot of bounce outs. The trebles weren't as big as they are now. And the darts manufacturers have improved tremendously."

"So it is an easier game now, but you have got a lot more people dedicated to it. The game's changed completely, especially money-wise."

"That's what's getting people involved – the money and the fame. It's absolutely fantastic."

Despite the glamour of modern darts, Taylor remains grounded in his advice for Littler, emphasising the importance of balance in a sport with an increasingly demanding schedule.

With more tournaments than ever before, players are travelling constantly, chasing rankings and prize money at the expense of rest and recovery.

TAYLOR'S 16 TITLES

YEAR	FINAL	SCORE
2013	Van Gerwen	7-4
2010	Whitlock	7-3
2009	Van Barneveld	7-1
2006	Manley	7-0
2005	Dudbridge	7-4
2004	Painter	7-6
2002	Manley	7-0
2001	Part	7-0
2000	Priestley	7-3
1999	Manley	6-2
1998	Priestley	6-0
1997	Priestley	6-3
1996	Priestley	6-4
1995	Harrington	6-2
1992	Gregory	6-5
1990	Bristow	6-1

1990 & 1992 were BDO titles

"Luke won the Grand Slam, and there's another tournament the next weekend down in Minehead with the Players Championship Finals. It's crazy. I don't know how they do it."

"They'll end up having to do what Gary Anderson does and have to pick and choose."

"If you're tired, don't go, because all you're doing is

ruining your reputation, really. You're only as good as your last game."

The current crop of darts stars are carving out their own rivalries and moments of brilliance, but the trail for these players was blazed by unforgettable characters from Taylor's generation.

"I started with Jocky (Wilson) and Eric (Bristow). I always played pairs with Jocky. And I still smile when I say his name. I loved him to bits, honestly, one of the biggest characters I've ever met in my career," Taylor recalls with fondness.

Those rivalries and partnerships were all about personality and drama, drawing fans to the sport.

Wilson and Bristow brought flair and charisma to the oche, while Taylor's dominance created an aura that defined an era and elevated darts to new heights.

Taylor's own career was marked by moments of high drama, none more iconic than his comeback in the 2004 World Championship final against Kevin Painter – a game that went all the way to a sudden-death leg.

"He got me. And what I also did was I put myself under

Phil Taylor following the last of his 16 world titles with victory over Michael van Gerwen

pressure, so I was tensing up," Taylor says.

"So I just looked at the score, and thought, 'Well, you might as well just enjoy it now, because you're going to get beat anyway.' And all of a sudden, I relaxed, and the darts started coming."

It's this kind of composure under pressure that Taylor believes defines champions, and it's something he already sees in Littler, the rising star he thinks could dominate the sport in years to come.

"It's all about relaxing, and that's what young Luke does," Taylor says.

"He doesn't drink, he just sits there and he's doing the other players' heads in. He just sits there. He doesn't do anything. He hardly practises."

"He must practise, obviously, because he's that good. Blimey heck, what a player."

As Taylor reflects on his career and the sport he helped transform, his enthusiasm for the next generation is clear.

He's excited to watch Littler carve his own path and maybe, just maybe, take a run at that legendary record.

"Honestly, I would not bet against him," Taylor says. "Definitely."

GET READY TO GO BUNTING MENTAL

by HARRY CRICHTON

STEPHEN Bunting doesn't lose on Wednesday nights.

For three years, the world No.8 has reigned supreme in his local darts league. But as he gears up for the sport's grandest stage at Ally Pally, he's proving that no oche is too small to leave his mark.

The 39-year-old has turned 2024 into something of a breakthrough year. Already a staple on the PDC circuit, Bunting boasts a semi-final finish at the 2021 World Championship and years of consistency at the sport's highest levels.

But this year, he's not just contending – he's winning. His February triumph at the Masters, where he outclassed some of the game's biggest names, has solidified his status as a genuine contender. Write him off at your peril – "The Bullet" is locked, loaded, and aiming for glory.

For Bunting, darts is as much about staying connected to his roots as it is about rising to the occasion on the grandest stages, which

Can the grounded crowd hero cause an upset?

is why he still plays on Wednesday nights in his local darts league.

Speaking to Ladbrokes, the sponsors of the UK Open and Players Championship Finals, he said: "The local darts is great. I'll never forget my roots, and I've been playing for the last three years now."

Remarkably, Bunting remains unbeaten in his local league during that time.

But even for a PDC professional, local darts is not for the faint-hearted.

"Sometimes it's actually harder to play local league because you're expected to win – and you've got the added pressure of being in a team, so you don't want to let your team-mates down. The pressure of that is immense," he explained.

Despite this, he relishes the camaraderie and simplicity of his weekly darts outings,

which offer a grounding counterpoint to the intensity of his professional commitments, and an opportunity to let loose with his mates.

Bunting's rise in darts has been methodical. A former BDO world champion and two-time BDO World Masters champion, his transition to the PDC in 2015 marked a turning point.

He walks out to the song Titanium, a fitting anthem for a player who has consistently proven his mettle.

His semi-final run in 2021 and quarter-final appearance in 2023 highlight his ability to thrive on the World Championship stage.

However, 2024 has been particularly special.

Bunting stunned the darts world with a decisive victory at the Masters earlier this year. En route to the title, he toppled reigning world champion Luke Humphries before defeating Michael van Gerwen 11-7 in the final.

His dominance in that tournament – winning 37 of 55 legs in 15 darts or fewer – set the tone for the year.

Bunting continued to deliver consistent performances across various tournaments elsewhere, including a quarter-final finish at the UK Open and deep runs in several European Tour events.

And while Bunting's darts career has soared, his personal life has been just as eventful. The recent arrival of his second son added a new dimension to his already busy schedule.

"Leading into the Grand Slam, I didn't put that much preparation in because I was at the hospital with [wife] Keila," he revealed. "But you never forget how to play darts, and sometimes a rest is as good as being on the board."

And despite his demanding travel schedule, Bunting makes an effort to be present when he's home.

"When I'm here, I try and make myself useful... even if it's just making cups of tea or looking after dinner," he said.

His eldest son, Toby, has also stepped into the role of big brother with enthusiasm.

Balancing the pressures of professional darts with family life isn't easy, but for Bunting, it's a source of strength and perspective.



Stephen Bunting has had an impressive year, which included winning the Masters (below)



CATHERINE IVILL/GETTY IMAGES

Unless you've been living under a rock or stumbled across this paper in the depths of the Amazon Rainforest, you've heard of Luke Littler.

And Bunting has been effusive in his praise for the sport's new superstar, often highlighting the 'Luke Littler Effect' – a surge of youthful energy and enthusiasm that has transformed the game.

For Bunting, the impact has been unmistakable, manifesting in unique and surprising ways.

"Luke's brought so much attention to our game from a younger audience and I've even noticed it myself," Bunting shared.

"I went to JD for a pair of trainers, not long back, and there must have been about 15 to 20 kids following me in

for pictures and autographs! That's never happened before... that's the Luke Littler effect."

Bunting is quick to credit the teenager's composure and maturity, qualities that belie his age.

"He's such a nice lad, very unassuming," Bunting noted. "He just seems to have his head screwed on."

While Littler's rise has been meteoric, Bunting's own story is a reminder of the long-term dedication it takes to build a successful darts career.

"It's an interesting time for darts," Bunting reflected. "We're all very lucky to be playing in the era of Luke."

As the World Championships approach, Bunting's focus is clear.

Every sport has its defining stage. Tennis at Wimbledon,

boxing at Madison Square Garden and snooker at The Crucible. For darts, Ally Pally is it. For players such as Bunting, it's the ultimate arena to etch their names into the history books.

This year, with momentum on his side, he'll be eager to go further than the semi-finals, and he just might have his best chance yet to do something truly special.

Notable about Bunting is his likeability. He disarms fans with his composure and singalong walkout.

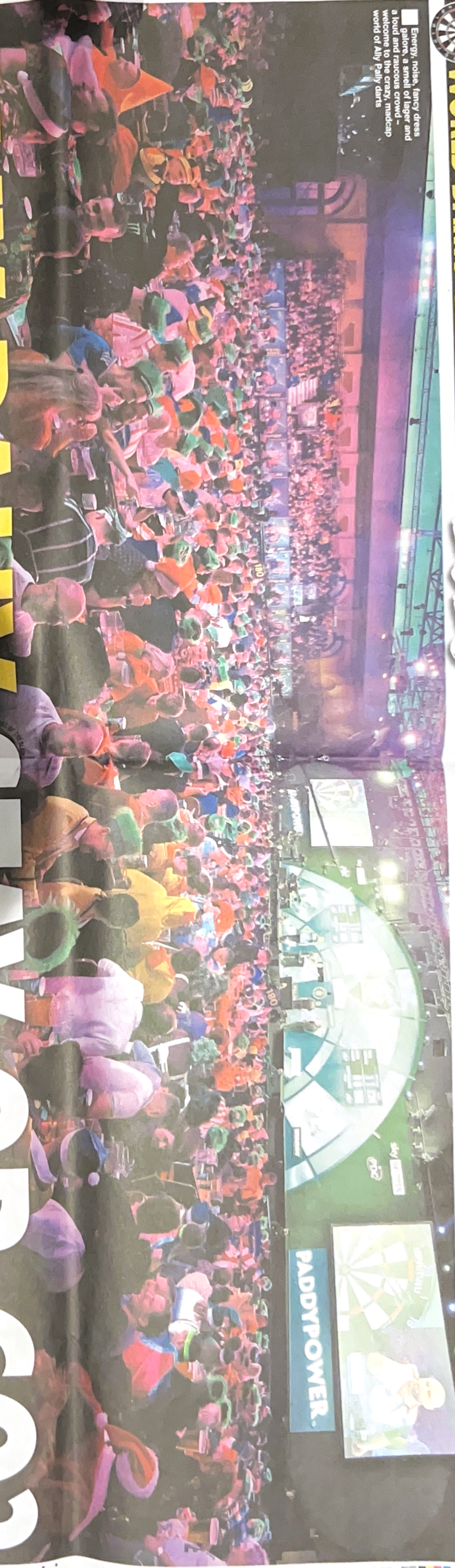
As the crowd belts out the lyrics – "I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose, fire away, fire away" – it's clear the words embody him perfectly.

One thing is for sure, we'll all be going Bunting Mental if he pulls off an upset at this year's World Championship.



Energy, noise, fancy dress galore, a smell of lager and a loud and raucous crowd – welcome to the crazy, madcap world of Ally Pally darts

WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023



ALLY PALLY STAY OR GO?

■ BY HARRY CRICHTON

THE cold, tipsy, December walk up the hill to Alexandra Palace has the feeling of a pilgrimage for darts fans.

The chill in the air only fuels the growing excitement as thousands in every costume imaginable – jockeys, traffic cones, the odd lobster – clamour up, Santa hats pulled low and anticipation high.

Ally Pally has become the place where tradition and pure spectacle merge. Where the sport's serious stakes coexist with carnival fun.

Stepping inside, the energy is immediate, almost physical. The smell of lager hangs in the air, mingling with the loud hum of hundreds of voices.

Fans file into the hall, the tables stretching endlessly, the chants start, the pitchers flow, and somewhere up there, the darts probably happens – though, let's be honest, half the time you're too busy chanting at the board, boofing, tables to actually catch much of it.

For a moment, it doesn't feel like just darts – it's a festival, an event that's grown far beyond its pub-game roots to become a staple of the sporting calendar.

When the night ends, people spill back down the hill, voices hoarse, wondering where the hours went and if they can find an excuse to do it all again tomorrow.

Ally Pally isn't just a venue, it's the beating heart of the darts calendar, a stage that has witnessed the sport's transformation.

For many, the venue is darts, and nothing else could feel quite the same.

But the days of Ally Pally as darts' spiritual home might be numbered. The sport is growing like never before, and anyone who has tried to buy tickets knows that the 3,000 capacity venue sells out every session before general sale even begins.

With an increasingly global audience, the future of the event at the Palace hangs in the balance.

While many fans can't imagine the championship anywhere else, others see potential for a fresh setting to take the reins. Could Ally Pally's reign as the heart of darts come to an end?

We asked those involved in the sport for their thoughts...

The verdict from Gerwyn Price: It's nothing special

GERWYN Price, the 2021 World Champion, has voiced strong opinions in favour of relocating, citing issues with crowd behaviour.

Price, who has often faced a hostile reception from audiences at Ally Pally, even pushing him to come on stage in a pair of ear defenders in 2022, believes a change of venue could improve the overall experience.

He wrote on Instagram: "Maybe it's the way forward, less drunken hoodlums that aren't fans, causing fights, that turn up once in a blue moon. It spoils/detracts the outcome of the game in what's the most important event of the year for the players."

"If you want that atmosphere there's four months of it with the Premier League. People can still enjoy themselves without alcohol!"

The verdict from Barry Hearn: You can't rule out potential elsewhere

BARRY Hearn, Matchroom President and ex-PDC President, acknowledges the challenges of maintaining the World Championship at Alexandra Palace as the sport continues its meteoric growth. The demand for tickets, which regularly outstrips availability, supports his argument for expanding or possibly relocating the event.

"We reckon we could sell 250,000 tickets for the World Championship, and they wouldn't fill in Ally Pally," he explained. The potential to sell more tickets is a strong incentive, but Hearn also recognises that the unique atmosphere of Ally Pally, "The essence of darts is it's party time," he added. "And this is central to the event's appeal."

Hearn has even discussed the possibility of hosting the tournament in money-rich Saudi Arabia, a country keen to enter the darts scene.

Speaking to the *The Mirror*, Hearn said: "I have spoken to the Saudis and they were very keen. They're not ready yet, but they won't be far along."

For Hearn, as darts grows internationally, finding the right balance between preserving tradition and expanding capacity is crucial.

The verdict from Michael Smith: Stay put - it's iconic

SMITH Stay put - it's iconic

FOR 2023 world champion Michael Smith, there's no question that the World Championship belongs at Ally Pally.

Smith sees the north London venue as an irreplaceable setting that defines the tournament's identity, and he's adamant any changes should be within its iconic walls, not outside of them.

"Ally Pally, we should move rooms, not move venues," he told the *Daily Mirror*, referring to the larger room in the venue that could hold six to seven thousand people. To Smith, Ally Pally holds a status that's more than just sentimental.

"It's an iconic thing," he said. "You're not going to move the Matchplay because it's at the Winter Gardens. It's iconic. No one ever calls it the World Champs, they say 'I'm going to watch the darts at Ally Pally.'"

For Smith, that recognition is irreplaceable, and moving would break a bond that's deeply embedded in darts culture.

The verdict from Matt Porter: A perfect fit, but an eye on the future

MATT Porter, PDC chief executive, very much echoes the sentiment of Michael Smith.

Porter told *Sky Sports*: "Ally Pally is an iconic venue. It is a beloved venue. The World Darts Championship, at Ally Pally, at Christmas, is as natural a fit as Wimbledon, strawberries and cream, and the summer." For Porter, it's not just the main hall that makes the venue special – it's about Ally Pally's fan village, historical character and festive atmosphere that is hard to recreate elsewhere.

However, he remains open to the possibility of moving, given the event's growth demand.

"The event is sold out in July even before it goes on general sale," he noted, acknowledging the need to maximise the opportunity and the revenue for the players.

While he insists Ally Pally is a perfect fit and that "you don't want to fit what is not broken", Porter concedes that if an extraordinary opportunity arose, it might be worth considering.

"It would take something very special for us to leave Ally Pally," he added, making it clear that any shift would have to be justified by something as significant as the championship's history and works for darts.

The Verdict from Wayne Mardle: A move to Saudi could risk a "chill war"

In darts' as-pug-turned-commentator, believes relocating to Saudi Arabia could create deep divisions in the sport, likening it to the turmoil in golf between LIV Golf and traditional tours.

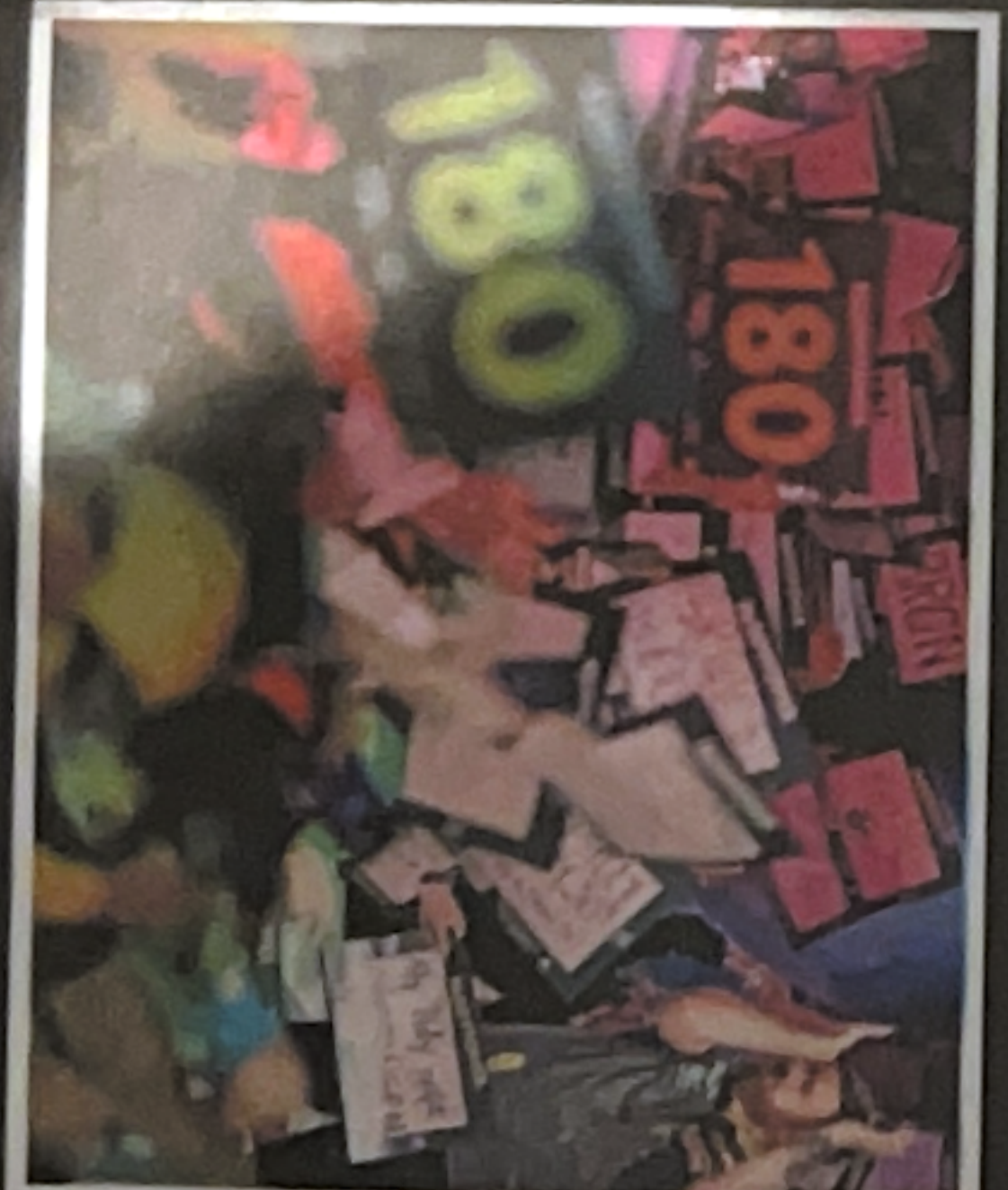
Mardle is clear in his stance: "I don't like it," he said.

"Darts is UK-based, which is why the biggest, best events are predominantly in the UK, because that's where the fanbase is."

While Mardle acknowledges the financial benefits that such a move could bring, he fears it could alienate fans and diminish the authenticity of the championship.

"Take it to Saudi, give them all a million pounds each for turning up, but what if there's no one watching it? Suddenly it becomes a sham," he argued.

For Mardle, Ally Pally has history and works for darts.





WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

THIS TRULY IS THE WORLD CHAMPS!

■ by HARRY CRICHTON
BRITAIN and Europe may well be the hotbed of darts, but the sport is growing around the planet. Here, we take a look at some of the lesser-known international qualifiers who will be competing at Ally Pally this month...

Ally Pally stage is a real global attraction

now earned his debut at the World Championship and his first trip to Ally Pally by topping the DPA Order of Merit, an impressive rise after starting the final weekend in seventh place – winning two events and finishing runner-up in another to clinch the top spot.

It's a journey from the Fraternity Club in Wollongong to London's Alexandra Palace, where Comito is ready to bring a slice of Aussie darts showmanship to the big stage.

TOMOYA GOTO

NATIONALITY: Japanese
QUALIFIED THROUGH: PDJ Japan Tour
TOMOYA Goto returns to Ally Pally this Christmas for his second World Championship appearance, having previously impressed by landing seven 180s in round one and checking out 97 against Ryan Searle in round two.

The 28-year-old secured his spot this year by dominating the Japan Tour Finals in Shizuoka, conceding just seven legs across five matches to claim victory on home soil.

Now, Goto is back and ready to make his mark on the big stage once again.

NITIN KUMAR

NATIONALITY: Indian
QUALIFIED THROUGH: India Qualifier

NITIN Kumar, India's darts trailblazer, is returning to Ally Pally for the fourth time this year, all the way from Kolkata.

Known as 'The Royal Bengal', the 38-year-old is no stranger to televised PDC events having represented India in the World Cup of Darts and featured at the Bahrain Masters in 2023.

Building his reputation on the PDC Asian Tour, Kumar has qualified this year through the India Qualifier where he won all 20 of his matches across the two-day event.

RASHAD SWEETING

NATIONALITY: Bahamas
QUALIFIED THROUGH: CDLC Tour
RASHAD Sweeting made history this year as the first player from the Bahamas to qualify for the World Championship.

Sweeting has secured his qualification through the Championship Darts Latin America and Caribbean Order of Merit, winning two of the four events held in 2024.

Sweeting's journey to Ally Pally has taken him from the oche in Jamaica to Santiago, and now to the

unchartered territory of North London.

An immigration officer by day and darts powerhouse by night, Sweeting is ready to check in at the World Championship.

After nine years in the game, he's proudly carrying the hopes of his nation and is determined to make his homeland proud on the biggest stage of them all.

ZONG XIAO CHEN

NATIONALITY: Chinese
QUALIFIED THROUGH: PDC China Championship
ZONG Xiao Chen, known as 'The Pandaman', has pioneered Chinese darts, consistently showcasing his talent on the international stage.

His journey to the World Championship includes winning the PDC China Premier League in 2022 and 2024 and representing China in multiple World Cup of Darts events.

In 2023, Zong made history as the first player to hit a nine-dart finish in a PDC China streamed event – here's hoping he can recreate this on the Ally Pally stage.

After missing the 2023 World Championship due to an allergy preventing his Covid-19 vaccination, The Pandaman is back and ready to bamboozle his opponents.

RYUSEI AZEMOTO

NATIONALITY: Japanese
QUALIFIED THROUGH: PDC Asian Tour

RYUSEI Azemoto, a rising star from Japan, has gained attention in the darts world through his impressive performances on the PDC Asian Tour, where he clinched four titles in 2024.

Azemoto showcased his skill by securing back-to-back wins in Manila and further victories in Malaysia, establishing himself as a serious contender.

He recently made his debut on the international stage at the World Cup of Darts, representing Japan alongside Tomoya Goto.

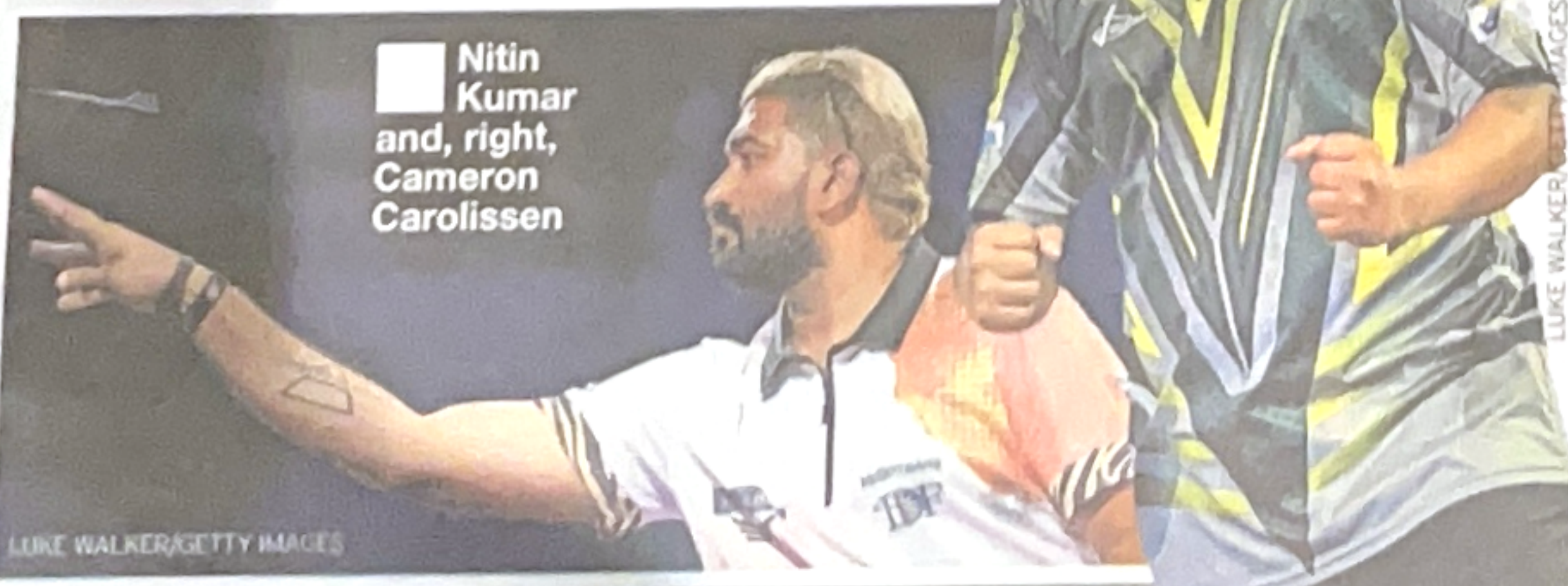
The pair missed multiple match darts to knock out the much-fancied Australian team of Simon Whitlock and Damon Heta.

Tomoya Goto of Japan is back after making his debut last year



PAUL HARRING/GETTY IMAGES

Nitin Kumar and, right, Cameron Carolissen



LUKE WALKER/GETTY IMAGES



Lourence Ilagan is a darts legend in the Philippines

IT'S THE **FAB FOUR** OF THE PHILIPPINES

by HARRY CRICHTON

UNDERNEATH the neon lights of local Filipino bars and small-town sports clubs, a quiet revolution has been brewing. Darts.

Once a modest pastime, it has exploded into the national consciousness, driven by a new wave of talent ready to test their mettle on the world stage.

This year, the World Championship will see an unprecedented Filipino line-up of four players: Lourence Ilagan, Paolo Nebrida, Sandro Eric Sosing, and Alexis Toylo.

For these players, it's more than a tournament – it's a chance to show that the Philippines is ready to stake its

The talent is there, but can they make a mark?

claim as Asia's top darting nation.

Over the past decade, the growth of organised leagues and tournaments has been crucial in transforming darts into a structured and recognised sport in the region.

Key organisations like the National Darts Federation of the Philippines (NDFP) have paved the way, establishing formal competitions that attract players from across the country.

The PDC has also played an

instrumental role in this growth, with the PDC Asia Tour bringing high-stakes tournaments to the region.

This year The Asian Championship was hosted in Manila, giving Filipino players a chance to compete on home soil – a significant step in raising the sport's profile locally and regionally.

Events such as the Darterong Pinoy tournament have drawn record-breaking attendances, with recent

figures reaching over 1,200 participants, underscoring the sport's broad appeal.

And there's serious money in it too. The Philippine Open International Dart Tournament now boasts a prize pool of PHP 9 million (around £120,000), underlining the growing investment in the sport.

Central to the growth of every sport is its idols, and in the Philippines, darts is no exception.

Forget Manny Pacquiao – they've got Lourence Ilagan.

As one of the Philippines' most seasoned and successful darts players, 'The Gunner' has firmly established himself as the face of Filipino darts on the global stage.

He returns to the hallowed walls of The Palace for his ninth World Championship this Christmas.

His career took off in the world of soft-tip darts, where he claimed an impressive set of titles. Yet it's his performances at Ally Pally that have solidified his status as a trailblazer, making him a recognised and respected figure on the PDC circuit.

Ilagan's journey isn't

just about personal success, it's a path that has paved the way for a generation of Filipino players aspiring to make their mark internationally.

Following in Ilagan's footsteps, Paolo Nebrida, Sandro Eric Sosing, and Alexis Toylo are three emerging talents who bring their own stories to the world stage.

PAOLO NEBRIDA

A TALENT who has steadily risen through the ranks of international darts.

A prominent player in both the PDC and national events, he first made waves in 2014, reaching the final of the Malaysian Open in his international debut year before capturing his first major title at the Hong Kong Open.

No stranger to the Ally Pally stage, Nebrida pushed Danny Jansen to the limit in a close first-round battle in 2023, his debut at the World Championship, hitting a ton finish in the second set.

He returns for his third consecutive tournament, having picked up four titles on the PDC Asian Tour in 2024.

SANDRO ERIC SOSING

HE delivered an impressive performance in the PDC Asian

Championship, reaching the final on home turf in Manila.

Though ultimately bested by Ilagan, his strong showing secured him a spot at the World Championship. While a title has eluded him so far, Sosing's breakthrough has placed him among the Philippines' darts talents.

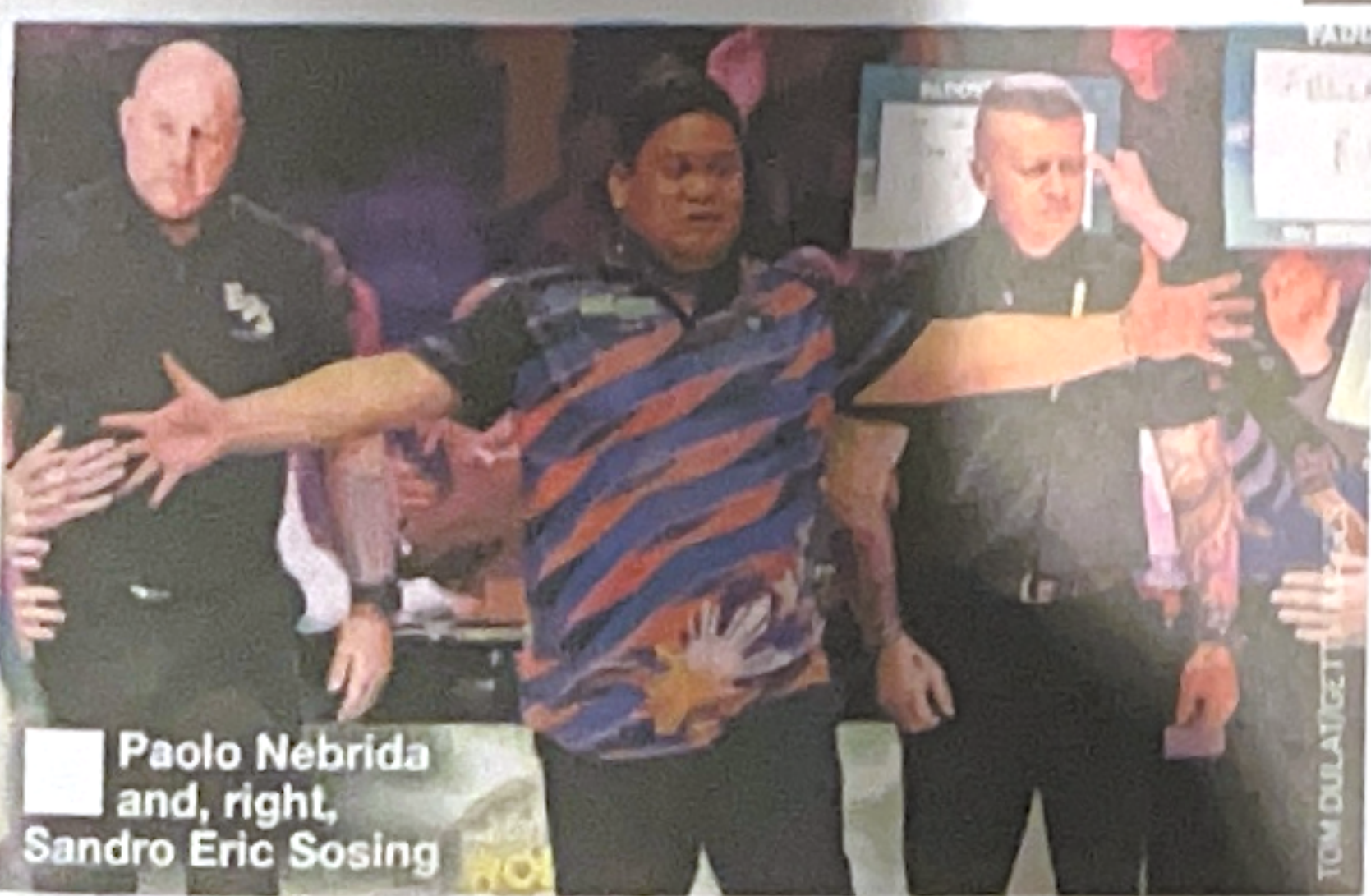
ALEXIS TOYLO

AT 32, Toylo is the youngest of the Filipino foursome and has emerged as a dominant force, claiming five of the first 11 events on this year's PDC Asian Tour.

Toylo is a shining example of the work done by the NDFP, having competed in their youth competitions from the age of 17. He currently holds the highest number of ranking points under their system, with 630 more than Ilagan.

A left-hander with a composed presence, he made his big-stage debut at the World Cup of Darts alongside Ilagan. Now, he's set to make his Ally Pally debut as something of a wildcard.

Together, these four represent a microcosm of the global footprint that darts is establishing. Inspired by Ilagan's path, each has found their own way to the top, proving that Filipino darts is a force with lasting potential.



Paolo Nebrida and, right, Sandro Eric Sosing



Scutt Merits a return to the biggest stage

■ by HARRY CRICHTON

BEHIND the glitz and glamour of the year's majors, hundreds of players battle it out across PDC divisions, fighting to earn their place on the Ally Pally stage.

Connor Scutt is one such player. He has navigated a year of highs and lows to secure his return to darts' spiritual home and regain his PDC Tour card by topping the 2024 Challenge Tour Order of Merit.

After a second-round loss to Gerwyn Price at Ally Pally last year, Scutt lost his place on the PDC Pro Tour, but the 27-year-old from Sussex has bounced back in style.

Heading into the final weekend of the Challenge Tour, he was locked in a tight battle with Wesley Plaisier, with just £50 separating them in the Order of Merit standings.

"It was swapping around so much," Scutt recalled on the Weekly Dartscast podcast. "Wesley would win a game and go top, then I'd win and go top. Once I made the final of the first event, I thought, 'this is the lead that I needed'."

When Plaisier was eliminated early in the second event, Scutt could finally relax, knowing his return to the professional circuit was secure.

"It was quite a wave of emotion, to be fair. I didn't cry, but I nearly did - I got a little bit chokey," he admitted.

This triumph caps a year of standout performances, including a semi-final run at the WDF World Masters, where he thought he had been dumped out in the group stages, only to be called back after a three-way tie in his group led to a nine-dart shootout.

"I was in Tesco shopping, got a nice lasagna to have in

the evening, and yeah, luckily, we received a phone call saying we had to get back to the venue as soon as possible.

"I couldn't believe it. It's quite nice to get a second chance. I knew I had to make the most of it."

His triumph on the Challenge Tour has already earned him his place at the Grand Slam, where Scutt stunned Dave Chisnall with a 5-0 whitewash in the group stages, showing he can mix it with the best of them.

He followed it up with wins over Martin Lukeman, Mario Vandenbogaerde and Daryl Gurney to reach the quarter-finals of the Players Championship Finals, where he took Dirk van Duivenbode to a last-leg decider.

Now, Scutt is turning his attention to Ally Pally.

While some players in his position might have opted for the WDF World Championship at Lakeside, Scutt was clear about his priorities.

"Choosing the World Champs was less about the money differences, more about the crack in the top 64 because that would be a massive head start on next year," he explained.

With no pressure to retain his tour card immediately, Scutt sees this as an opportunity to make his mark, saying: "I've got three bites at the cherry to do something. It would be nice to crack the top 64 just to take a bit of pressure off year one with the card."

Looking ahead, Scutt is optimistic about his future. He said: "Winning a ranking title - that'd be nice, wouldn't it? It would be nice to have a senior title under my belt."

"Hopefully, the Pro Tour will be the next one, or maybe I'll just do a Richie Edhouse and take a major!"

More than anything, Scutt feels ready for this next chapter, adding:

"I feel a lot more comfortable in the room now. I don't feel out of place."

"I know I've got a decent game to combat most opponents, so hopefully I won't lose my card for a while now!"



Connor Scutt is back on the pro circuit

Bright spark Nij ready to make big stage return

■ by HARRY CRICHTON

BANNED for match-fixing, boasting an exceptional record against young rival Luke Littler, and now winning events on the PDC Pro Tour, Wessel Nijman is no stranger to turning heads.

As Littler has taken the media spotlight, however, the 24-year-old Dutchman has been quietly going about his business since earning his Tour Card in 2023.

In his debut year, Nijman has bested Littler at the Baltic Open, cruised to victory on seven occasions on the Development Tour and, most recently, broke his Pro Tour duck by winning Players Championship 24.

Now he's got a chance to be this year's breakout star.

After storming the Dutch and WDF youth rankings and winning on his Development Tour debut in 2020, Nijman's potential was always clear.

But his career took a dark turn that same year when he was banned for match-fixing, admitting to intentionally losing a game against David Evans. Nijman received a five-year suspension, later reduced to two-and-a-half years.

"Obviously, we did it, and I'm the one to blame in the end," Nijman said on The Darts Show Podcast. "I put it aside real fast, but I wasn't too sure if I was coming back to play darts."

The turning point came thanks to darts legend Darryl Fitton, who encouraged Nijman to return to the Development Tour. Since then, he has

gone from strength to strength.

"It has been very fast. It's still fast going. But I think this is the right journey for me. I want to get into the top 32, maybe top 60, maybe even better. But for now, I'm very happy where I'm standing," said Nijman.

With the uncertainty surrounding his sporting career, Nijman juggles professional darts with a demanding day job. Working as an electrician specialising in high-voltage systems, he is yet to commit to darts full-time.

"I didn't have a plan when I was younger, but now I'm working as an electrician. On Monday, I still go to work, so I maybe will have to have a little chat with my boss and talk about the future," Nijman explained.

"I'm lucky that my boss likes what I do. He basically gives me free time whenever I need it, and follows my progress."

While his story is one of redemption and promise, Nijman's return hasn't been without challenges. The match-fixing ban cast a long shadow, but he has remained resilient in the face of online criticism.

"In person, it's never been that difficult. People don't walk up to you and say silly things - they only put it on the internet," he said. "But I'm happy to leave it behind and be how I am right now."

As he prepares for the World Championship, he hopes the iconic Ally Pally stage will provide the platform to showcase his best darts and to begin living up to the potential he displayed in his early career.

"I know I can beat anyone, not just Luke," he says. "But I'm not setting big goals, like saying I want to be a world champion this year or that. I'll just play on and see what happens."

■ Wessel Nijman has bounced back from his ban



SHOWDOWNS, UPSSETS AND TITLES GALORE

by MARY CRICHTON

The darting story of the year heading to Ally Pally

JANUARY THE year began with the fallout from Luke Humphries' World Championship success, but the big names were quickly back in action at the Bahrain Masters. Luke Littler swiftly put his Ally Pally disappointment behind him, cruising to victory and defeating Michael van Gerwen just days before his 17th birthday in his World Series debut.

The teen sensation hit a nine-darter against Nathan Aspinall and knocked out Gerwyn Price in the semis on his way to the final, adding to the future surrounding his staggering rise to fame.

MVG quickly enacted his revenge, defying a 106 average from Littler to lift the Dutch Masters in Don Bosch.

FEBRUARY IT was time for the Premier League to get under way. Michael Smith upset home favourite Gerwyn Price on the opening night in Cardiff before Van Gerwen followed up on night two, overcoming Littler and surviving two match darts to deny the Nuke an early Premier League win.

Littler, never far from the headlines, responded with another nine-darter and a victory in the Players Championship.

For MVG, February was a lucrative month, with a hat-trick of Premier League victories consolidating an eight-point lead at the top of the table.

Van Gerwen met his match in the Masters, however, where Stephen Bunting defeated him to win his first televised PDC title, averaging 102 on the night.

In a busy month, Ryan Searle grabbed the headlines by taking his first title of 2024 in the Players Championship after finishing runner-up in the two opening events the week before.

MARCH THERE was a turn of fortunes for MVG, who was dumped out of the UK Open early by the rearing Mennour Suljovic, who rolled back the years to defeat the pre-tournament favourite.

Dimitri van den Bergh ultimately prevailed in Minehead, taking his second televised ranking crown by seeing off Humphries in the final. In the Premier League, Humphries made it three consecutive victories, winning in Dublin after successes in Brighton and Nottingham.

Nevertheless, Littler broke his duck, picking up his first trophy win in Belfast. He also claimed his first European Tour title on debut, beating Rob Cross in Belgium and, yes, he hit another nine-darter en route.

APRIL A SHOWDOWN between Humphries and MVG on the European Tour saw Humphries beat the Green Machine in spectacular style in the competition where he had picked up his maiden European Tour title two years earlier.

In the Premier League, it was back to winning ways for Van Gerwen, who had lost six of his last seven league matches before arriving in Birmingham on Night 11.

Littler picked up three wins in the Premier League, establishing himself at the top of the table with a five-point lead over his closest rival, Humphries. In the midst of his Premier League domination, he added an Austrian Open title on the European circuit, and, to top it all off, he was

MAY THE headline event came at the Premier League night at the O2, where Littler was at his very best. He produced yet another nine-dart finish to defeat Humphries in front of 14,000 fans in the capital - the biggest UK crowd in PDC history.

After disappointment in London, Humphries picked up his fourth nighty win, routed on by the Leeds United faithful at his home event.

Despite a brilliant career-darner of his own, Humphries was dented by Cross in the Baltic Sea Darts Open as the Volage doubled his tally on the European Tour. Smith finally returned to winning ways, claiming his first ranking title in 11 months at the Players Championship, followed by a Premier League win in Sheffield.

Elsewhere in the Players Championship, Brendan Dolan won his first title in nearly two years in Hildesheim.

JUNE THE big highlight was the World Cup of Darts, where Humphries and Smith guided England to a record-breaking fifth title, overcoming Austria in Frankfurt. The Englishmen delivered the first World Cup



Mike de Decker of Belgium was a 100-1 outsider for the World Grand Prix in Leicester, but he went all the way to see off Luke Humphries 6-4 in October's final

success since 2016, becoming the only players other than Phil Taylor and Adrian Lewis to triumph in the competition.

The tournament produced eyebrow-raising results, notably Cross stunning Wales early on after the title holders were hampered by Price's absence through health issues.

Elsewhere in the competition, tensions ran high as the Belgian pair of Van den Bergh and Kim Huybrechts labelled Van Gerwen and Danny Noppert 'big mouthed' before they knocked out the Dutch duo.

AUGUST THE World Series tour headed to Oceania, where Littler was handed a rare humbling as Price stormed to an 8-1 victory in the Australian Masters final. The stunning display earned Price his second World Series title of 2024.

Despite being the sport's dominant figure in 2024, a World Series title had eluded Humphries, but he broke new ground in New Zealand, defeating Smith, Littler and Dannon Iena.

Peter Wright defied the odds to overcome Littler on the

European Tour in the German Championship, doing so in cruphatic style with a 106.8 average and ten 180s.

However, Littler reminded everyone of his class in the World Series, storming to the lack's World Series title on his debut in Amsterdam, brushing aside Smith in the final to claim four TV crowns in an unprecedented first year as a professional.

For MVG, despite being crushed by Littler, who put nine straight legs past him in Amsterdam, the Green Machine ended a 16-month drought on the European Tour by winning the Hungarian Trophy.

Chisnall also had a strong month, picking up wins on the European Tour in Antwerp and at a Players Championship event in Leicester.

Despite Chazzy's win, it was James Wade's on-stage trouser snitch that took the headlines in Leicester after the English veteran belatedly the cameras had stopped rolling on stage.

SEPTEMBER THIS month belonged to Littler,

Michael van Gerwen was beaten in the final of the World Matchplay at Blackpool's Winter Gardens in July



BEN ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

as the teenage sensation amazed us once again at the World Series Finals, defeating reigning champion Smith in style.

Entering as the top seed, the Nuke backed up his earlier triumphs in Bahrain and Poland to complete a hat-trick of World Series titles, pocketing the £30,000 prize.

Littler didn't stop there, adding another Players Championship title in Wigan to his growing haul.

However, fans were left speculating when Littler skipped the Hungarian Darts Trophy.

Tongue in cheek, he insisted it had absolutely nothing to do with the tournament clashing with the release of E 125!

United, was gracious in defeat, despite being defeated in the final. Anderson reminded the media what a 'load of b---s' it was that Humphries was repeatedly overlooked in big competitions, and Humphries quickly showed us all why the Scot was right to back him by

dumping Littler out of the Czech Open and storming to his 10th title in just over a year.

NOVEMBER As the excitement builds towards the Ally Pally World Championship, the month delivered box office darts with last year's finalists picking up crucial wins ahead of their return to the big stage.

The Grand Slam, one of the marquee PDC events, saw Littler finally clinch his first major ranking title, taking his career earnings past £1m and rocketing to fifth in the PDC Order of Merit.

And, as always, Littler did it with flair, reeling off an astonishing 15 straight legs to dismantle Martin Lukeman 16-3 in the final.

Littler came close to doubling up a week later at the Players Championship but found himself outgunned by Humphries, who defended his title in style, leaving both with big paydays and building anticipation for a showdown at Ally Pally.

Are they peaking at just the right time?



Michael Smith was the centre of attention on the opening night of the Premier League at Cardiff in February