



WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2025

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 larger-than-life promoter whose Midas touch elevated darts from smoky boozers to the Ally Pally stage.

Through his company, Matchroom Sport, Hearn has become one of the most influential figures in darts, eventually serving as

No stopping this sport, says the ringmaster of darts

chairman of the Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) until 2021.

Reflecting on his journey on his podcast 'The Barry Hearn Show', Hearn shared how he transformed darts from pub entertainment to a global spectacle.

In the early 1990s, the

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 slap 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, who'd hit a 170 checkout, 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 darts to have its current reputation, Hearn also credits the players and their personalities, whose

charisma contributes to the sport's excitement.

He hilariously recalls the late Jocky Wilson, a darts legend, dampening fellow pro Rod Harrington's party piece of catching a dart mid-flight by stabbing him in the belly with another dart.

"Jocky was on the floor in hysterics, and Rod was just looking at his shirt as a trickle of blood rolled down. No lasting damage, but that was darts," Hearn laughs.

Darts, however, isn't about practical jokes. Behind it are players who want to win, but these individuals, who honed their skills in pubs and clubs, knew they had to entertain.

"In working men's clubs, you had to be interesting, or people wouldn't come to watch," Hearn says.

"You needed a quick line, a shout-back, an answer."

Perhaps none did this better than the 'Crafty Cockney' Eric Bristow. Around Bristow, Hearn built the characters that now captivate darts fans.

"He had persona," said Hearn. "He had charisma, and he didn't give a monkey. Fans would throw beer cans

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 want headlines and people talking about it."

"You need those characters because they're priceless."

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

When Sky offered a deal, the ratings rocketed. TV brought quirks 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 greaser on the phone saying he's the chicken,' and the team said, 'oh, 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



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



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.

"You've got to spread love and happiness," Hearn adds. "When people go to the darts, they have a great time and tell their mates the next day and this is the ultimate marketing tool."

The potential Hearn saw has been fulfilled – and more – with the 2024 World Championship final between Luke Humphries and Luke Littler attracting the highest non football audience on Sky Sports at 4.8 million.

With Sky's backing, Hearn's ambitions took darts global. Packed arenas across Europe and even Madison Square Garden in New York now sell out in minutes.

"Madison Square Garden sold out for darts, with 70 per cent of the crowd in fancy dress. Where did that come from?" Hearn says.

Hearn's success isn't waning, 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 multi-millionaires."

Hearn's commitment extends to the sport's future through youth programmes such as the Junior Darts Corporation (JDC).

Rising star Littler, who joined the JDC at 10, is already making a significant impact, captivating audiences and redefining the sport for a new generation.

"He could be one of the greats, and that's the sacrifice he has to make," Hearn says.

"He hit a nine-darter in his first match after the World Championship. We're being

entertained by greatness." Littler's presence has been pivotal in attracting a younger audience to the sport. He connects with fans who might not have seen themselves in darts before.

This younger fan base is bringing fresh energy and ensuring the sport's longevity.

As darts continues to evolve, Hearn's influence is evident in every aspect of the sport. His relentless drive to elevate darts has created a thriving community.

Reflecting on his journey, ahead of the World Championship, 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 bellies, 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

Madison Square Garden sold out for darts, with 70 per cent of the crowd in fancy dress
Barry Hearn



WORLD DARTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2025

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 darts 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

this year's seedings - there is no saying who may throw up some surprises, with rank outsiders like Richie Edhouse and Mike de Decker both winning majors at double-figure odds in the run-up to December.

"If you're in the World Championships, you can win it. That's a key point," he says. "Nobody can say that only one, two, three or four people can win. There are 96 who can."

"The difference between winning a world title and winning a major tournament such as the European Championships or the Grand Prix is that it is completely different. You have to be pretty much perfect and you need a bit of luck."

"When you're playing the likes of the top, top players over the best of 13 sets, 11 sets, or nine sets, you have got to be on your A game. You won't get away with playing

Two-time world champion Gary Anderson defended Humphries this year



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 it, 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 you'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 enjoyed myself, 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 have achieved - retain the sport's biggest prize and cement his place in darts' immortality.



Luke Humphries seals his World Championship victory with a kiss

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



LITTLER

THE TALENTED TEEN CHANGING THE FACE OF DARTS

■ by 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

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

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 4.8million people tuned in to watch the final against Luke Humphries, making it the most-watched

non-football sports event ever on Sky. Coincidence? Hardly.

Littler's rise has sparked a wave of media attention and a buzz around darts that hasn't been seen in years.

The Nuke 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 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 164th 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.



Pundits, fans and even

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

peaking at the right time of the season, and few would bet against him this time.

The World Championship looms large in Littler's mind, but he insists he won't be changing much about his approach. While others might lock themselves in the practice room for hours, the teen prefers to keep things loose.

"I won't practise because I've only got three or four days at home," he said ahead of the recent Players Championship finals.

Even British acting star Mollie Bobby Brown

LITTLER 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 15
Players Championship 20



Luke Littler with the Premier League trophy

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 mate's 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."

Freedom, it seems, is Littler's calling card. 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





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



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 – clamber 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 boring, boring, 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

Is moving the championship to Saudi a real possibility?

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 2023, believes a change of venue could improve the overall experience.

He wrote on Instagram: "Maybe it's the way forward, less drunken hooligans that aren't fans, causing fights, that turn up once in a blue moon."

"It spoils/dictates 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."

To Price, moving the championship could help "give back some enjoyment" to both players and fans, free from the distractions of unruly crowds.

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 fit 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 its 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 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
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 growing 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 fix 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 justify parting from a venue so central to the championship's identity.

The Verdict from Wayne Mardle: A move to Saudi could risk a "civil war" in darts
WAYNE Mardle, the legendary ex-pro 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...

CAMERON CAROLISSEN

NATIONALITY: South African
QUALIFIED THROUGH:

African Qualifier
VUVUZELAS, fancy dress and raucous fans brought the PDC Africa Qualifier to life on social media.

And its eventual winner, Cameron Carolissen, will be no stranger to the electric atmosphere awaiting him at Ally Pally. The South African from Cape Town returns for his second appearance, having previously qualified in 2021 when he was knocked out by Danny Noppert.

Carolissen, nicknamed 'The Javelin', is set to spearhead a wave of African flair at the World Championship as he hits the oche.

JOE COMITO

NATIONALITY: Australian
QUALIFIED THROUGH: DPA Pro Tour

JOE Comito, from Harvey, Australia, began his darts journey at 21 inspired by his father's love for the game.

Just four years later, he claimed his first Australian title, setting off a career defined by determination and resilience. The 43-year-old has

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.

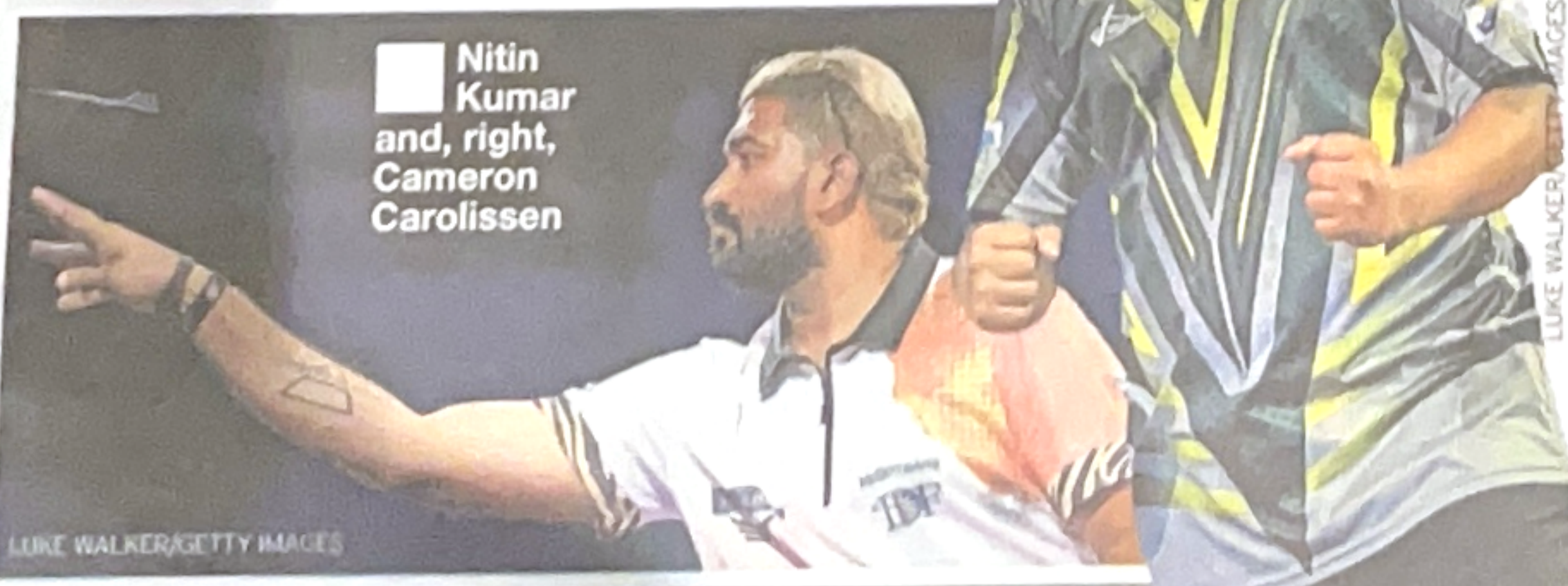
The pair missed multiple match darts to knock out the much-fancied Australian team of Simon Whitlock and Damon Heta.

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.

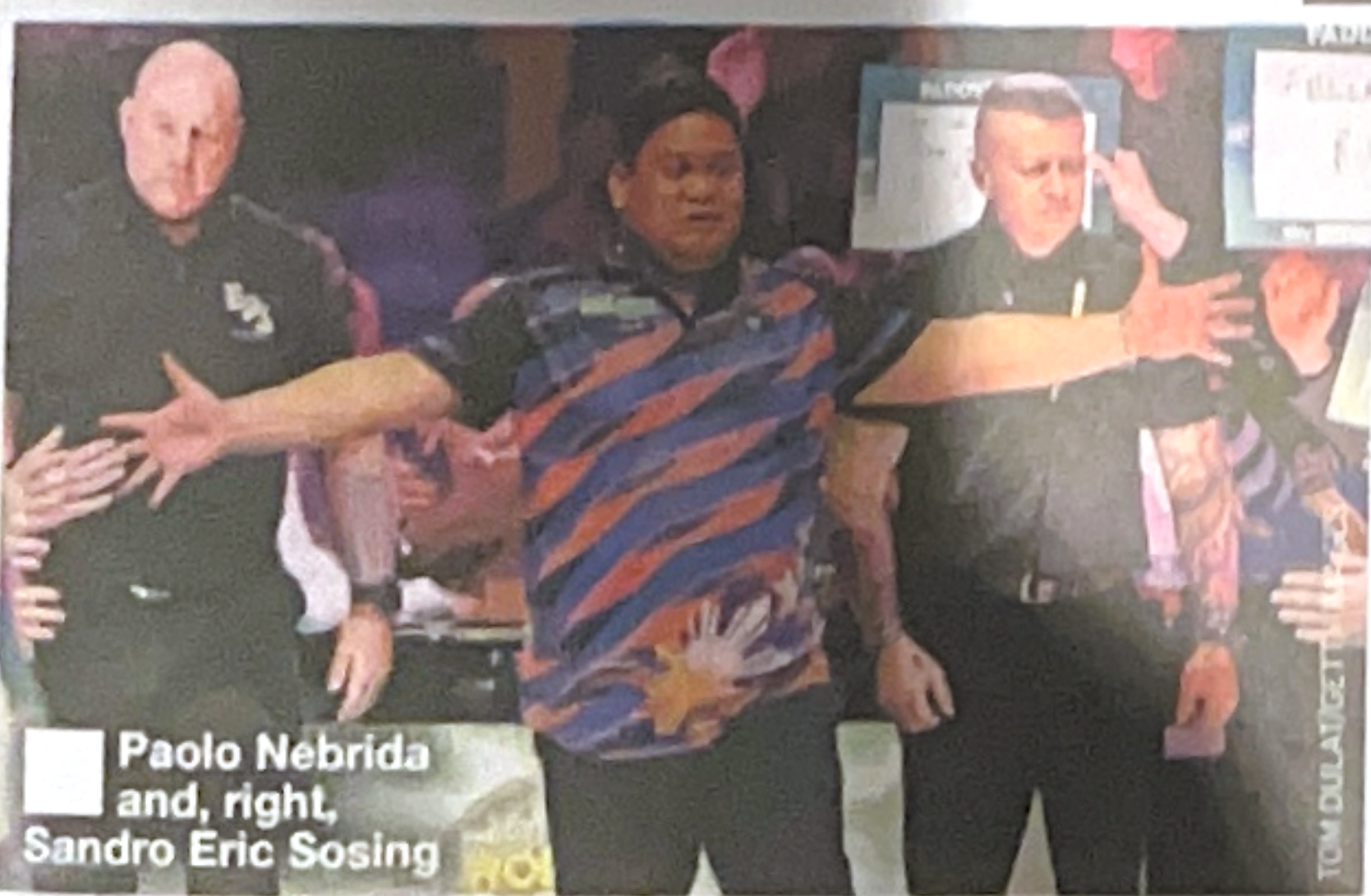
ALEXIS TOYLO

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

