

Grass Roots and Green Shoots

Yep, even I was a little surprised when Unicorn recently made the bold decision to shift some of their focus and resources away from their long and mutually fruitful association with the PDC (which included the supply of all the boards for PDC events) to greater promotion of darts at grass roots level. Unicorn will still be heavily involved with the professional game, but it'll be interesting to see how their new focus and "For Every Player" initiative turn out.



This blog is not actually about Unicorn's plans for that, though. Instead it's an entirely personal view of some areas in which darts might look to progress as a sport for everyone, how darting green shoots might be fostered from the ashes of lost traditional pub and club venues. In this context I make no apologies for drawing on my experience as a coach in other sports, but I don't pretend to have all, or even some, of the answers. I'd thus be very interested to hear your comments and ideas, via social media or wherever.

The first issue I want to raise is that darts is a major sport, but it's not run like most major sports (I'm afraid I'm going to be rather parochial here and mainly talk about the UK, but I think a similar argument applies across the world). Before going down that rabbit hole, let's quickly deal with the question "is darts a sport at all?" by considering the Council of Europe's definition from their 1993 Sports Charter:

"Sport means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels."

For me, darts does all that – even a single game of 501 involves a fair amount of "physical activity" at my level due to the number of times I have to walk back and forth to the board!

So, darts is a sport, and the PDC have done a great job with furthering it at the professional level, also with helping up-and-coming players through their Challenge and Development tours. There are also many other worthy bodies, even after the demise of the BDO, that look after individual aspects of darts, including the DRA, the WDF, the PDPA, and the various national and, in the UK, county organisations.

The fact remains, though, that on UK Sport's alphabetical list of recognised National Governing Bodies (NGBs), after "Dance", "Darts" is listed next to a blank row.

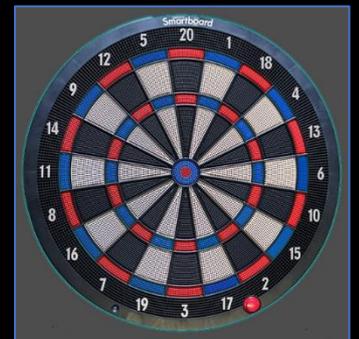
CROQUET			Scottish Croquet Association	The Croquet Association		
CURLING			Royal Caledonian Curling Club	English Curling Association	Welsh Curling Association	British Curling Ltd
CYCLING	BMX Cyclo Cross Cycle Speedway Downhill Mountain Biking Road Track	Cycling Ulster (Cycling Ireland)	Scottish Cycling	British Cycling	Welsh Cycling	British Cycling
DANCE	Ballroom Latin Highland Dancing Scottish Country Folk Dance		Dance Sport Scotland Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing Royal Scottish Dance Society	English Amateur Dancesport Association	Dancesport Wales	
DARTS				English Folk Dance & Song Society		
DISABILITY SPORT	See end					
DODGEBALL						
DRAGON BOAT RACING			British Dragon Boat Racing Association	British Dragon Boat Racing Association	British Dragon Boat Racing Association	British Dragon Boat Racing Association
EQUESTRIAN	Dressage	Horse Sport Ireland	Horse Scotland	British Equestrian Federation	British Equestrian Federation	British Equestrian Federation

In the UK, having a recognised NGB means the chance of accessing government help and funding (over £250 million pa is available to “help people play sport”). Moreover, it means mandatory regulation of things like coaching, a key aspect in ensuring anyone, but especially children and vulnerable adults, can learn to play and enjoy a sport in a safe and secure manner. (I’ve touched on this topic before in my 2017 “Get Smart” blog - I was partly provoked to raise it again now as last week I was once more on a course to renew some of the safeguarding qualifications I require for both squash and badminton coaching).

I expect many of you will now be thinking that no-one needs a coach to learn darts, and of course you’d be right. But experience has taught me that a good way to get new people to try a sport is to offer drop-in coach-led “beginner” sessions, then provide an easy way to move on to “improver” and beyond. To plug an organisation sponsored by a Unicorn rival brand for a moment, at junior level Steve Brown’s JDC academies could be seen as being along these lines and are certainly helping to foster the next generation of players, which can only be good for everyone (and every equipment company!) involved in darts.



So what about social-media-promoted “learn darts” events held in pop-up or open access venues which offer the chance for anyone to try their hand at darts in a controlled and safe environment, with some coaching tips along the way. There would be the chance to try out different equipment, not just different darts but products such as the self-scoring steel and soft-tip Smartboards, of which non-dartists might be unaware. More “fun”, easy-to-play, games other than 301 and 501 could also be introduced.



This type of low-commitment way of getting involved in a sport can fit better with modern lifestyles than joining a club or organising matches or even friendly games that are hard to cancel last minute. Hence Sport England, through projects like “Street Games”, promote sports that avoid membership fees, are convenient, “feel good” and not too serious, and are, most importantly, inclusive for all sectors of society.



What about darts more specifically? Well, it starts with huge advantages as a sport for everyone as it’s relatively cheap and easy to play at home, it just needs more folk to give it a try and get hooked. This is where the success of “Flight Club” in promoting auto-scoring easy-to-play darts as a fun, sociable way to spend time is great to see (in 2016 I wrote a complimentary blog after checking out the first Flight Club after it opened in London – I don’t know how they’ve been affected by Covid, but I believe there are now several others scattered around the UK as well as in the US and Australia). Fun new venues in which to play darts are definitely a good thing!

Lastly, as steel-tipped or even adult soft-tipped darts can be risky playthings for a young child, it’d be nice to see improvements in dart games for them. Velcro ball dart games are OK, but a bit removed from the adult version. Children’s rubber-tipped darts (as well as magnetic darts, even using stronger neodymium magnets) can be frustratingly prone to falling out of the board. There must be a better solution somewhere (I’m pondering on it!).

So that’s just a few ideas from me, what do you think?

