

DR. DARTS' NEWSLETTER

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JACK PRICE – ‘MR. 180’

So often the referees and officials are the forgotten heroes of darts so I thought that this month I would reflect on the darting life of Jack Price who was one of the best known and most popular referees in the game.

Jack Price, who hailed from Bristol, was one of the first ‘recognised’ darts referees. Born on 20th October 1928 he sadly passed away on 23rd February 2006, aged 77.

As the popularity of darts on television accelerated during the 1970s, Darts World magazine turned its attention to the ‘Men behind the mike’ in an occasional series that ran from late 1977 to late 1978. The issue dated January 1978 focused on ‘The daddy of them all’, namely, of course, Jack Price. The unattributed article was titled ‘A referee who likes being where the action is’ and is reproduced here in full with additional photographs from my archive.

A REFEREE WHO LIKES BEING WHERE THE ACTION IS

[Jack] (pictured) was one of the first MCs of the current crop now on television and, although they might not admit it, set a lot of the trends which are still being followed today.



Fast-talking Jack arrived on the scene about six years ago and was in all the big ones, first time round. World Masters, Watney British Championship, etc – you name ‘em, he was there, talking about it.

“I think I did something for the B.D.O.,” he says, “I certainly helped change the image of a darts referee as a guy in a tatty old jumper, with one eye on the board and the other on a pint.”

Jack took up refereeing after a solid but unspectacular darts career.

He captained several sides in the local leagues and once played for the West of England ‘B’ team. But he really hit the target as a referee.

“I had been a link-man in cabaret shows anyway, so it followed logically from that. It’s not an egotistical thing. I like being where the action is, with the players.”

And he takes the job very seriously, stressing the importance of building up a rapport with the players and the spectators.

“A good MC should do his homework on the players. Most of them appreciate it anyway, if they know you have taken the trouble to find out about them and give them the big build-up.”

“It’s important to build up a relationship with the crowd to create an atmosphere. There’s nothing worse than playing in no atmosphere. Even more important is not to make a mistake. I know we’re all human but mistakes in our line of business are bad. If you do make one, you should check it and correct it in the same breath if possible.”

Jack could not recall any blunders of his own but he recalled seeing one MC booed off stage after a couple of errors.

“Crowds don’t bother me. If they do shout anything out, I’m usually ready with a quick answer or just a ‘shush’ usually quietens them down.”

One of Jack’s trademarks is emphasising big scores.

“Nowadays tons are commonplace so I don’t emphasise them but I still give the 140s and 180s a bit of a shout. Only recently a friend of mine heard someone shout on a televised match, ‘That’s a big 180’ and he told me afterwards that he thought it was me commentating.”

Jack’s darts refereeing has taken him all over the world with some of the top players. And he has survived a brush with the B.D.O., [*British Darts Organisation*] who stopped using him for their major events for 15 months. That was when he officiated at a U.K.D.F. [*United Kingdom Darts Federation*] Great Britain versus Wales match not recognised by the B.D.O.

Things have quietened down now but he missed not being asked to commentate at last month’s World Masters. “I thought that after doing the Home International and England versus Wales I was in with a chance. I was disappointed about it but not disillusioned,” he said.

Now he goes when and where he’s wanted round the clubs in the West, fitting in darting assignments with his trouble-shooting job for a Bristol double glazing firm.

Jack passed away in February 2006 and in a key tribute published in the April 2006 issue of Darts World, Roger Turner of the Bristol Darts Federation wrote

IT IS with sadness that after a long illness Jack Price, the first and probably the best ever “caller” in darts, has died in Bristol at the age of 77.



William “Jack” Price was known as the original “Mr. 180”.

An excellent darts player, Jack took to calling darts with the formation of the Bristol Darts Organisation in 1966, along with founder members Bill Sheppard (later Vice-Chairman of the British Darts Organisation), Ken Nicholas (later Treasurer of the BDO), Eddie Norman (later

Competition Secretary of the BDO) and Bill Phillips (later Chairman of the West of England Darts Organisation).

In 1968 the Bristol Darts Organisation became the West of England Darts Organisation as it still is today.

Jack was Welsh, and along with Eddie Norman became a talent scout for the West of England Darts Organisation. They scoured Wales for players who were instrumental in signing up many Welsh players for the West of England, including Leighton Rees, Alan Evans, Tony Ridler, David Porter, and of course the great Alf Jefferies.

Under their guidance Harry Heenan from Scotland and Cliff Inglis (the first World Masters champion) also joined the West of England Darts Organisation, which attracted crowds of over 2,000 to 2,500 at each and every one of their county matches in the Inter-Counties Championships.

But the true talent of Jack was being on stage. He was a natural.

When the West of England played Sweden in Bristol Jack did the introduction in Swedish as well as English, and received a letter from the Swedish Embassy complimenting him on his speech.

Jack travelled with the West of England Darts Organisation a great deal and called their matches in Moscow in 1977 (speaking in Russian), in Turkey, Gibraltar and Barbados. In 1973 he called the first Home International Darts Championships between England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland in Bristol.

A year later, in 1974, he was caller at the first World Masters, sponsored by Phonogram, in London. He was caller at the first two British Open Individual Darts Championships held in Bristol in 1973 and 1974, and both won by the great London player Charlie Ellix. In 1973 the West of England Darts Organisation joined the British Darts Organisation and Jack was to call their matches at every major event for many years.

In 1976 Jack was a founder member of the United Kingdom Darts Federation and called the international match between Wales and Great Britain at Weston-super-Mare.

Jack was immaculate in his appearance on stage. He kept himself superbly fit. Slim and good looking, he was the first choice for calling every big event in darts at home and overseas. Without doubt most darts MCs would not be in their position today without having copied something of the style of calling from Jack Price.

A great man. Darts owes him a great deal.

Jack has gone but he will not be forgotten in darts.

Further tributes recorded at the time came from Olly Croft (BDO Director), Ken Herbert (West Midlands) and Derek Lindsey (Middlesex). Olly Croft wrote:

Jack was the original BDO MC/referee and a real front-runner for all the MCs and referees who have followed in his footsteps. He was instrumental in the setting up of the BDO in 1973

and became our first high profile caller and referee. All the top players of that era knew and respected Jack and he will be greatly missed by us all.

Ken Herbert wrote:

An old friend from the early 1970s, Jack was the first MC/referee known as “Mr. 180”. He was a great MC, but above all he was a gentleman and will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

Derek Lindsey added

I played with Thames Valley for two years and I can remember Jack calling at the first big tournament I attended in the West Country. Jack was always immaculately turned out and the fairest of men. I was always impressed by his knowledge and handling of every situation. In short, he was a giant in the sport of darts.

*It is interesting to recall the **control** that MCs, like Jack and the late Freddie Williams, had over the crowds in the 1970s and 1980s where a polite announcement during a pause in play asking the crowd for “Best of order please” were usually greeted with silence. But, of course, the nature and culture of darts and the nature and expectations of the crowds have changed since then. My guess is that, if Jack was still around and plying his trade he would still command respect from players and fans alike.*

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Key sources: *Darts World* magazine, issues January 1978 and April 2006.

BRUCE SPENDLEY - OBITUARY

Just as *DDN* was being published, news came in that the former MC and referee Bruce Spendley had died at the age of 80.



The Professional Darts Corporation recorded on their site:

The PDC is saddened to learn that PDC Hall of Fame member and former referee Bruce Spendley passed away on Tuesday (15th June).

Cleveland-based Spendley, 80, joined the PDC following its formation and worked for two decades on as a referee in televised events and as an official at tournaments across the circuit until his retirement in 2013. (Photograph, left, shows Bruce, with Tournament Organiser Tommy Cox, in 2012

when Bruce was inducted into the PDC. Image: © PDC. Used with permission.)

He had refereed in his first World Championship in 1980, and was highly respected throughout the sport following a distinguished career.

Spendley was inducted into the PDC Hall of Fame following his retirement in 2013 having refereed the second half of the 2013 World Championship final between Phil Taylor and Michael van Gerwen in his farewell match.

“Bruce was a very popular and respected member of our staff and one of the most experienced referees ever in our sport,” said PDC Chief Executive Matt Porter. “His distinctive voice was recognised around the world and he was held in high regard by players throughout darts. We send out condolences to his family and friends at this sad time.”

A minute’s applause was held in Spendley’s memory before the start of Tuesday’s Player Championship 14 in Milton Keynes.

I hope to include further tributes to Bruce in the July DDN.

WHAT TO WEAR FOR HONOURS CEREMONY?

Thanks to subscriber David Mason who wrote:

Patrick. Thank you for a really great May edition of DDN. I have now read it three times. Absolutely brilliant. You and your staff must be proud of such a great newsletter.

I replied to David:

Great to hear from you. Thanks for your kind comments on the May DDN.

I have to smile when readers mention my 'staff'. There is only me plus my wife Maureen who proofreads it. And yes, I am proud of it (and her). I am also proud of my readers who often send me questions to answer which eventually end up in the newsletter.



David added:

I was asked today, what do darts people wear to receive their honours from your Majesty, The Queen of England. Do they wear top and tails or just suits? I have been asked this several times and do not know the answer, Is there any photos in your Darts News. Please keep up your wonderful newspaper. Kindest Regards David.

In response to David’s question, I sent him this scan (left) of the front cover of the April 1989 issue of *Darts World* showing world champion Eric Bristow on the day he received his MBE, for services to darts, from Her Majesty the Queen at Buckingham Palace. In the photo Eric is, as we say where I come from, ‘suited and booted’ for the occasion. Eric admitted to the magazine, “It was more nerve-racking than any TV final.”

When his honour was announced in December 1988, as part of the Queen's New Year Honours, everyone in darts was thrilled for 'The Crafty Cockney' but, of course, there were many, not into the game, who saw it as a joke. Here's an example from *The Mail on Sunday* on 1st January 1989 where the editor wrote:

A darts player has been honoured for services to sport. Now this may be an admirable plot to kill off the Honours List through public ridicule. If so, it does not go far enough. We now await the Dominoes Dame, the Bar Billiards Baronet and the life peerage for cribbage.

I was in quality company in 1996 when I felt the *Mail's* barbs, like Eric had done seven years earlier, when the sister newspaper, the *Daily Mail* reported about the beginning of my journey to my PhD. On 24th December the paper's political pundit, Simon Heffer, under the title 'A darts degree? You must be joking!' complained about my university taking me on, even though I was paying every penny of the costs. Heffer ended his diatribe with

I shall apply for the professorship of shove ha'penny and applied cribbage – so long as it doesn't involve getting into domino theory.

FEEDBACK FROM THE MAY ISSUE

Regular contributor, Mick Simpson, wrote:

Hi Patrick. Well, what can I say? What a fantastic read News of the World and Joe Hitchcock all in one DDN. What more could I ask for? Brilliant Patrick. That is a lot of darts per game. Were they throwing from 9ft? And, of course, brass darts were a lot bigger then compared with tungsten darts of today.

(Clearly, some throw-lines were set at 9ft but I cannot tell from what line Joe Hitchcock was throwing in that example score.)



Another great player you have written about, Alan Evans, [the Welsh star pictured right in 1976] was a brilliant player, sadly taken far too soon. What a lucky man Dr. Norman is, travelling the world talking about darts? Blimey I could fancy myself doing that. As you have written another fantastic DDN I'm hoping you're getting a lot better? Take care my friend as ever yours in darts Mick.

And from Colorado, Jerry Feather writes:

Patrick, you continue to outdo yourself! This was one of the most informative & interesting DDN's you have ever done. I just love Darts history. Thanks again.

I was fearful that suffering a stroke might change things (which of course it has) but it seems that DDN is still welcomed and appreciated. For example, Doug, from Nova Scotia, told me

Patrick. Just another super article that I truly enjoyed. Your in-depth knowledge of the sport and your research is truly amazing. Thanks very much.

Brian H. wrote

Hi Patrick. Hope you are well & getting back to your old self. Evidently, judging by the latest edition of DDN (thanks for that). As always: jam-packed with interesting facts & stories but all the more interesting for the fascinating NoW stats from 1959.

I think low 20 dart 501s are good going considering the circumstances & the times: 8ft mark; elm, thick wired board; brass darts with canes & paper flights & just 3 legs (not best of 21 or more) with no time to settle the nerves & get in the groove. And ordinary blokes who worked for a living with a lot less leisure time & opportunity. Same for Joe Hitchcock: as you say seven consecutive tons is some going even by today's standards. Anyway, look after yourself & I look forward, as always, to the next edition.

As you all know I welcome all feedback from readers. Perhaps I'll be hearing from you in the future.

DARTS IS A FUNNY GAME...

Or so that appeared to George Hakim (author of *The Darts Players' Handbook* (London: Seeley Service & Co., 1977)) recently when while playing darts with a friend. George explains:

Patrick, I thought I had seen everything that can happen whilst playing this game we love so much but what happened last week whilst throwing for the twenty fives and bullseyes made me laugh.

I scored 25 with the first dart, then another 25 with the second dart which then to my surprise and the opponent made us both chuckle as the dart came out doing a complete turn and landed resting on the first dart as photos taken at the time record. (See right)



Sadly, George reported that

Looks like our pub "The Fox And Goose" at Greywell [Hampshire. UK] will be using the darting area for serving food now and we will have to play from another venue on Monday nights if and when allowed. Shame it was a nice little place, very small with low ceiling and open fireplace and good food. Sadly, it will be one of many I fear.

Indeed George. I think that most readers, especially in the UK, has noticed the effect of COVID-19 on darts and the pub business in general. Decisions had to be made by brewers and pub owners that effectively transferred dart spaces to food places. This wasn't done because of any dislike of the game but out of necessity as social distancing meant that every inch of the pub area was needed to fit in as many diners as they could. However, I guess that

there will be a few publicans who will use or already have used Covid to rid their pubs of darts: something they may well have been looking for an excuse to do for some time.

I hope George and his friends are able to find a new oche.

QUADRO 240 DARTBOARD

Over the years, *DDN* has featured a number of articles relating to the *Quadro 240* dartboard, the one with a fourth ring scoring four times the value of the scoring dart. However, I am pleased to mention the board again following an enquirer asking via my website if I knew anything about the one (pictured) which features 'SKOL' lager advertising.



I am sure that the 240 was played in a tournament played and won by Mike Gregory in Norwich, UK. I will seek that out before the next *DDN*.

In the meantime, I asked folks on the forum 'Darts from the Past'. Danny Key was the first to respond. He wrote:

Lot of Quadro tournaments were Skol and Lada based like the LADA Masters which I believe Mike Gregory won one of the first of them.

whilst Shane Lancaster told me that he remembered going to two Matchplay matches on the 240 held at the Doncaster Dome (UK) in 1995 and 1996. Shane told me, "Alan Warriner was winner one year and Phil Taylor the year after." If any readers can help, please drop me a note.

TERRY O'DEA – OBITUARY

I am presently preparing an obituary in respect of the Australian darts ace, Terry O'Dea.

This will appear in the July issue.

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