

DR. DARTS' NEWSLETTER

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MIKE GREGORY

Darts fans mourned the recent death of yet another top darts player, England's Mike Gregory.

Mike was born in St. Martin's Hospital, Bath, Somerset on 16th December 1956. He was the son of George and Florence. His father was a kerb-layer. Mike has a sister Helen and a half-brother Roger Smith. He passed away on 19th April.



In 2011, whilst researching suitable candidates for my 'Where are they now?' series for *Darts World*, it was easy to add Mike to the list. I interviewed him on 25th October that year; an interview undertaken over the phone. Mike was extremely generous with his time and answered all of my questions clearly and honestly. For whatever reason, the interview was never published in *Darts World* and so this is the first time that it has appeared in print as part of this article. When asked how he first became involved with darts Mike told me:



"My step brother Roger Smith [pictured here with Mike in later years] used to play and he gave me an old elm board and a set of darts. I was aged four or five at the time.

It was put on the settee for me to throw at. I used to go and watch Roger play for West of England. I used to go and watch them up on stage with the 'B' team (15-16 years old) with the likes of Leighton Rees [Who Mike told me was his role model.], Alan Evans, Doug Priestner and Harry Heenan. Roger doesn't throw anymore. Roger used to run a million and one over a weekend – two hours on two hours off – then upped it to two million and one. Took roughly the same time. All for charity."

Before he entered the darts big time, Mike worked for Dickinson Robinson where he “made sheets of steel and ply, wood and aluminium 8 x 4 – I sprayed glue on all. They also made solid doors for backs of ‘artics’ [Articulated lorries]. This work strengthened my playing arm.”

Mike told me, “Roger used to take me round to local tournaments which included the Bath Open. I reached the final. I hit a 180. And won it!” That was Mike’s first major breakthrough in darts; a win which made him to look at becoming a professional darts player. He told me that earning £75 per week at work and then £2,000 ‘just to play darts,’ was no contest. After the Finland Open the points put him in the Unipart British Professional at Redcar in which he beat John Lowe in the final (£8,000). When asked, when he actually went full-time professional Mike replied

“I was doing some tournaments – then at Picketts Lock – Mel Coombes [a top darts Manager] approached him, came over and had a chat. Jocky said to Mel, “Go get this lad. He’s going to be good.” Barry Twomlow [the News of the World Champion (1969) and a darts ambassador for Unicorn] asked Mike, “Would you like a Unicorn contract?” - £300-£400 to start. If I won a major event there would be more money. Brought out ‘name’ darts later. Mel said he’d like to sign me up. Had a chat with my brother Roger.”

Mike recalled that, at that time, *“Jocky was doing the Strongbow Roadshow. Mel took me along and the brewers offered me £2,000 to do exhibitions on their roadshow. That was 1984.”*

Mike was signed to Unicorn and was later sponsored by Datadart, WINMAU and B&W. After being managed by Mel Coombes, Mike left to join Dick Allix’s stable, then later Tommy Cox (Jocky’s manager) and also Alan Critchlow (a friend of Dennis Priestley).

Mike’s record at the Embassy World Darts Championship appearances had everything except the Final win, the remembered is the 1992 Embassy and *that* final between Mike and Phil Taylor. Fans also remember that Jocky Wilson was Mike’s nemesis. Mike said, “People kept saying “Jocky always beats you in the Embassy and you always beat Jocky in the World Masters.” That was right!” (Image, right, shows Jocky relaxing, probably at an Embassy.)



Mike’s first appearance at the Embassy world championship, was at the Jolles Showclub, Longton, Stoke-on-Trent (31st December 1983 to 7th January 1984). The programme told the fans that Mike

‘Had a fine 1983, therefore it was no surprise when he won his way through the qualifying rounds of the Embassy. In January he came runner-up to Eric Bristow in the British Open; in December he took second place to the same man in the Winmau World Masters. In between, however, Gregory had his revenge in the finals of the Winners Matches Open, and he also beat Bristow on his way to the final of the Double Diamond.’

Having defeated Paul Lim (Singapore) 2-0 in the first round, Mike met the Sweden star, Stefan Lord in the second and beat him 4-1. All was then set for him to meet Scotland’s

Jocky Wilson who showed his class, as he had done when he lifted the title in 1982 (and in reaching the semi-final in 1983), by whitewashing Mike 5-0 in the quarterfinals.

Mike returned to the Embassy in 1985 but was stopped in his tracks in the first round by Bobby George (2-1). The venue of the Embassy moved to the Lakeside in 1996 but Mike's visit there was just as fleeting as Keith Deller beat him 3-0. In 1987, Mike opened his Embassy campaign by beating the man he called his 'role model', the Welsh darts legend Leighton Rees (3-0). The second round saw Mike triumphed 3-0 again, this time against England's Ritchie Gardner. In the quarterfinals Mike was once again pitched against Jocky Wilson, and on this occasion, it was a much closer affair, Jocky winning 4-3.

Mike was No. 5 seed in 1988, and having won the *News of the World* championship (pictured here with the NoW trophy and model, Maria Whittaker (Image © *News of the World*. Used with permission.), the Finland Open, the Unipart British Professional and the MFI World Matchplay, was expected to do well. The programme notes revealed that *'the Embassy has never been his favourite championship...Has had an up-and-down pro career, but now this quiet man from the West Country looks well set again.'* [I wonder if this was the occasion on which Mike was given the moniker 'The Quiet Man of Darts'?] Unfortunately, Mike suffered another first round defeat as he lost 3-0 to Wales's Chris Johns.



Seeded No. 4. in the 1989 Embassy, a win over Scotland's Peter MacDonald (3-0) was the ideal start. A similar scoreline over Sweden's Magnus Caris in the second round indicated that things were going to plan. That was until Mike met Jocky Wilson (again) in the quarterfinals. It was another close encounter with the score 4-3 in the Scotsman's favour.

The following year, Mike was clearly on form as he went through the field with a win over England's Alan Warriner (3-0) in the first round followed by a 3-1 victory over Belgium's Leo Laurens in the second and then yet another quarterfinal match against Jocky Wilson. On this occasion, *at last*, Mike came out the winner in yet another close game, beating Jocky 4-3. Mike had made it to his first Embassy semi-final. There waiting for him was Eric Bristow who put an end to Mike's 1990 Embassy campaign (5-2).

In the 1991 Embassy Mike started with a 3-2 win in the first round over Scotland's Bob Taylor but fell to Eric Bristow (again), this time 3-0 in the second round. However, Mike still believed that his time would come. That year was to be 1992: a year that produced what many darts regard as the best-ever Embassy final.

To reach the final that year Mike beat Australia's Wayne Weening 3-1 in the first round, then Wales's Chris Johns (3-0) (the same score line that Johns had beaten Mike back in the 1988 Embassy) in the second round. The quarterfinal matched Mike with England's Rod

Harrington. Mike was victorious 4-3 and then moved into the semi-final for only the second-ever time. There he met England's Kevin Kenny who he beat 5-3 which led to Mike's first-ever Embassy World Championship final. There waiting for Mike in the Final was England's Phil Taylor. Phil had beaten Magnus Caris (Sweden) 3-1 in the first round, Denmark's Per Skau (again 3-1) in the second, had whitewashed Wales's Martin Phillips 4-0 in the quarterfinals and then taken out England's John Lowe in the semi-final 5-4.

Phil, who had already won the Embassy World title back in 1990 (where he had demolished his mentor, Eric Bristow, 6-1), was the favourite in 1992 but many pundits thought Mike had a good chance. Phil was the No.1. seed and Mike No. 2. The programme notes for the Final said of Phil Taylor that he

again comes to the Embassy as the top seed, having a comfortable lead over second-placed Mike Gregory. Although he fell in the quarterfinals last year, when defending his Embassy title, he had a good year. This included winning the North American Open and coming runner-up in the Denmark Open.

The programme recorded how unpredictable his opponent could be on occasion:

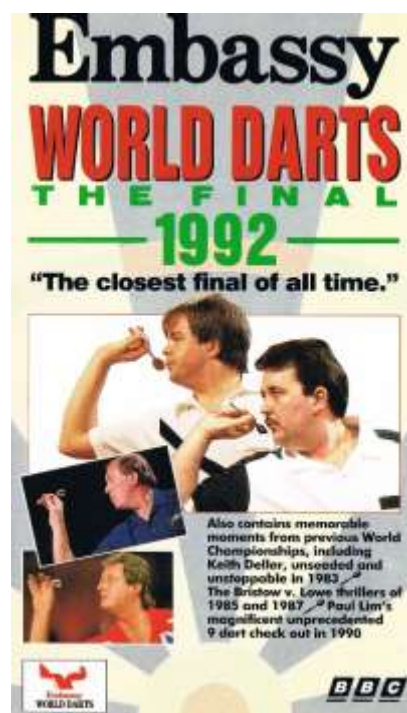
Mike has never been higher in the world rankings, therefore his catalogue of near-misses in the Embassy may be coming to an end. His high spot came two years ago, when he lost 5-2 to Eric Bristow in the semi-finals. But he has won the British Professional title, similar in make-up to the Embassy, and his ice-cool temperament always makes him a potential winner of a major title.

He [has] had an unpredictable career. Last year, he was not seeded at all; two years ago, he was seeded No. 4. In 1991, he won the British Open and the Canada Open, and picked up points in Denmark and Finland. Plays locally in the Radstock Super League and for Somerset's county side. Became a father for the third time last year, and lists his hobby as gardening.

Broadcast 'live' by the BBC, spectators and viewers witnessed what is still regarded by many as not only the closest Embassy final ever but also the most exciting Final in the history of the championship. Phil and Mike at five sets all and five legs all, and all being decided by one final leg. It was arguably the best match that modern darts had ever seen and "The closest final of all time."

Now available on the 'net for all to witness and enjoy, it is not my intention to go through the match dart by dart but to look at Phil and Mike's comments after playing in such a marvellous Final (the first darts match to be produced and released by the BBC on video). It was also the first tie-break Phil had been involved in.

'The Power' said: *"It's a good idea because it's fair. You can't play forever and shouldn't lose by tossing a coin. Mind you, I'd have been happy if that final had gone on even more. I was enjoying myself."*



Mike agreed, saying

“Since that final I have beaten Russell Stewart in a tie-break in the Australian Grand Masters so I can’t complain. And I’ve come up against tie-breaks in the past. What annoys me is the six doubles I had to win the Embassy. Two at double eight, two at double twenty and two at double ten.

If you look at a dartboard you will see how those three doubles form a triangle. They were my Bermuda Triangle. My darts got lost on their way to the doubles. I tried to flush those misses out of my system right away. The same night we drove back to my local, the Winterfield Inn at Paulton near Bristol, and had a good session with the landlord Dave Fowler and his wife Rose. And I remember leaving sixty on purpose in an exhibition and checking out on double ten, double ten and double ten.”

In 2011, looking back at that historic match, Mike told me

“I was a bit disappointed. I rushed it. A costly mistake. A little later at the Unipart European Masters against Peter Manley I had the same shot, double top, and I took my time. Had a drink of water and hit the shot first dart.”



In the following year (1993) Mike won, amongst other tournaments, the Sweden Open, the Lada UK Masters (which he had also won in 1992), the Australian Grand Masters and whilst losing only to Alan Warriner in the North American Open.

Fired up after those successes, Mike did not believe for one

moment that his chance of winning the Embassy had passed.

“I am more determined than ever to win. I remember losing in the finals of the News of the World and crying my eyes out afterward. Bobby George told me they should be of tears of joy that day. He was right. I came back and won the News of the World for the next two years, which is not easy. I feel the same way now about the Embassy.”

But sadly, it was not to be although it wasn’t for the trying. In the 1993 Embassy, Mike started well by beating Scotland’s Jamie Harvey 3-0 in the first round and then Denmark’s Jann Hoffman (3-1) in the second. Then, in the quarterfinals, he met an on-form Bobby George (England) who ended Mike’s dream for another year by beating him 4-2.

In 1994, Mike was surprisingly absent from the Embassy World Championship line-up (possibly because of personal reasons) but was back in 1995 as the No. 5 seed. His first round challenger was Yves Chamberland (pictured right) (Photo © *Darts World*/Steve Daszko) who was representing his country, Canada, at the Embassy for the first and what turned out to be his only time. Mike beat Yves 3-2. In the second round Mike met Ian Brand (England) who Mike beat by a similar scoreline. But in the quarterfinal Mike came up against the No. 4 seed, England's Martin Adams playing in only his second Embassy. Martin won that encounter 4-3.



The 1996 Embassy saw Mike back up to No. 4 seed but that meant little when he met Les Wallace in the first round and was beaten 3-0. (The following year Les, the likeable Scot, lifted the Embassy title.) The 1997 finals did not prove any better for Mike when he fell at the first fence, beaten by Dutchman Roland Scholten 3-2.

With his career in decline, Mike failed to qualify for the 1998 Embassy but made his last appearance at Lakeside in 1999 being one of the many 'unseeded and qualifying players' and 'not placed' in the World rankings. The programme notes included the following

'Mike starts this year against Martin Adams as he tries to lose the tag of perhaps being the best player never to have won the Embassy.'

Sadly, for Mike, Martin, unseeded too but 10th in the World rankings, was on form and beat Mike 3-1 in the first round, bringing to an end Mike's impressive Embassy record.

Rather than remember Mike as 'the best player never to have won the Embassy' I prefer to reflect on how well he did in that competition and for being one of the two men who gave us probably the best Embassy final of all time. Mike will also be remembered for his record in the *News of the World* Individual Darts Championship.

When chatting to Mike back in 2011, he was living in Welton, part of Midsomer Norton, a mere 300 yards past the *Stone Cross* pub where Mike had entered for the *News of the World* tournament. I asked him what life was like 'now'. He told me

"I am very happy. I have been with San [Sandra] for ten years but have known her a lot longer. [Mike had been divorced from his wife Carol in the mid-1990s.] I work for an infrastructure company. Traffic control. Stop and go boards. Anything mobile. I'm walking two or three miles a day. I hardly drink at all."

To many, the death of Mike Gregory came as a shock but to those who knew and loved him they knew how he had fought bravely against dementia for the past few years. Mike's funeral took place at 2 p.m. 6th May at the Mendip Crematorium at Shepton Mallet. **RIP Mike.**

[Of course, this article/obituary is not the end of the Mike Gregory Story. His record in the *News of the World*, his numerous victories and his involvement and decisions made in relation to 'The Split' will be featured in next month's issue.]

AND NOW...A QUESTION FROM JORDAN

I know that *DDN* is read in all four corners of the world and some other strange places too, but I cannot recall being contacted from **Jordan**. Ahmed Al Jaber wrote:

'Dear Mr. Chaplin. Hope this email finds you well

Let me begin by telling you it was really hard finding someone who specialises in darts or darts history but thankfully I found your website recommended in a Youtube video and I was really glad that I did.



Not to bother you with a lot details, I am a humble collector of antiques and odd stuff in general for many years now. I don't specialise in anything in particular but anything that I can smell the scent of history coming out it! I stumbled upon these two sets of darts while dealing with one regular dealer here in Amman, HKJ (Jordan) and they just seemed interesting.

I would really appreciate it if you could tell me

anything you know about them and am not looking for money value or anything like that, just any details that you can help me with and am sure they could be ordinary but nevertheless any info is fine. I really appreciate your help and keep up the great work you are doing.

NOTE: Please find the pictures attached for your review and I think one of them will be more interesting for you than the other as I sense it has more history to it.'



I replied to Ahmed as follows:

Clearly the sets of darts are in used condition; one set being brass with standard flights, the other tungsten with a more collectable set of flights. The brass set will have been made in the 1960s or early 70s, and then sold in the pack which, in your example, was sold through a sports shop, the name of which is clear to be seen. This set is of little value.

The 'Game Shot' set is made of tungsten and were first sold in 1976 by Harrows Game Shot of Hertfordshire here in the UK. Even though they are made of tungsten, they are of little value, perhaps £10. The 'Fuller' flights (representing a London brewery) are of interest but add very little value to the item. I am sorry that my reply might disappoint you but thank you again for seeking my advice.

That was an easy query to answer for me (and I am sure for many *DDN* readers and darts collectors too) but this was from an unusual source so I felt that it was worth an airing. BUT

the question I have to ask is “Why did it take Ahmed so long to find my website? Why did he have to resort to YouTube to find me?”

I know I replaced my former website a few years ago with a new one but why should that result in me going from one of the top ‘Darts History’ websites to someone that people can’t find. **Any ideas?**

FEEDBACK ON DDN

Subscriber Kevin Pilling wrote

‘Hello Patrick. I always enjoy when you send your emails every month. I hope you are keeping well. You have indeed a unique brilliant knowledge of our Darts. I loved when you said about Eddie Norman and Jack Price. Both Bristol gents, of course you said. I am from and live in Beautiful Bristol.



Can I just say, I was and lucky enough to somehow, I can remember how I did this. Got a telephone number, of the late Great, Great, Mr. Peter Chapman. And I spoke to him on the phone. Such a gentle voice he had. I spoke to him for quite a while, saying that I've watched him playing and winning the 1974 News of the World championship. which I, thankfully, still have the video tape from ITV Sport. [Peter pictured, left] Very kind lady who sent me that, also the 1976 and 1980 NoW she sent me as well and John Lowe's 9 dart finish on October 13th 1984 video tape. Peter was such a good, kind and amazing darts player, as, of course, you know... You are our Doctor Darts!'

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