

DARTS HISTORY

(aka *Dr. Darts' Newsletter*)

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MIKE GREGORY – A TRIBUTE (Part 2) – THE NEWS OF THE WORLD



As promised in last month's issue, I continue my tribute to Mike Gregory by featuring his success in the *News of the World* (Photo © 1988 Darts World/PC Darts Archive/Steve Daszko) but, before that, I have received feedback to Part One featured in #146 from DDN readers which I would like to share with you.

Kevin Pilling wrote:

Hello Patrick. Thank you for DDN. Always amazing and I look forward to it. I agree about making this month about our Mike Gregory. Thankfully, I had met him a few times playing darts. Me coming from Bristol, was lucky enough to do so. I first saw him practicing darts in 1984, when I was fourteen, in a place called GB Brittons in Kingswood, Bristol, where I live. It was just me watching him practice as the club wasn't being used on this

Thursday. Mike didn't mind me watching him. I also saw him and played him in an exhibition night in Staple Hill, Bristol. He loved finishing his game against us on double top, which he did amazingly ... I'll miss him. He was such a gentle man, and a great darts player. Thanks Patrick. My Kindest regards.

Thomas replied

Thanks as always for sending your newsletter over. The Mike Gregory tribute was excellent. That Bermuda Triangle line is just superb.

Chris M. wrote:

I was sorry to hear about Mike Gregory - I had no idea of his situation and death. He seemed to embody the epitome of the working-class dart player - no wonder he was a popular figure.

And Mat Coward said

Hi Patrick

Really enjoyed the piece about Mike Gregory. Looking forward to part two. I have bitter-sweet memories of the great match against Taylor; on the one hand, it was the best darts final I've ever seen. But I still feel sad, as I did at the time, that Mike didn't win. Always one of my favourite players, and it was a rarity to see a Somerset player at that level!

I have also received notes of thanks from members of Mike's family which I very much appreciated.

MIKE AND THE NEWS OF THE WORLD

In 2011 I asked Mike how many times he had entered the *News of the World* Individual Darts Championship and he replied

"At local pub level I went through in this area ten years on the trot and there was one player I beat every time, Roger Gilvray (the Stones Cross pub), then through to the next round played at Bridgwater. I made it six times through to Exeter, St. George's Hall, for the Divisional Championships and went to London five times.

I actually thought that all I ever wanted to win was the News of the World - the 'workingmen's tournament' - A super tournament. I first went to see Roger Smith in 1978 at the Empire Pool, Wembley. We were way at the back. A Mini was the prize. Stefan Lord won it that year. That gave me the bug. Roger didn't do too well. Roger played for England."

Mike's half-brother Roger had qualified for the Grand Finals in 1978 as the Western Counties Divisional Champion, playing out of the Three Firms Club, Midsomer Norton. Mike recalled that Roger 'didn't do too well', but he actually beat the U.S. A. champion John Zimnawoda 2-0 in the first round only to be defeated by a similar scoreline in the next round (2-0) by John Coward, the North of England Divisional Champion, playing out of the White Hart British Legion, Sedbergh, Cumbria. Coward made it through to the final where he was beaten 2-0 by the winner, as Mike remembered, Sweden's Stefan Lord. Clearly the whole *News of*

the World experience left its impression on Mike; giving him the belief that one day he would lift the title.

As Mike has said, he was successful in making it to the *News of the World* Grand Final in five years. These were in 1982/83, 1983/84, 1985/86, (all at Wembley Arena) 1986/87 and 1987/88 (both at the Hammersmith Odeon), all as the Western Divisional champion.

The 1983 *News of the World* Grand Finals comprised of eleven champions and four rounds, First Round, Quarter-finals, Semi-finals and Final. Given the odd number of champions no less than seven players were given a 'bye', straight to the next round, the quarter-finals.



The programme told the fans that Mike was a 26-year-old Glass Fibre Laminator who had taken the Western Counties title with 'as decisive a display' as any of the year's Divisional Finals had produced and 'he looks an obvious threat to anyone with designs on our trophy.' (This photo shows Mike being presented the Divisional trophy by Keith Taylor, the Sports Editor of the *Express & Echo*, Exeter. (Image © News of the World. Used with permission.)

Mike was one of the four players who played a First Round. Mike

was drawn against Eire's champion John Joe O'Shea (playing out of Crowley's Dart Club, Bantry, County Cork), who Mike (playing out of the Royal British Legion, Midsomer Norton, near Bath, Avon) beat 2-0. In the quarter-final Mike met Tony Clark, the Wales Divisional champion, (playing out of the *Oak Tree Tavern*, Wrexham, Clwyd) and was beaten 2-1. That was the end of Mike's championship for 1983 but he would return in the following year's finals.

Mike made it to the quarter-final in 1984, being one of three players who was drawn a 'bye' in the first round. However, this was no help to the Paulton darter as he was beaten 2-1 by the London & Home Counties Divisional champion Ian Robertson (playing out of *The Bell*, Marston, Bedford). So, it was back to the drawing board for Mike.

Mike returned to the Wembley Arena two years later in 1986, when, whilst three players received a 'bye', he had to start with the first round. His opponent on this occasion was Rick Ney, the USA qualifier, representing the United States Darting Association (USDA). This was the fourth time Rick had appeared at the NoW and he was hoping to be the first American to lift the title. Mike was quoted as saying, "I'm convinced this is my year."

Could he make it 'third time lucky'? No. Rick Ney beat him 2-1 and went through to the Final where the American was beaten 2-0 by an on-form Bobby George (England).

In 1987, Mike must have been thinking “Is it *fourth* time lucky?” when he qualified for the Grand Finals again and this time made the trip to London to the new venue, the Hammersmith Odeon.

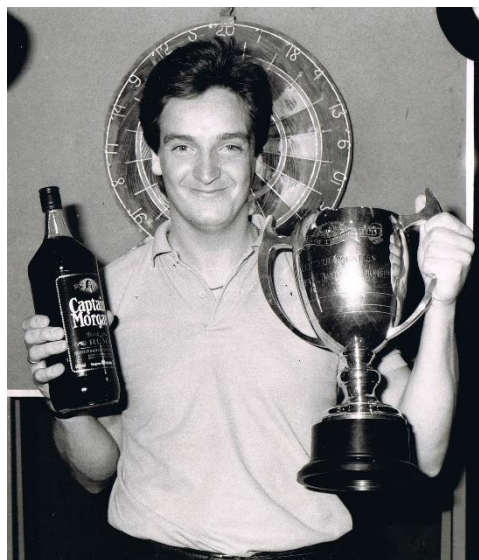
On this occasion Mike was one of the three ‘byes’ and met Steve Beaton (the Midlands Divisional champion, playing out of the William IV, Coventry) in the quarterfinal. Mike (now playing out of the *Stone Cross*, Midsomer Norton) beat Steve 2-1 and moved on to the semi-finals where he met Canadian, Bob Sinnaeve. Mike beat Bob 2-1 and then, for the first time, won through to the Grand Final.

There Mike met fellow Englishman, Peter ‘The Fen Tiger’ Evison, the Eastern Counties Divisional champion who was ‘determined to get his hands on our trophy.’ However, Mike was the favourite to win the tournament and that was exactly what he did by beating Peter 2-0. (Image of Peter with the Eastern Counties Divisional Trophy 1987 courtesy PC Darts Archive.)



In 1989 Mike was back at the Hammersmith Odeon to defend his title. Could he do it again and join the elite of dart players (Tom Barrett (1963/64 and 1964/65) and Eric Bristow (1982/83 and 1983/84) who had previously regained the title?

Mike wasn't one of the three ‘byes’ so he had to start from the first round, where he met Dennis Williams, the North of England Divisional champion (playing out of the *Greys Inn*, Embleton, Berwick-upon-Tweed where, coincidentally, his wife was the landlady). Mike won 2-1 and moved through into the quarterfinals where he was matched against the Swedish darts master Magnus Caris (playing out of the Larsberg Darts Club).



Having dispatched Magnus 2-1, Mike then met England player Tony Jenkinson in the semi-final. Tony was the London & Home Counties Divisional champion, who was playing out of the *Lion* pub ‘Kingston & District’, Surrey, and hoped to realise his ambition to win the title. Mike put a stop to that ambition by winning their match 2-1 and moving to the Grand Final and the opportunity to retain the title.

His opponent in the Final was fellow Englishman Kevin Spiolek, the Eastern Counties Divisional champion, (pictured) playing out of the Cambridge Squash Club. Kevin's journey to the Final had not been

easy but it had been impressive. He had taken out the Scotland Divisional champion, Rab Lusk, 2-0, then the Lancashire & Cheshire Divisional champion Ronnie Baxter, also 2-0. (Ronnie had beaten both Alan Warriner and Kevin Kenny to win the Divisional title.) In the quarterfinal Kevin had another 2-0 win, this time over the fancied Canadian, Bob Sinnaeve.

With Kevin recording 2-0 wins thus far, there were many who bet on him beating the Western Counties champion and spoil his party. But that didn't happen. Mike won by two legs to one and retained his title. Mike had joined the elite. He had become one of the greats.

Mike's 'double' was celebrated on the front cover of the June 1988 issue of *Darts World* magazine. He had been presented with his trophy by Page 3 Girl Maria Whittaker (see right).

In addition to the *News of the World* Challenge Trophy (to be kept at his pub for one year), Mike received his own replica of the trophy, £5,000, a 'Tradewinds' Caribbean two-week holiday for two and a gallon of Captain Morgan Black Label Rum!

Before the 1988 final, Mike had told the *News of the World* that his ambition was 'to be the first player to win the *News of the World*/Captain Morgan Rum championship *three times*.' But, of course, first he'd have to win it twice. The programme notes added that Mike's then wife Carol was 'hoping that's just what he does today.'

With two titles in a row. Mike now set his sights on a treble!

The *News of the World*/Captain Morgan Rum Darts Championship returned to the Hammersmith Odeon in May 1989 but, sadly, Mike didn't. The programme notes announced to the fans (who didn't already know) that

'Today we will witness a new champion as the reigning champ, Mike Gregory, was defeated in the Western Divisional Finals in March. This was a sad blow to Mike who was hoping to make history by being the first person to win the title for the third time. But, that's typical of this game, anyone can win.'

The winner of the Western Counties Divisional championship in early 1989 was handyman, Chris Whiting who, according to the *News of the World*

'...spends his working-hours building and his off-duty moments demolishing darts reputations. The 15-stone 6-footer from Cheltenham is the man who ended Mike Gregory's dream of a News of the World hat-trick, and he did it in a style that showed just why he's been called up by England this season.'



Thus, Mike's amazing run in the *News of the World* came to an end. Mike was never to make it to the Grand Finals again but, of course, he had made his mark on the tournament, success that will never be forgotten.

NEXT ISSUE: I conclude my tribute to Mike, looking at his other key successes and his role in 'The Split'.

SHAUN GREATBATCH

Just as I was about to put this issue to bed I heard the sad news that England's Shaun Greatbatch had passed away on 6th June.



Shaun (pictured) was best known for being the first man to hit a nine-darter on 'live' TV.

Shaun's wife, Barbara Lee broke the news on Twitter. She wrote:

"With a heavy heart and deep sorrow, I'm letting you know of the death of my dearest husband Shaun, yesterday afternoon, he was the most amazing, kind, caring, loving, funny best friend, father and grandfather you could ask for, and will be heartbrokenly missed by us all."

Peter Melton of England Darts, posted

'On behalf of the Directors,

Executive and the current England players I am sad to report that former England International Shaun Greatbatch has sadly passed away after a long battle with cancer.

Shaun represented England on 13 occasions winning 9 times, he also played in the Europe Cup once for England. Shaun will always be in the darts record books as he was the first ever dart player to record a nine dart leg live on TV, which happened in the final of the Dutch Open which he went on to win.

As well as his time with England I also shared many years with him in Cambridgeshire, he had a natural talent for the game which meant he could take long breaks from the game, usually in the summer when he could usually be found fishing, but come the start of another darts season it was like seeing someone flick a switch as all his talent on the board returned instantly and he was a match for anyone.

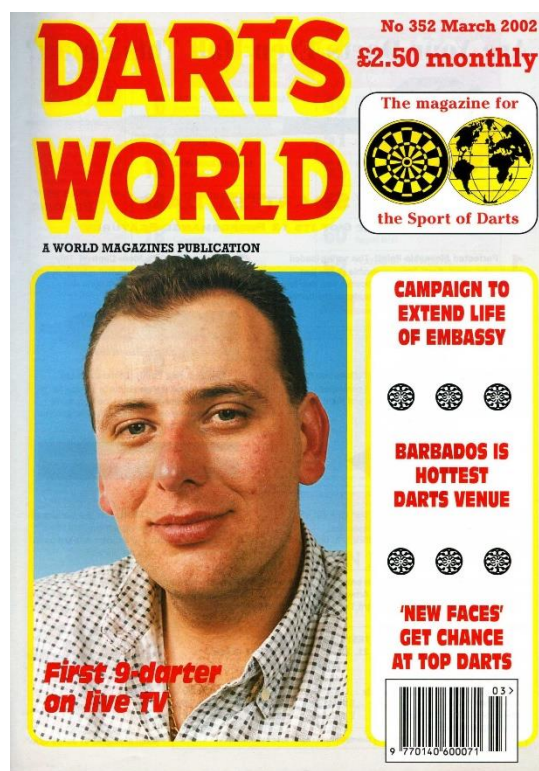
It has been a terrible time for the family as only a few weeks ago, his Mum Sandra also passed away, so our thoughts are with his wife Barbara, his son Tom, his Dad Barry and his sister Sara and the family at this very sad time. It was a pleasure to have known him, RIP Shaun.'

Former world no.1 Steve Beaton added:

“So sad to hear the awful news that Shaun Greatbatch has passed away at only 52. My deepest condolences to all his family and friends he was lovely guy. RIP Shaun.”

Back in early 2010 I visited Shaun at his home at Lakenheath and wrote an article about him which I published in one of the very first issues of *DDN*, Issue #8 – October 2010. As my tribute to Shaun, I reproduce that article here with some minor amendments.

‘It was Sunday 3rd February 2002. The occasion was the Dutch Open; the venue the Koningshof Hotel, Veldhoven, Holland. We are watching the final where two relatively unknown Englishmen, Steve Coote and Shaun Greatbatch, are fighting for the title. There are 5,000 spectators and the match is being broadcast live by Dutch TV station SBS6.



It is the second set, third leg. Steve Coote had won the first set 3-0 but Shaun was 2-0 up in the second. When Shaun started the third leg with back-to-back 180s the crowd fell silent. He then struck his seventh treble 20, then treble 15 and finally double 18! As referee Steve Nicholas calmly announced ‘Game shot’ the audience went mad and continued to applaud and cheer Shaun for a full five minutes or more.

After the raucous crowd had calmed down, the game was resumed and Shaun went on to take the Dutch Open title 4-2 but by then he had already carved his name forever into the history books.

BE UNDER NO ILLUSION. HISTORY WAS MADE THAT DAY. SHAUN HAD ACHIEVED THE FIRST-EVER PERFECT NINE-DART GAME ON ‘LIVE’ TV.

But what was his reward for this historic achievement? £100,000? No. £50,000? No. Shaun told me recently, “I didn’t win any money for hitting the nine-darter, although after the event someone phoned in and offered two thousand Euros.” Shaun also made front-page news in *Darts World* magazine (pictured above) and thereafter the Dutch fans in particular dubbed him ‘Nine Dart’.

Shaun was born in Newmarket, Cambridgeshire, England on 13th July 1969 the son of Barry and Sandra Greatbatch both of whom played top-level darts. Shaun told me, “I became interested in darts through my mother playing and watching it on TV.” A Norfolk county player by the time he was 15 years old, Shaun soon moved to the Cambridgeshire team and only retired from serving that county at the end of the 2010/11 season.

His major breakthrough was playing for England in 1997 and one of his best-ever games “the first five sets of the Lakeside semi-final in 2006 against Jelle Klassen.” Shaun also remembers with pride his performance at the 2001 Lakeside World Championships play-offs where he told me he was ‘awesome’ throughout, beating Gary Anderson in the play-off final.

However, his form eluded him in the first round of the World Championships proper where he was beaten 3-0 by Ted ‘The Count’ Hankey. (That was also the match that featured an interruption by the first-ever streaker at Lakeside.)

On 13th June 2008 Shaun was diagnosed with myeloma (bone cancer). He told me, “It was horrendous.” A long period of treatment has seen Shaun lose four and half inches in height (from 6’ 5 ½” to 6’ 1”). At the Lakeside World Championships in 2009 a guard of honour of fellow darts players lined the route to the Lakeside stage as Shaun came out to play his match. Shaun said, “It was very emotional for me.” The myeloma is now controlled but he has to undergo blood tests every three months to monitor his condition.

On Sunday 9th May 2010 Shaun played his last match for Cambridgeshire (against my county, Essex) and he has not thrown a dart since; not even socially. When I asked Shaun if he had any regrets he replied, “I was never 100% committed to darts. I was never one to prepare for matches. I preferred the social side of the darts; a side that got progressively worse once I met Bob Taylor!”

Shaun, who married the top lady darts player Barbara Lee in June 2010, continued, at the time of my interview, to work part-time as a Training and Safety Co-Ordinator for SCL (a local company owned by Scottish darts international Trevor Nurse). The rest of the time, when not relaxing with Barbara, Shaun pursued his other main passion: fishing.

Shaun will always be remembered as a great darts player but particularly, as the man who hit the first-ever perfect nine-dart game on ‘live’ TV. For that achievement alone he has etched his name into darts history.

NEXT ISSUE

You will have noted that Shaun’s mum, Sandra, had passed away only a short time before Shaun. Sandra was, herself, a well-known, ground-breaking lady darts player. I will be featuring Sandra in the July issue together with the final part of my tribute to Mike Gregory and items that had to be deferred this month.

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