

A Brief History Of Darts

The game of darts can be traced back many hundreds of years and stories take its history back even further. What credence can be given to tales that ancient Greek warriors used to throw short spears at the upturned ends of wine barrels during the intervals between battles is not certain . It is a fact however that during the middle ages the sport of darts gained some recognition and popularity with men from all walks of life taking an interest, playing the game in the drinking houses that sprang up. In 1530 it has been recorded that Anne Boleyn gave King Henry The Eighth a set of richly ornamented darts.

The early darts were much longer than those of today being some 25 cm long. Slices off tree trunks were commonly used as targets as they provided natural sections to aim at with their rings and as they dried out, radial cracks, that developed.

It is well documented that the game was popular with sailors who would use a section off an old mast as a target.

Indeed it is recorded that the game was taken over to America by the Pilgrim Fathers on the Mayflower. As the rules became laid down the game developed solely as an indoor past-time with smaller darts. The barrels were made from wood with a metal point stuck in one end and feathers in the other.

It was not until in 1898 when an American patented a folded paper flight and 1906 when an Englishman patented the metal barrel, that the game really started to resemble that of today. It was at about this time that a standardised dart board with numbers on was also developed. The distance adopted for the throw was measured by placing three beer crates from a firm called Hockey and Sons who were a big brewer in the southwest of England. The crates measured 3 feet giving the early distance for the toe line at 9 feet.

Eventually the crates were reduced in size down to 2 feet and then 4 crates were used to measure the distance which changed to 8 feet. As ladies tried their hands at the sport shorter distances were also used.

This explains why if you look at a standard pub darts mat you will see several different lines clearly marked.

It is believed that the name for the throw line called the Oche comes from the name of the brewery that supplied the crates.

In the early 1900s games of chance were illegal in public houses and it was considered that darts came into this category. However a landlord called Foot Anakin challenged this ruling in court. He set up a board in court and threw three darts into the 20 segment. Then he challenged the court officials to do the same. None of them could match his accuracy so the court ruled that it was not a game of chance. This led to the game becoming even more popular in public houses and led to regular teams and competitions.

By the end of world war two the game was firmly established with a large proportion of pubs having teams throughout the country. Competitions with substantial prizes started to be run with the News Of The World competition in 1927 being the first really big one. This was only open to London residents at first but rapidly opened up to the whole country drawing large numbers of competitors.

In 1954 the National Darts Association was formed to oversee the game and establish more widely recognised rules of play. In 1957 the foundations for county darts were laid .

The Creation Of The B.D.O.

It was not until 1973 when Ollie Croft formed the British Darts Organisation that the next stage of development occurred.

The B.D.O. grew rapidly and in 1975 the Embassy competition was first promoted on T.V. In the mid 1980s the B.D.O. organised over 800 tournaments held every year all over the country. These included competitions held at all the major holiday centres such as Pontins, Haven and Butlins. At this time the B.D.O. had some 30,000 members in all.

Ollie Croft drew up a comprehensive set of rules for the game and this included a new Metric regulation throwing distance of 7ft 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ inch which was used for competitions as a standard worldwide. It was adopted by most leagues throughout the world but even to this day some still throw at 8 feet and some at 7 ft 6, and although the board has specifications laid down for its structure there is still in use a Yorkshire board with no trebles on it.

The 1970s and 80s were to be the "Golden Years" of darts because in 1988 the TV programme called "Not The 9'0 Clock News" did a particularly vitriolic sketch on darts which put the players in a very bad light. The newspapers were quick to pick up on the aspect of heavy drinking portrayed and the press destroyed the image of the game. Attempts were made to clean up the image with players being told to drink water on stage on TV. Some players such as Jockey Wilson even started fitness campaigns but it was to no avail and in 1988 all ITV coverage of the game was scrapped and the BBC only screened the Embassy competition.

Ollie Croft continued running the BDO like a benevolent patriarch with his wife Lorna from his address in Muswell Hill, but the top players suffered from a lack of TV coverage for some 5 years and darts went into a decline.

Troubled Times For Darts.

Five years later in 1993 the top 32 players wanted to appoint a PR consultant to get them back on TV and improve the image of the game as their incomes were suffering and they wanted to

get the game back to its previous golden years. (To this end drinking alcohol on the competition stage was banned from tournaments.) The men they wanted to improve the image were Tom Cox and Marcus Robertson but Ollie was having none of it. He would not relinquish his hold on the organization.

The players decided to hold their own tournament sponsored by Lada cars and Ollie again objected. Tom Cox and Marcus Robertson ran the new competition and formed an organisation called the World Darts Council. When the players played in the Embassy they all wore badges showing the new WDC insignia instead of the BDO. They were forced to remove them and the players decided unanimously that if Ollie Croft wouldn't recognise the WDC they were not going to play in the Embassy again.

Cox and Robertson tried to build fences and acted as mediators arranging a meeting with 100 BDO delegates to try and sort out the mess. However the meeting degenerated and voted to ban all 32 players from any BDO competitions in Britain. This meant that they could only play overseas and curtailed their earning potentials considerably. Mike Gregory was the only player to turn against his fellows and wormed his way back in with the BDO. Eric Bristow was disgusted with him and still shuns him to this day.

Soon after this the Las Vegas competition was to be held and the World Darts Federation decided to hold a meeting there to discuss the situation. Tom Cox could see the ban would be made worldwide and lobbied the delegates but such was the influence of Croft that that the ban went ahead.

The only thing that the players could do was to start lengthy legal proceedings which were to go on for some three years. Eventually a settlement was made out of court and the players were reinstated but on the grounds that the WDC changed its name.

It was a hollow victory for the players because the legal actions had cost the sport hundreds of thousands of pounds which it could ill afford.

Even now most of the original top 32 players wont play in the Embassy, which is still running some 25 years later, but play in their own competitions which are televised on Sky sport.

Technological Developments

Elm boards were used for many years and attempts were made to replace them with paper boards which were totally unsuitable as they soon broke up. Gradually bristle boards were developed and when Dutch Elm disease overtook the country this prompted the change over. Bristle boards are far superior and have now been adopted universally. Elm boards had to be soaked to close up the dart holes in them in between matches and did not last very long as they dried out and cracked under the heat of the spot lights.

A continental board has been developed recently which has a mesh surface and the scores are registered automatically. But this has not found favour with the English players.

Not only has the dartboard undergone a series of changes but so have the darts. In the 1940s Jim Pike became a big star of the darts world and as with all stars he had equipment named after him.

Jim Pike darts were all the rage for many years with their brass barrels, split cane shafts and paper flights. They were the first modern darts and brass continued to be favoured for the barrels until the 1970s when tungsten started to become popular. This gave the weight without the need for a very thick barrel.

Tungsten obviously had enormous advantages as thinner barrels meant it was easier to get three darts in one treble. Stems have undergone some changes from split wooden canes to plastic

or aluminium threaded shafts which do not drop out during a throw. As the barrels got thinner the thread size was reduced from $\frac{1}{4}$ Whitworth to 2BA. Flights have also changed beyond recognition from paper tassels to elaborate feathers and on to modern plastic. (These will be discussed later in the book.)

Darts is a major sport but perhaps it does not get the coverage that it deserves. It has never received the acclaim that snooker, tennis or golf have. Perhaps if it makes it into the Olympics as some people have suggested it will gain more esteem.