

CHAPTER 1

‘Welcome back to Wolverhampton’s Civic Centre, home of the Party Poker.com Grand Slam of Darts.’ The presenter announced as the television viewers returned to the live action after the commercial break.

The audience in the arena erupted with excitement as they could see themselves on the television screens that were mounted from the ceiling to the left and right of the stage displaying the live feed, holding up personalised notes written on their “180” cards for all to see as the camera’s panned around them. Multi-coloured spot lights danced around the spectators as the theme music played in the background, drowned out somewhat even as the cheering quietened. The loud din of laughter and general chat remained, some quarters of the audience chanting for their favourite player, all adding to the almost party atmosphere. The cameras continued their journey across the crowds, pinpointing groups of people in fancy dress; such was the nature of the fans of the sport and seeing the cameras again they jeered and thrust their notes forward as others around them seeing the pictures interject to do the same.

Tables lined the viewing area perpendicular to the stage providing ample space for the fans whilst providing a good view of the action. With the break in the competition people were jostling around returning to their seats with drinks and food ready for the next matches and also standing talking with friends and family, all the while keeping an eye on the television screens in case they were picked out. The evening was a sell out and aside from the seated positions on the floor and to the balconies that ran around the three sides of the arena it was standing room only. The atmosphere electric with the anticipation from the quality of play so far but also filled with good humour and respect for the players as well as those around them. The cameras continued to pan around everyone during the break capturing the essence of the nature of the sport as an enjoyable family event verging on the celebratory as the games went on.

Across the sides and to the back of the arena attached to the balcony viewing areas, a continuous matrix display of lights graphically depicted darts hitting a dartboard and exploding to then display the PDC logo and the name of the championship in a smooth animation that surrounded the audience. The excitement of the crowd began to rise again as the presenter continued his announcement.

‘A spectacular evening of darts so far I’m sure you’ll agree...’ The presenter said as the crowd cheered to confirm their agreement. ‘...Congratulations then to “The Flying Scotsman” Gary Anderson who moves into the quarter finals after an inspired performance.’ The fans of the Scotsman shouted and cheered their appreciation at the mention of his name whilst waving their flags in support. ‘It’s always sad to see a talented player getting knocked out in the early stages but I’m sure he’ll be back. A big hand then ladies and gentlemen for “The Sandman”, Dean Hodge!’ Again the spectators cheered their appreciation for great round of darting action.

Dean having left the stage during the commercial break, had made his way to the interview gantry one level up from the spectator floor on the left hand

side. Looking over the crowd cheering at the mention of his name he couldn't help but feel emotional. Even though he'd been knocked out and knocked out by a superior player, he still felt proud that he'd made it this far. This was his dream and for right now, he was living it. His arrival at this tournament had been the result of a culmination of several months of hard training putting in at least four to five hours a day in between working. The qualifiers for the match had been tough as the quality of the competition was extremely high but he'd managed to get through with some skilled play and carrying a score average of a few decimals over ninety seven.

A smile crossed his face as he looked down at a group of individuals slightly below his position, they were decorating their "180" cards with bright coloured pens, writing messages he assumed to friends or family that may be viewing at home. One in particular was quite artistic with a depiction of two lightning strikes and the words "The Power" written between them. Obviously in readiness for the match later on with Phil Taylor, Dean couldn't help but wonder when someone would do something similar for him. It was this type of, not adulation in his mind, but following and support interest in him and his game that was his marker for achievement. When someone did this for him during a tournament, then he would know that he had finally made it. The fans made the game for him. The game of darts connected with the fans in a way that no other sport could, the players were bread and butter for them, the same as them. There were no airs and graces, no anonymity; they came from the same backgrounds and spoke and looked the same. Players mixed with the fans in the audience even sitting amongst them after having been knocked out of the rounds. It was this connection that everyone respected, it was part of the game, it was part of sport of darts. Dean loved that about these tournaments and relished every minute that he was a part of it. Darts, a people's sport that everyone could relate to, was in their pubs and clubs which anyone could have a go at and enjoy, from the young to the old. He admired the ethos and was proud to be a part of it.

Averting his attention to the stage where the presenter was standing giving his commentary, he admired the oche he'd just played on. His eyes wandered across the expanse of the stage, from the board to the wall behind which was made up of a large light brown colour semi-circle that ran the full length of the stage with two giant darts intersecting at forty five degree angles on either side with the board positioned in the middle. The rest of the wall behind that jet black and on either side of the semi-circle there were two electronic digital score boards which confirmed the scores in bright red giving the players information that they may need to calculate their next shots. Various liveries from the organiser to the sponsors were strategically placed on the wall, and wherever the camera's were pointed there were advertising boards with the sponsor's name. A camera was positioned above the dart board looking back at the players as they took to the oche and on the floor to the left and right behind the oche, the sponsor had their name clearly on display on prominent advertising boards.

The presenter continued. 'The best though is yet to come as we move into the quarter final stages. A battle of the titans, it's "Barney"! Raymond Van

Barneveld versus “The Power”! Phil Taylor! Before that though it’s Mark Webster and Wayne “Hawaii 501” Mardle in a much anticipated match.

The live feed of the program then cut to an interlude of player profiles for the next matches and the presenter then handed over to the Master of Ceremonies on stage for some announcements to the audience.

The crowds then began to resume their chatting and talking whilst announcements were being made about the results of the day’s raffle which resulted in a few excited cheers from parts of the arena.

Gary Anderson had been roaming around the edges of the crowd signing autographs for his fans whilst the presenter was addressing the audience. One of the officials had caught up with him to guide him up to the gantry where Dean was standing waiting so that he was there in time for the interviews when the presenter had finished.

Dean looked down as he waited in the gantry for a few moments while Gary sped up the stairs to join him. The presenter was making his way off of the stage and also headed in their direction as Gary made it to the top and shook hands with Dean’s before turning to the audience to wave down. Gary was one of Dean’s favourite players in the tournament even though his was Scottish. The rivalry between England and Scotland always a great one that carried with it a lot of respect. Gary’s previous nickname was “Dream Boy” and Dean was always curious as to why he didn’t like it, but he thought that this was probably not the time to ask him about it and focussed his attention elsewhere.

Dean knew the format of the interviews and also knew that he would be first up to give the loser’s interview. He wished that the tables were turned and that it was him that would be giving the winners speech, but for the moment he had to be content with doing what was necessary and then wait for the next tournament.

Under the spot lights and standing behind one of the graphical light matrixes the heat was getting to him. Perspiration began to drip from his forehead, his naturally curly short black hair becoming more sodden and he was starting to feel a little light headed. He couldn’t quite remember how many drinks he had downed before the match but he was sure that it wasn’t helping. He dismissed the thought though as he knew he needed a few “stiffeners” before a match to settle his nerves. Alcohol seemed to make his game flow better, he was sure of it and in the pub county games he played in alcohol was always part of his game and he’d put in some stunning performances on the back of it which lead to him attempting to get into the professional game. It was these big stages that seemed to have a slightly detrimental effect to his game, he knew that he was better than this but stage fright always seemed to take hold and his performance suffered as a result, never quite making it as far as the Semi-finals. His resolve though was to play as many big tournaments as he could qualify for so that he could gain the experience and confidence to put in some better performances.

Leaning on the rails overlooking the audience, Dean tried to shake off the dullness in his head. Interviews to camera were always quick affairs such being the time constraints of the schedule. He had to brighten up and do so a bit lively

he thought to himself. It was at that moment that the presenter arrived on the gantry and took up position between them both and the camera man readied his equipment and lined up the view directly at them. Straightening his shirt and giving a quick sweep of his hair he went straight into it.

‘Well it’s been a breathtaking display so far this evening and with me now I have Dean Hodge.’ The presenter said as he turned to focus his attention on Dean and positioned his microphone between them.

The camera man aimed his lens at Dean as the presenter continued. ‘Dean, commiserations on missing out on the third round. There was a leg there where it was four all and both of you missed a lot of doubles in that leg and then you lost it against the throw. Do you think that was the crucial point in the match from your perspective?’ The presenter quickly asked him.

‘Yeah I think it was. You know it was always gonna be tight between me and Gary. Very similar sort of players if you like and score quite heavy. It was always gonna be whoever pinched the double first you know, so, yeah I’m very disappointed obviously. I knew that once I lost my throw I was on an uphill task so, yeah disappointed.’ Dean answered positively but with an obvious air of disappointment.

‘It’s been a few years now since you were ranked up in the top fifty of the world and you reached the world championship quarter finals. Are you getting back to the Dean Hodge we knew from that kind of era?’ The presenter continued.

‘Yeah I suppose I am. Listen, I’m a great darts player you know and rightly or wrongly I’ve never given myself that much credit as a player and perhaps I should do. I know I can play the game very nicely but it’s getting up here and doing it, getting to the stage and performing and that. That’s where I play proper darts you know, so I know the ability’s there, it’s just getting it right on the night you know.’ Dean said assuredly if not as eloquently as he would have liked.

‘And this is the first time you’ve been to this stage in this tournament beyond the second stages now.’ The presenter stated.

‘Yeah so third round here, quite pleased with that although I was hoping to go further obviously. Previous was second round, lost to me old mate Adrian in the second round two or three years ago I think so you know. But tough game today, I knew it was gonna be tough, Gary played exceptionally well this evening but that’s the thing with Gary, he’s a tough opponent so all the best to him.’ Dean lied. He didn’t wish his opponent all the best, he wanted to have that place in the quarter finals, but, he had to look sporting and show his opponent the respect that was expected.

‘So, what’s next for “The Sandman”?’ The presenter asked

Dean looked around at the crowd and then back to the camera, he knew he had to work harder and smarter. ‘Well its back to the drawing board you know. Get more training in and concentrate for the next tournament.’

‘Thanks for that Dean and hard luck.’ The presenter finished off and then turned to focus on Gary with a more upbeat pitch.

‘Cheers.’ Dean replied but the focus had already moved on.

With that Dean left the gantry as the presenter carried on with his piece to camera and his interview with Gary. Walking down the stairs, his head began to spin a little after the effort of the interview as the crowd roared back into action at the sound of Van Halen and their track “Jump” as Mark Webster started to walk on for the next match.

CHAPTER 2

‘Read ‘em and weep boys... Three kings.’ Jack said with a wink as he laid out his cards in front of himself and then sat back in his chair with a smug grin of self satisfaction, looking around at the three others at the table.

‘Where the fuck did you get three kings from?’ Eddie asked whilst leaning forward into the table to look Jack square in the eyes.

‘Luck of the game my son. Fold the notes and slide ‘em over if you will ta very much...’ Jack replied indicating to a modest stack of five pound notes that lay somewhat strewn across the centre of the table.

‘No, I don’t think I will to be honest. You see I say that cos I got two kings in my hand.’ Eddie states quite firmly. ‘So I’ll ask you again, where the fuck did you get three kings from?’

‘Err...’

‘Ya fucking right “err”. I ought to slap you like the bitch you are right now you cheatin’ tosser.’ Eddie said as he had his right index finger pointed firmly in Jack’s direction over the table.

‘Oohh you give me the shivers you do when you’re angry.’ Jack retorted in a mock homosexual voice finishing the sentence of with a slow wink and kiss.

‘Fuck you and gimme back my money.’ Eddie stated ignoring the sarcasm. ‘That’s the fucking last time you and me play cards. Three card brag? Fucking cheating bastard more like.’ He continued as he began to rise from his chair.

‘That doesn’t even make sense.’ Jack replied exaggerating the look of confusion.

Eddie slowly took his seat once again and looked directly into Jack’s eyes. ‘I’m glad you bought that up, my slight grammatical error as it would so seem. So how about I remedy the situation by landing my big arsed fist in your boat race thus knocking you senseless so you can better understand what it was I just fucking said?’

‘Err nah, you’re alright Ed, point made.’ Jack replied a little sheepishly as he fumbled around with the cash in front of him to return his winnings to their rightful owners.

Behind them the door slammed. Immediately the two others not involved with the skirmish got up and made themselves look busy and exited the room from the other door to the left of the table.

‘Fackin’ ‘ell!’ Harry said as he entered the room waving his right hand vigorously in front of his face, the left hand holding a briefcase and a newspaper. The smog from the cigarettes they were smoking whilst playing cards hung thick in the air. It was an untidy room, moderate in size being one of the back rooms to Harry’s pub in Stockwell. Patterned brown wall paper, of the type popular in the seventies, lined the walls, peeling in places. A large gilt edged mirror hung proudly, if somewhat misty with dirt from not having been cleaned probably since being hung there, positioned in the middle of the wall to the left of where Harry was standing. The room large enough to accommodate a four seat beige leather sofa beneath the mirror which had seen better days as it was well worn

suffering from various cracks, creases and the odd stain picked up over many years of use. A low level glass coffee table positioned in front of the sofa was covered with various newspapers and empty mugs and another overflowing ashtray matching that of its mate on the card table. A small window situated high in the wall to the right of the room remained unopened and shrouded in a nicotine stained heavy net curtain. The table they had just been playing on was in the right hand corner of the room, large enough for four maybe five seated players, covered in a green felt cloth, cards now scattered across its top mingled with notes and coins that had been used in the betting. A door to the left hand corner of the room was gently pulled shut behind the two that had just left.

‘Do you lot just open a pack of twenty, light ‘em up and sit there inhaling the fumes?’ Harry continued now looking directly at Eddie and Jack as they were the only ones left in the room now standing at either side of the table they’d just been playing on. They could almost be twins with the same suit jacket style leather coats they wore. Each with short cropped brown hair the only difference between them their size. Eddie, Harry’s number one man stood a good six foot two inches and had the build to match. Jack on the other hand was five foot eleven inch and portly built. He did have some muscle, which is why Eddie used him, he could handle himself more than adequately but suffered from a room temperature IQ according to Harry and so Eddie was always told to keep him on a tight leash.

‘Sorry boss.’ Eddie replied. ‘Do you want me to open the window?’ He asked.

‘Shows how many times you’ve done that don’t it? Nah you can’t, it’s welded shut with paint.’ Harry shot back with a grimace whilst pushing the bridge of his thick brown framed glasses further up his nose. Harry was an old school London hard man who’d known nothing but crime since his childhood. He’d been bought up with it and it was second nature to him. In his fifties now, he’d shifted his interests into something more lucrative. He was the bookie of the area running games of anything that would pull in the punters and taking bets, but he always ensured that there was an upside for him, no matter what. Be it bare knuckle fighting; dog fighting; poker you name it he had a game going for it. More often than not he also had a ringer in his pocket as well, someone he could rely on for a win, or a loss for that matter.

Although his age was showing quite obviously with his brushed back greasy looking grey hair almost verging on white, stern looking pale features making his aged yellow teeth more prominent, his temperament was still that of the young cockney hard man he used to be. Although short in stature against his two main guys, he was big on attitude and wasn’t frightened on following through on his threats. Everyone respected him and no one would dare cross him. He had a reputation and it was one that he worked very hard to keep in everyone’s mind.

Harry made his way over to the sofa and put his briefcase and paper on the coffee table. Looking across at Jack he furrowed his brow giving the impression that he was a little angry. ‘Isn’t there a barrel that needs changing or something?’ He suggested.

Jack knowing this meant that he should disappear rather quickly, nodded positively and walked across to the door at the left of the room and exited quickly closing the door behind him.

Eddie made his way over to the sofa and sat down at one end as Harry took the other end.

‘Right, so what’s the crack Eddie? Who is it that thinks he can muscle in on my patch?’ Harry asked straight faced. Business had been down a touch and attendance to his games had been lower than normal. He’d heard some whispers that someone else had been running some scams in his area and this did nothing to please him. Upon hearing the news he had sent Eddie out on a fact finding mission to locate the guy and find out what his business was about.

‘It’s a black geezer. Goes by the name of Tyrone. Thinks of himself as a bad arsed gangster of some sort and seems to be hitting it off with the younger members of our clientele. Thing of it is though that it appears as if he’s running better odds than us at the moment, I’m thinking that maybe he’s doing it to attract more people in the short term to build his business up.’ Eddie confirmed.

‘Well that’s bleedin’ obvious innit?’ Harry answered sharply. ‘What scams is he running?’

‘Same as us Harry in the main. The only thing he aint doin is the dog fighting, doesn’t seem to have the taste for it.’ Eddie replied shifting his position in the chair slightly, raising his knee on to the seat next to him.

‘How capable is he?’

Eddie knew that this question was with regards his business strength and resources. ‘Not bad as it goes Harry. He’s got a sizeable crew, all big bastards you know and he seems to have the money to back himself up. Property wise he has a garage, you know, car mechanics and that. He also has a warehouse that he uses for a legitimate distribution business. The warehouse he uses to run his knuckle fights, card games the lot. Big old place, nicely kitted from what I’m told.’

‘Good work Eddie. Needless to say that I don’t want this muppet interfering with my business. We’re going to need to come up with a plan, clear the air as it were.’

‘Right you are boss.’ Eddie stated in agreement. At that moment a loud knocking on the door that Harry came through distracted their attention.

‘Go and find out who that is.’ Harry demanded.

Eddie got up off of the sofa and walked around the coffee table to open the door. Dean was on the other side looking remarkably happy with himself. ‘Show me the money!’ He exclaimed with both arms in the air.

‘Harry, it’s the sandman.’ Eddie stated in an uninterested manner.

‘For fuck sake, OK let him in.’ Harry stated being not too happy with the interruption in their discussions.

Almost barging past Eddie, Dean strolled into the room boldly, slightly taken aback by the now stale cigarette smoke which had still not cleared the room. ‘Harry! Hows it going?’ Dean asked chirpily. He didn’t particularly like Harry, being that he was a very abrasive character and certainly not what you would call friendly. Harry did however extend a very sizeable line of credit

which made him a very attractive bookie to Dean. He'd never had that much cash on hand but Dean knew that he could with one phone call make a very healthy bet without having to prove that he had the means to pay it back if it fell through. He met Harry through the pub, it was one of his local haunts when he was growing up and when he started playing darts in the pub leagues. It was Harry who suggested laying some bets on the side as well as using Dean on the odd occasion to make some money from him as a ringer when Dean didn't have enough to make good on a bad debt. Now though, Dean was in the black and he had a nice amount of wedge coming his way from his performance at the PDC Grand Slam. 'Bet you I could get into the third round didn't I?' He went on to say as more of a joke than a confirmation of the win.

'Bloody 'ell you're ambitious aintcha?' Harry retorted. 'Why don't you play to win? You know you always come to me to bet on getting to a certain round. It's becoming a bit of a balls ache for me as a lot of the time you do. See now if you set your sights a little higher and bet to win you may actually do it, meaning that you win all the prize money and don't have to bet on yourself causing me to be out of pocket.'

'Where's me money Harry?' Dean asked getting a little frustrated at the onslaught.

Harry looked at him disapprovingly as if Dean had disrespected him with the curt response. Brushing it aside though for the moment, Harry reached for his briefcase from off of the top of the coffee table. Unlatching the clasp at the front of the bag he opened it up and took out several blocks of twenty pound notes and laid them out on the coffee table in front of him to then look up at Dean.

Dean smiled as he saw the stacks of cash laid out. There must have been at least twenty grand there.

Harry sat back in the sofa. 'There's your money boy. Only a large bunch of it is mine.' He said with the merest hint of a smile.

'Eh? How do you work that out?' Dean asked. He was also put out by Harry's use of the word "boy". Harry used that on anyone less than thirty five years old to assert his authority over them and make them feel small. Dean though at thirty one was far from a boy and always resented being called it. Not that he would ever say anything to Harry about it though for fear of losing a limb for the disrespect.

'You're still into to me for a fifteen weight on your last poor showing.' Harry stated with his trademark grimace that Dean really rather disliked as it bared some of the worst teeth he'd seen. 'Did you forget?' He continued rather sarcastically.

'Fifteen grand?' Dean asked somewhat surprised by the amount.

'Yeah. A ten weight for the bet and a five weight for the late payment. Consider yourself lucky boy that I didn't get Ed here to break off some of your fingers for messing me about. It was only because you were playing in the Grand Slam that I let it slide. Didn't want to handicap you and then have no chance of getting my money off you did I?'

Dean's dejection at being told of the severe cut to his winnings was obvious to see as he looked quizzically and unhappily at Harry.

'Anyway, it's not all bad news. There's a five weight with your name on it and your account is stevens. Above board. Full credit now extended once again.' Harry confirmed.

Dean reached over to collect his block of cash from the table as Jack made his way back into the room unaware that there was a visitor.

Walking through the door he did a double take. 'Is this him? The Sandman? The guy off the telly?' He asked as Dean raised one eyebrow as if in confirmation but looking decidedly unhappy.

Harry however, momentarily disturbed by the unannounced entry of Jack into the room didn't want to show his irritation in front of a client. Shifting his position in the sofa, he smiled at Jack. 'You can't tell me you don't know who this is?' He asked. 'This is the great Sandman no less. Used to play for me back in the day didn't you boy? Before you had delusions of grandeur thinking you could mix it with the professionals. Oh yes, what is it you walk on stage to? Metallica, Enter Sandman isn't it? Very apt. I'm more of a Carpenters man myself.'

'That's cool, I love darts me. Watched you in the Grand Slam, awesome performance, unlucky on the result though.' Jack stated looking admiringly at Dean.

Harry getting even more irritated with Jack continued his diatribe. 'Of course it's an interesting story how you got your nickname innit boy?' Harry asked as more of a statement than as a question. Dean looked on as he knew what was coming. 'Imagine, televised performance and the boy here is due up on stage next. Of course, as the geezer on stage calls his name, no bugger turns up do they? No, so he calls again and still no one turns up. Turns out that the boy has passed out aint he? Too many pints of the sauce before the game and he's passed out in the players' lounge. It took what, fifteen minutes for some of the officials to rouse you out of your slumber?' He asked of Dean who nodded gently to answer positively, disinterested in the memory that Harry was now stirring. 'The match was delayed and he was lucky not to get disqualified. So anyway, when he finally manages to crawl onto the stage rubbing his eyes like some kid who'd just woken up, the presenter says "looks like the sandman must have taken some of his own medicine". So from that moment the name stuck. All you had to do was change the walk on music, redo the outfit accordingly and that completed the ensemble. Fucking brilliant, you couldn't make this stuff up! The boy's a plasterer by trade, but I won't embarrass you by going into how all that came about now, I want me lunch I'm hungry. But I will say this though, it's a pity that you can't smooth out your performance as well as you can a brick wall eh?' Harry chided, laughing at his own joke, though sounding more like a cough than a laugh.

'Thanks for that Harry.' Dean said. 'I must remember to come back anytime I feel like a little pick me up to brighten my spirits. Ta ta for now.' He continued as he motioned his winnings at Harry in acknowledgement. Making

his way through the door Dean was relieved to be out of there with at least some cash in hand though nowhere near as much as he was expecting.

Eddie closed the door behind Dean and went back to the sofa as Jack took a seat at the card table waiting for Eddie to be free so that they could do their afternoon collecting rounds.

‘You know I wasn’t gonna say, but according to my sources, Dean is into Tyrone for quite a sizeable weight.’ Eddie relayed to Harry.

Harry looked at Eddie with some interest. ‘How much?’

‘Dunno exactly but it’s not peanuts I can tell you that.’ Eddie confirmed.

‘This could be advantageous to our plans Eddie, keep that in mind. Mind you, I don’t like the sound of this Typhoon geezer...’

‘Tyrone.’ Eddie interrupted to correct Harry.

‘What difference does it make? I still don’t like the sound of him. He doesn’t play by the rules. Not a gentleman.’ Harry stated.

‘What do you want us to do boss?’ Jack asked wanting to get in on the action.

‘I dunno just yet, I need to think. In the mean time keep trying to find out what you can about this geezer and keep me apprised. Also find out what you can about Dean’s debts. He could prove useful.’