



# TABLE-TOPPERS

THE WORLD-CLASS PLAY WHICH RETURNED TO OUR SHORES AT THE PRESTIGIOUS AUSTRALIAN GOLDFIELDS OPEN IN BENDIGO WAS VASTLY DIFFERENT TO THE SNOOKER YOU MIGHT REMEMBER ...

**IT'S NOT EVERY DAY** you see two sportsmen tucking into a friendly pub lunch together just hours before they're due to battle it out for a prize pot worth \$70,000 and a place in the final of one of their sport's newest and most important events. But that's exactly what two pro English snooker players, Mark Davis and Barry "The Hawk" Hawkins, did one rainy day while in Bendigo, Victoria recently for the Australian Snooker Goldfields Open.

This is the second year running that the historic gold rush town has hosted the Goldfields Open. Last year it was Englishman Stuart Bingham who took the trophy ... And this year?

Hang on, mate. Patience, mental focus, gamesmanship and professionalism are considered virtues in snooker, which has undergone a

global renaissance since sports promoter Barry Hearn acquired majority ownership of the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association in 2010 and set about revitalising the flagging sport.

"Barry Hearn's done wonders for snooker," says our man on the baize, Neil Robertson, who's excited to be playing in front of a home crowd, along with an impressive assortment of snooker's leading lights in a topsy-turvy competition for a total prize pool of \$435,000.

Topsy-turvy? In a perfect illustration of one of the known knowns of snooker (weird shit happens), the players who are expected to strike gold at the tournament put in what turns out to be surprisingly brief appearances, while the long-suffering underdogs – those blokes who seem destined to stand one step shy of the limelight –

come to the fore. Current world no.1 Mark Selby doesn't even make it past the first round, losing 5-3 to 37th-seeded Scot Jamie Burnett. Last year's golden boy, Bingham, has a similar first-round nightmare when he goes down 5-4 to Matthew Selt, while Friday the 13th proves unlucky for seventh seed Shaun Murphy, who falls 5-4 to Peter "The Ebdonator" Ebdon.

Ebdon is no newcomer, but ever since he turned vegan and started putting away around a dozen organic bananas a day, his game has improved. The day after dispatching Murphy, he sends Ding "The Star of the East" Junhui home early 5-4, and the day after *that*, the clean-living Englishman sails through his semi-final match with Hong Kong's Marco Fu, winning 6-2 and potting himself a place in the final.



Australia's Neil Robertson. RIGHT A pub lunch with a mate – and rival – didn't pay off for England's Mark Davis.



Ding "The Star Of The East" Junhui.

Since we last visited Neil "The Thunder From Down Under" Robertson back in 2007, he's won the 2007 Welsh Open, the 2008 Bahrain Snooker Championship, and the 2009 Grand Prix. In the 2009/2010 season, he won the World Championship and World Open. In 2011/2012, he won snooker's most prestigious invitation event, The Masters, and was champion at two Players Tour Championship events. In the last two seasons, he's banked more than \$450,000. In short, life is looking good for Robertson, and the blond left-hander from Melbourne fronts up to the Goldfields Open feeling confident.

He gets off to a good start, scoring a comfortable 5-1 first round win over Englishman Nigel Bond with impressive breaks of 135, 81, 92 and 113 in front of a jubilant home crowd. "It's really special to be playing in Australia," he comments afterwards. "I've got all my family up here as well and all my closest friends. It's fantastic to catch up with everyone; I'm really enjoying the experience."

But the "catching up" an amiable Robertson does before his next game against Davis (that's the bloke asking Hawkins to pass the salt) turns out to be his undoing; his pre-match practice routine goes out the window, along with his game and his place in the tournament. Robertson wins the first frame, but a kick on the black in the second on 39 lets Davis onto the baize, and the Sussex-born-and-bred player with a penchant for fish 'n' chips makes the most of it, taking the next four frames with breaks of 67, 65, 81 and 61.

"It's always disappointing to lose, and I guess it's more disappointing to go out on home soil. I

went out in the last 16 last year, and unfortunately I've gone out in the last 16 again," says Robertson, who is determined to win an Australian Goldfields Open, and has resolved to leave the catching up until *after* his game next year.

There used to be just six UK-based ranking tournaments and the big one, the World Championship at the Crucible in Sheffield. Now, there are 28 spread across Europe (Germany, Belgium, Poland, Bulgaria), Thailand, China, Brazil and, since 2011, Australia. Snooker's international television audience has grown from 75 million in 2006 to an estimated 350 million this year. Prize money is growing, and players are encouraged to achieve high breaks with cash incentives. They get more for the televised breaks – all part of Hearn's marketing-savvy master plan to make snooker a spectator-favourite world sport.

It's another of sport's known knowns that – sometimes – fans are more committed than the players, and there's at least one chap in the audience who has travelled from the UK to get amongst it Down Under. But if he's expecting the fiery showmanship and high drama we've come to expect from the likes of Ronnie "The Rocket" O'Sullivan, he's going to be a bit peeved, because O'Sullivan isn't here.

Everyone's disappointed that O'Sullivan chose not to make the trip Down Under – except O'Sullivan himself, who announced after winning

last year's World Championship that he'd be taking a six-month break (last we heard, he's broken his foot). It's as much an indication of O'Sullivan's state of mind as it is a reflection of the sport's state of play: the increased opportunities offered by Hearn's snooker shake-up mean, more than ever, the top players can pick and choose when and where they appear. In fact, the long-haul flight to Australia and concerns about jetlag mean O'Sullivan's not the only big name no-show: a smattering of other top-16ers also decided not to come.

"Obviously any tournament that doesn't have Ronnie O'Sullivan in it is a bit of a miss," says Robertson, who is right behind snooker's globalisation, and reckons we'll be seeing more world-class snooker in Australia. He's just waiting for his big-name mates to clock on, pointing out that as the prize money grows (which seems likely, given the prize pool for the China Open has doubled from \$300,000 to \$600,000 since it was first held in 2004/2005), so will their interest.

If we take the phenomenal growth of snooker in China as an indicator of Hearn's brave new snooker world, we can expect to see more international competitors coming through. China makes up more than 50 per cent of snooker's global television audience, and its star player, 25-year-old Ding, is worth millions. He might be the only Chinese player currently in the top 16, ▶

**"HOW PETER EBDON IS ALLOWED TO PLAY THAT SLOW IS A JOKE."**

PHOTOS BY Getty Images



Barry Hearn loved the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association so much, he bought it in 2010.

**"BARRY HEARN'S DONE WONDERS FOR SNOOKER."**



but five (or six, counting Hong Kong's Marco Fu) of his fellow countrymen are in the top 60 (more than any other non-British country).

For now, the Englishmen dominate, and the biggest drama of this year's Goldfields Open is arguably The Ebdonator's characteristically slow, intense and methodical style. He averages a shot time of 38 seconds against Ding (who averages 25), and gets a share of the blame from the crowd for Robertson's poor form when his long-winded match, which precedes Robertson's second-round match against Davis, causes the home favourite's game to run two hours behind schedule.

Criticism comes from his colleagues, too. "How Peter Ebdon is allowed to play that slow is a joke," tweets Judd Trump, snooker's second seed and its current young upstart. But it's water off a duck's back for Ebdon, who's been here before: at the Crucible in 2005, he inspired O'Sullivan to draw blood scratching his own forehead in frustration, and makes no apologies.

"C'mon England," some smartarse shouts from the stands two days later, as a nervous-looking Hawkins and a philosophical Davis, who wisely went their separate ways after lunch, get started on their semi-final game. The match begins well for The Hawk, and he goes into the interval with a 3-1 lead. Davis finds some form after the break, and levels the match with breaks of 98 and 93. Hawkins takes the seventh, ninth and tenth frames – and the match, 6-4.

It was a bittersweet moment for Davis, who "really fancied" winning the tournament. "I didn't play badly, but I missed a couple of balls that I

should've got. My safety let me down; it just wasn't good enough, all the way through the game.

"Playing a friend in a semi-final, I tried to treat it like another game. I didn't win, but obviously I'm over the moon that Barry is in the final. He's a great mate of mine and a great lad."

The Goldfields Open final between Hawkins and Ebdon takes place the next afternoon, Sunday, in front of a full house. Davis is sitting up in the players' lounge watching, and Robertson swings by with his Mum for a spot of commentating and a look-see.

There's a lot riding on this match. For Ebdon, a chance to secure his tenth ranking crown and cement his place as the vegan poster boy and comeback king. For softly-spoken Hawkins, who has been playing professionally since 1996, but never won a major event, it's a chance to finally go all the way.

Ebdon takes the first frame, despite fouling after mistaking the brown for a red, then hands over to Hawkins, who comfortably wins the next four frames with breaks of 57, 74, 106 and 114. A tight-faced Ebdon hasn't sunk a ball for just over an hour when he wins the sixth frame, helped by a 63, to reduce the deficit by one. Both players win a further frame each before the session ends, Hawkins leading 5-3 going into the interval.

The Hawk soars in the evening, winning all four frames and achieving a break of 133 to seal a memorable maiden victory. "Barry's been a winner waiting to happen for quite some time," says Ebdon afterwards, who succinctly describes his own form as "crap", and no match for Hawkins' on-

the-money touch, feel and cue ball control.

Hawkins, a man of few words at the best of times, is both thrilled and stunned and comes close to cracking up on camera at the thought of his wife and pre-schooler son, Harrison, back home. "Even during the good times, there's still doubt; you start questioning yourself, thinking, 'Am I ever going to win a big tournament?' I've come close quite a few times, but that was a few years ago now, and I hadn't reached a quarter-final for a while. To be the last one standing is unbelievable."

Hawkins' commitment illustrates another, more recent known known: there's not much time for slacking on Hearn's new and improved snooker scene. "Barry Hearn's given us all a big kick up the backside," says Robertson. "In the past when I won a tournament, I could take a couple of months off, just chill out and not do anything."

Now, the former champ won't take his foot off the gas. "I was a little bit lazy before, not going to the club when I should have, but I've learnt from that and have to keep going because we're playing so many tournaments."

Hawkins is singing the same tune, and is heading home with tournaments lined up arse to ear for the rest of the season. But first: the pub. Earlier in the week he put his success in Australia down to having a few pints of an evening, and he and Davis are off to celebrate with the locals – despite all their success, it's where these ordinary blokes are most at home. Let's hope they don't lose touch.

– Vanessa Murray