

2007 SPORTSMANSHIP GAMES – AT AMF STIRLING – SIMPLY THE BEST

Thirteen years ago people would have called me mad to think that I could entice 200 people hundreds of miles away on a bowling weekend, with no money at the end of it. But this is the Sportsmanship Games. It has established itself firmly on the calendar as a weekend that many bowlers look forward to all year round and fight to get a coveted place in the tournament.

With Stirling playing host this year, many bowlers turned their weekend away in to a long weekend and some, including myself, extended the trip to a week. Arriving from the Wednesday, bowlers and guests took up residence mainly on the University campus – a beautiful setting with the backdrop of the Ochil Hills, a par 3 golf course, a loch and even its own castle, not to mention the fantastic facilities the university extends to its guests. The majority were housed in the Stirling Management Centre – a purpose built conference and banqueting centre with three star hotel rooms. Others booked either 4 or 7 night packages and stayed in self catering chalets in a beautiful woodland setting.

I had a couple of days to get settled and put everything in place ready for the weekend of August 11th & 12th. I had a special room in the hotel where I had registration and welcome packs and by the time Friday night came around, I had virtually seen everybody and was safe in the knowledge that everybody had arrived safely and was ready for the bowling.

After a couple of days of glorious weather, Friday morning saw the arrival of the rain. Not something to be too concerned about – only I had an open-top bus excursion planned for the evening.

From midday, the tournament had its first “official” practice. The centre handed over 8 lanes, with the tournament condition and allowed bowlers to practice free of charge! This was thoroughly appreciated by the bowlers who I’m sure would have put coffer in the bar and diner tills to make up for it.

Later in the afternoon the weather cleared up and there was a bit of a rush from people to get their names down for the excursion. The bus left the bowl at 6.00pm with the top deck packed and only a few spaces left downstairs. The trip took in all the major sites and tourist attractions of Stirling and the surrounding area, with an extended history commentary, due to being stuck in some horrendous road works.

Arriving back at campus for 7.50, I had just 10 minutes to get ready for my evening registration. Thankfully Emma Manning was assisting me, allowing me time to hop in the shower and get changed ready for 9.00pm and the evenings’ quiz. I had dubbed the quiz “Fyles o’ Facts” after quiz master Pete Fyles. Together with husband Barry, daughter Natalie, plus Harry & Wilma Sustins who had traveled all the way from Spain, we made up the team known as “Jock Straps”. We felt rather proud getting 47 points but way off the winners Team Wantz, who amassed 92, proving that last years win was no fluke and that they are indeed very clever. They opted to donate the £100 raised through the quiz to The Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital and were presented with a big bottle of bubbly and a box of chocolates. That just left time to grab a final drink in the bar before heading to bed in readiness for the tournament proper.

Breakfast passed without a hitch, mainly because I had hounded the duty managers telling them

they would need to be well staffed up for the morning. It was almost ghostly as I had forgotten that a third of the contingent would be catering for themselves in the chalets. I had also forgotten to tell them that breakfast was available from 7.00, rather than the published 7.30. Still, better safe than sorry.

Having registered virtually everybody over the previous three days, Saturday morning's registration was a doddle. The lights went down and two of the YBC brought out the perpetual trophy pins (team all events) to the sounds of Scotland the Brave being piped over the PA system. Further introductory music was played and opening speeches made before launching in to the singles event.

It didn't take long before tongues were wagging, as Doug Eastall (Stirling Performance) had the first 10 in a row. Unfortunately the 11th was a bit wayward and Doug had to settle for a 286 but was compensated with a silver medal in the handicap section. Brian Marks (OSIMA) grabbed gold with a 734 and Mark Spurway (Tequila Sunrise) lifted gold in the scratch section with 685.

A buffet lunch was being served over a two hour period in the centre. However people were a bit sceptical when I told them not to rush, as there really was plenty for everybody. There really was – it just kept coming and coming, sandwiches, soup, hot nibbles, cold nibbles, pasta, trout, puddings, flans, on and on – a feast for a king. I had popped my head in to the kitchen earlier where Jamie McLuckie who had been in since six that morning, plus many other members of the team were beavering away. My eyes nearly popped out as I viewed what was going on. I made a brief compliment and got out of their way – after all they were a little stressed and armed with knives!

With food and lane maintenance out of the way, I was passed a ransom note to read out. Brooklyn Heights had their team mascot monkey stolen and were asked for an assortment of things including alcohol, cigarettes, food and condoms, if they were ever to see their monkey "alive" again! This couldn't have proven too traumatic as it was Suzanne McLean and Chris Carey of Brooklyn Heights who then went on to win gold in the handicap doubles with 1346. SATGAG's Simon Marshall and Tom Ryan shot 1297 for scratch gold.

With bowling done for the day it was back to the university. Thankfully the traffic (jam) had died down a little, allowing enough time to get ready for the evening "Ball Jam". I briefed the DJ, set up the raffle table and then took my place in the queue for a very nice hot and cold buffet. Only the very last stragglers didn't get the full choice, as the chicken had run out.

With most people having eaten, DJ Ian Gillespie took things up a notch. It wasn't too long before people were singing and swaying at their tables and then up on the dance floor. I could tell he was getting the crowd going and I was loath to interrupt the flow – but it was time for a few brief speeches and the raffle. Eager to get people back up and dancing, I whizzed through this part of the proceedings as quick as I could, concluding with "guess where it is next year?" Guessing correctly (Gravesend) was Kim (Totti) Wedgbury-Locke – winning a meal for two including wine at the Management Centre. Kim and Steve duly did so on Monday night, to round off their anniversary weekend – this was the couple who got married during the Sportsmanship Games in Wigan two years ago.

I was more than happy to rest my rather frail vocal chords and hand the mic back to Ian, who

soon got the crowd on their feet. It wasn't too long before I found myself doing the "Gay Gordons" and then dancing on an ever decreasing piece of newspaper with a random (no offence Drew from Stirling) partner. There were a couple of more announcements regarding the monkey which concluded with his recovery – thanks to a rugby tackle (yes really) from PC Andrea Davenport on Pin Actions' Karen Chorlton. They both had bruises the next day!

The dancing went on til the wee small hours until the die-hard group of about 20 were asked to form a circle with their chairs. I thought that this was going to be a sedate version of Auld Lang Syne – but oh no. I shall just say that I was lost for words and suitably embarrassed. Those of you who were there know what I mean – those who weren't will have to wait for the (edited) video.

Sunday morning's registration was it's usual casual affair, as people drifted in, in various states (but all on time). Gentle music was swapped for the banging sounds of the Chemical Brothers as practice went on for the trio's event. Hangovers obviously counted for nothing as both gold medal winning teams came from the early squad. SATGAG's Simon Marshall, Ali Cliff and Greg Pullinger shot 1911 in scratch, with Dale Longyear, Cheryl Griffiths and Alan Calder doing the honours for the Royal Mail team in the handicap section with 1937.

The lunchtime buffet was another treat, with even more goodies than the previous day. Whilst lane maintenance was on, a very exciting game of giant Jenga broke out in the bar, with members of the Nuts & Bolts team doing battle to the sounds of "Mission Impossible" playing over the PA.

The penultimate event, the 6th Man singles, saw both gold medals going to local bowlers. Eddie Bear (guesting for Team Jackass) shot 646 (tournament record), with Sean Pritchard (We've Got Balls) 705 in the handicap.

Everybody then lined up on their designated lanes for the team event. However, before going on to practice they were all presented with certificates by Centre Manager David Fotheringham, to commemorate the occasion and the moment was captured on camera by Barry Joyce.

SATGAG's domination in the scratch continued, lifting gold medals in the team (2929), Simon Marshall in individual all events (2588) and the most coveted team all events with a record 13974. In the handicap section it was Bertie Johnston All-stars (3181) who won the team event; Pick 'n' Mix's Ian Senior (2668) for individual all events and the local YAC team of We've Got Balls (15129) winning the team all events. This went down a storm, especially with all the publicity the tournament had received locally in advance.

As the final scores were being calculated, there was just time for one final mini-feast before the medal presentations. Stirling Council members were present, as was the local press to capture the winners receiving their medals from Provost Margaret Brisley.

The final award, for the "Good Sport of the Games" was awarded collectively to the "A Team". In other words, the Management and staff of AMF Stirling, for their outstanding work in making the tournament such a success. I asked the man responsible for the magnificent buffets, Jamie McLuckie, to collect the award on behalf of the team. He duly obliged, very humbly, to the sounds of rapturous applause.

Then everybody took a cup of kindness (whisky nips and bubbly) and sang along to Auld Lang Syne, as the tournament signed off for another year.

Ever since my first trip “north of the border” to check out Stirling as a possible venue, I had a feeling of excitement and giddiness about how the 2007 Sportsmanship Games would turn out. And as it turned out, I have to just say it was “simply the best”. I have no idea how Gravesend or any other future venue could top that – but I’m working on it!