

SPORTSMANSHIP GAMES – WIGAN 2005

After all the hard work and organisation involved with taking the 10th anniversary Games to Paris last year, the 11th in Wigan was sure to be a piece of cake – a piece of wedding cake as it happens!

Three couples got engaged in Paris. First of all, both Williams's brothers proposed to their girlfriends atop the Eiffel Tower on the Thursday night. Then Steve Wedgbury went down on one knee in the middle of the Saturday night disco to propose to Kim (Totti) Locke. Later, when I announced that the next Games would be in Wigan, the local bowlers, lead by Fred Miller, suggested that they get married at the tournament.

Just when I thought I had been involved in every aspect of tournament play and organisation, I had a wedding to incorporate into the proceedings! I delegated Fred and his team to form a "wedding committee", sorting all the local wedding arrangements and liaising with the bowling centre, whilst I concentrated on the tournament.....

I checked in to the tournament hotel, the Britannia Hotel at Standish on Friday lunchtime, unloaded all the bags and boxes and then it was down to the bowling centre to set everything up.

After several meetings with Management, technicians and the wedding party, a sound check and notices in place, it was back to the hotel for an evening meal before "setting up shop" in the residents bar for a pre-registration. With a high percentage of the bowlers and guests staying in the hotel that night it made sense and saved time by having them register and collect their goodie bags.

Pete Fyles then very kindly volunteered to run a quiz again. This kept everyone in the bar suitably occupied and amused as they tried to work who played which detective, who sang what song and try to recognise a million Mister Men. Everyone who participated paid £1 and the winning team, the Bicester 800 (there wasn't 800 of them) could donate the proceeds to the charity of their choice. It was the Special Care Nursery at the John Radcliffe Hospital that benefited from the £65 donation.

After the quiz some of the younger and more energetic made their way in to Wigan to sample the nightlife. I decided to retire. Besides, £3.20 for a pint of lager was too much for my Scottish blood to endure.

Suitably refreshed, I was up nice and early the following morning for a hearty breakfast, before changing in to my best wedding outfit – not very practical for running around at a tournament but I thought I should make an effort as I was to appear in some of the wedding photos.

Everyone made it to the centre on time, thanks to some marvelous sign-posting by Fred Miller throughout the 5 mile journey between the hotel and the bowl. Anyone driving through Wigan that weekend was sure to be aware that the Sportsmanship Games was in town.

I made my opening announcements accompanied by Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" and then it was on to the singles, which resulted in gold medals for Stephen Jones (Smash 'n' Grab) in scratch (674) and Max Chapman (Ouze Avinit) in handicap (717).

With so many extra music tracks this year, I converted them to MP3 files on my home pc and then burned them on to a CD. However, as the morning progressed my DVD/MP3 player was becoming a little difficult to operate, until finally the buttons totally jammed and it “swallowed” the disc – just before the wedding!

Thankfully I had covered that eventuality by making extra copies of my discs and Centre Manager Martyn Law produced another DVD player from somewhere. Crisis averted, I launched into a string of wedding related pieces of music while lane maintenance commenced and the wedding guests arrived.

The wedding took place in the bar, with Fred Miller giving the bride away. Unfortunately not everyone (200+ people) could squeeze into the bar, so a radio mic on a stand was rigged up to broadcast over the PA. However the reluctance of the registrar to speak into the mic meant that those out in the centre could hardly hear what was being said.

For those who missed it, Kim said “I do”, Steve said “I do”, Cliff Richard sang “Congratulations”, Shirley Bassey sang “Kiss me honey, honey” and they signed the register to the sounds of Maria Callas trilling away to Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro”.

My husband and trusty side-kick Barry captured the ceremony (and parts of the tournament) on video, so everyone will get the chance to see the proceedings, once the DVD has been produced.

With the wedding and photographs out of the way, it was back to the business of bowling. I was amazed how well we had managed to blend the two together and without the loss of any time.

Next up was the doubles which resulted in a third gold medal for the pairing of Laura Ivory & Andy Fraser (Happy Hedgehog) with 1289 scratch. Husband & wife duo of Garry & Maria Lee (Smash ‘n’ Grab) shot 1383 in the handicap.

With only one minor problem on the lanes, everyone was finished by ten past seven, but I phoned ahead to the hotel to ask them to delay the meal slightly until 8.30, to allow everybody plenty of time to spruce themselves up.

An evening meal is not normally part of the Games scenario but because of the wedding factor, I thought it would be appropriate. The room was nicely decorated and trimmed and the seating was informal. Unfortunately there were a few uncharacteristic grumbles from some people who were unable to sit with the rest of their teammates. However they were re-united later to suffer the sounds of DJ Brian and his mate. I say suffer because I booked a top, very famous DJ who ducked out at the last minute (without letting me know) and sent this pair who were like something straight out of a Peter Kay sketch!

Kim and Steve had insisted that there be no top table or speeches, so I recited some little appropriate anecdotes and toasted everybody, wishing them “health and happiness”.

Then followed a few presentations. Kim received a track suit top from Peter Hirsch. It was her own. She had lent it to Peter’s partner Shirley, when she was taken seriously ill in Paris. Then

Brian Sims from Happy Hedgehog presented a specially made gift. Brian is a blacksmith and has just started a new on-line venture (www.erotichedgehog.co.uk) and to demonstrate his work, he gave the couple a (bowling) ball and chain, with manacle and matching handcuffs!

And of course there was a gift from all the competitors. First of all a giant wedding card, which everyone had signed earlier that day plus £500 worth of holiday vouchers to take them on honeymoon. Finally, on behalf of AMF Bowling, I gave the couple the chance to extend their stay in the hotel in Wigan while they perused the holiday brochures and quaffed a bottle of champagne.

The couple then took to the floor for the first dance to the sounds of Elvis Presley and then everyone else slowly joined in during the evening. It took Brian a little while before he finally started playing the songs people liked but he got there in the end. Most memorable sight had to be Geoff Rens and the entire bar staff doing the "Time Warp".

I interrupted the dancing during one of Brian's off-moments to make another brief speech and run the ever-popular free raffle. Finally everyone who had not won anything had the chance to win a case of wine by guessing where next year's Games was going to be.

I had in fact booked everything for Portsmouth and then a week later we sold the place. But in the same breath the Company acquired the Bowlplex site at Havant and, having checked it out decided it would make an excellent alternative. So anyone guessing either of the centres went into the draw – the winner coming from the Carlisle Raiders (forgive me for not remembering who it was)

With all my official duties out of the way, it was time to kick off my shoes and take to the dance floor – well when Brian played a decent tune, anyway.

Having only consumed moderate quantities of alcohol, I was able to rise with a clear head the next morning. Just as well, as there was an unexpected roadblock, with no diversion signs, en route to the bowl. I think it was a shooting (I kid you not), as the forensic team was there with markings all over the road.

After a quick detour around Tesco's car park, I fathomed out a way to get to the centre. Nearly everybody did the same but it was necessary for me to delay the start of play for 5 minutes, for a few stragglers caught unawares.

A very quick and informal registration confirmed everybody was there, so the trios got under way. Smash 'n' Grab continued on their quest for medals, picking up both scratch gold and bronze medals. Jim Jacobs, Paul Pearson & Mike Hastings of Team Wantz did the honours in the handicap.

For those who have not been to Wigan, it has 28 lanes split into 2 banks of 14 at either end of the concourse. With lane maintenance completed over one side of the house, I took the opportunity to save a little time and have the team photographs and certificate presentations made, whilst the other half of the house was dressed.

These presentations finished nicely in time with the lane maintenance, so it was on to the

penultimate event – the 6th person singles. This was the only event where Smash n Grab failed to pick up a gold medal, with John Rourke 30 pins short of Brian Buchanan's (Carlisle Raiders) total of 639. Colin Sowerbutts (Brooklyn Heights) shot 671 for the handicap title.

During this event Kim & Steve took time out to do a little presentation of their own. They had two pieces of glassware specially created – in the shape of a bowling ball with the date of their wedding and the Sportsmanship Games logo. They presented one each to me and Fred Miller in recognition of the extra work we had done for their wedding – a lovely touch!

As is fitting, the Games conclude with the five person team event. This gives me a good two and a half hours to sort various things out, including the medal presentations. This year the medals were mounted on to a resin trophy and, of the 114 medals, only 3 were still in place when I opened the boxes. Imagine my horror. Either the glue had not been sufficient or it had melted in transit. Chief technician Dave Morrissey came to the rescue with a fixative in a gun type thing and a frantic gluing session before the bowlers came off the lanes.

As teams finished one by one, they filtered into the diner to collect their buffet as my faithful scorer Andy Fraser tapped away furiously at his laptop. All results were known around about the same time as the buffet ran out. Some people had over-filled their plates despite pleas to the contrary, so the diner staff rolled up their sleeves, raided the fridges and produced extra for the few hungry mouths still waiting.

Then everyone crammed into the bar for the closing presentations. The final gold medals were divvied up between Smash n Grab and Breadsall who had had a running battle (in the nicest possible way) through the tournament. Breadsall took gold in the scratch section for the team event and team all events with Andy Courtnage, Simon Dean, Jo Marshall, Ash Hearn and Barry Joyce. Andy's brother Matt had to leave early to catch a holiday flight but a large, cardboard point of sale "Darth Vader", wearing a Breadsall shirt, accepted medals on Matt's behalf, much to the amusement of the assembled throng.

Smash n Grab emphasized their dominance by picking up scratch (Dave Ashworth) and handicap (Maria Lee) golds in the individual all events and winning the handicap section of both the team and team all events with the line-up of Dave Leyland, Stephen Jones, Dave Ashworth, Garry & Maria Lee and John Rourke

That just left one final presentation – the "Good Sport of the Games". Once again there were many candidates but one person shone out above all the rest and that was Fred Miller. Fred arranged so many things to do with the wedding that I couldn't possibly have managed. He was my eyes and ears in Wigan, keeping me informed of every development by phone and email. He drove every conceivable route between hotel and bowl at different times of the day and monitored the traffic via a satellite website. He had special direction signs printed and then risked life and limb, stopping in traffic to erect them in appropriate places such as junctions and traffic lights. He supplied me with the audio leads I needed for my music system, had a red carpet made for the wedding and gave the bride away. All this and more, plus the usual Fred qualities made him probably the most deserved recipient of the award to date.

Fred accepted his award with tears in his eyes to the sounds of rapturous applause. And then I played my final piece of music: "Swing low sweet chariot" which was to carry everybody home,

until next year in Havant.