



DARTS

GREATEST GAMES

FIFTY FINEST MATCHES

MATT BOZEAT

FOREWORD BY
RAYMOND VAN BARNEVELD

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Foreword

I OFTEN get asked what the favourite match of my career has been, or which game I enjoyed the most, and I'm so proud that I can look back over more than 25 years and have so many great memories.

The debate about which is the greatest match ever has been spoken about a lot over the years. Maybe Keith Deller's win over Eric Bristow in 1983, or John Lowe hitting the first televised nine-dart finish, Michael van Gerwen nearly hitting two nine-darters in a row or any one of so many games involving Phil Taylor?

Coming over to the PDC in 2006 gave me my chance to play against Phil on a regular basis, and I was desperate to prove myself against the greatest player ever.

I'm proud to think that I've done that, and although Phil's won more than his share of our games since, we've got a wonderful rivalry, a great friendship and so much respect for each other.

Hopefully that's something that comes across for the fans who watch us at the events or on TV around the world, because the game has now got so big.

Darts is a fantastic sport, not just for us players to be involved in, but also for the fans, and it's amazing to see so many people coming to enjoy themselves everywhere we go.

Having so many more tournaments now, of course, means that there are so many more brilliant matches which get seen worldwide, so to pick out just 50 for this book must have been a massive job for Matt!

It's a huge honour for me that three of my wins are included; my win over Richie Burnett in the 1998 BDO World Championship final will always be so special for me – it changed my life and came three years after Richie beat me in the final. I can still remember the emotion when I won.

My 2016 World Championship win over Michael van Gerwen is included too, and it was a really memorable game for a lot of reasons. Michael has been unbelievable with what he's achieved in recent years, and to win a game like that against him at Alexandra Palace meant a lot to me.

And finally, my game with Phil to win the 2007 World Championship. Is it really ten years ago already? I was 3-0 down in sets but I didn't panic. I had to stay calm and believe in myself; the 180s came and the doubles, and then I won the sudden death leg.

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The reaction in the Netherlands was unbelievable and people still talk about that game everywhere we go in the world. It makes me so proud to look at the picture of me on my office wall holding that trophy.

Raymond van Barneveld, February 2017



Phil Taylor v Raymond van Barneveld

2009 PDC World Championship final

THE way Phil Taylor saw it, he owed Raymond van Barneveld one.

Any loss was hard to take, but that loss in the 2007 PDC World Championship final was possibly harder to take than any other.

Van Barneveld boldly said he joined the PDC to beat Taylor and he had done just that.

After that, John Part reckoned van Barneveld's was the scalp the players prized most rather than Taylor's and although Taylor said he was glad the pressure was on someone else for a change, he didn't mean it.

He wanted to be the player the others feared, the one they prayed they didn't draw in tournaments and in the two years since that World Championship final, Taylor had beaten van Barneveld five times in seven matches in front of the television cameras.

The averages were always sky high, the human drama compelling.

Of all darts' great rivalries, theirs was surely the greatest and as with all great rivalries in all sports – think Borg and McEnroe, Ali and Frazier – they were very different characters.

Both were likeable enough, but Taylor was harder, thought less; van Barneveld was more vulnerable and complex.

"Raymond won five world titles, then changed his darts," said Andy Fordham. "Why would you do that?"

Van Barneveld got disheartened sometimes, Taylor never did.

Van Barneveld would shake his head on stage when he couldn't find the answers; all Taylor ever showed was a workmanlike determination to get the job done.

From the moment van Barneveld sank the match-winning double in the World Championship final just before midnight on 1 January, 2007, Taylor's job was to get the trophy back.

That match and the rivalry between Taylor and van Barneveld helped lift darts out of the leisure centres and working men's clubs of its working-class roots.

Bigger venues were booked for the Premier League and the World Championship shifted from the Circus Tavern to the larger and distinctly more upmarket Alexandra Palace.

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Neither defending champion van Barneveld nor Taylor reached the final there in 2008.

Van Barneveld was beaten by Kevin Painter in the second round and, more surprisingly, Wayne Mardle overturned a 3-0 deficit to oust Taylor in the last eight.

Their defeats cleared the way for John Part to become a three-time world champion with victory over qualifier Kirk Shepherd in the final.

Taylor had appeared in every other PDC World Championship final – all 14 of them – and perhaps darts would stride off into a sunlit future of stadia and slimmed-down superstars without him...

Shepherd looked to have a good future, Michael van Gerwen would surely break through and there were others.

The whispers about Taylor's possible demise grew louder after James Wade, Terry Jenkins and, worst of all, Peter Manley inflicted defeats on him in the opening four weeks of the following Premier League.

Taylor later admitted the loss to Manley had left him "the lowest I have ever been". Manley won convincingly 8-3, then mocked Taylor in his celebrations.

After that night in Coventry, Taylor was just about unbeatable.

He practised harder than ever, added several points to his average and won the Premier League, World Matchplay, Desert Classic, World Grand Prix, European Championship and Grand Slam of Darts.

Only van Barneveld beat him in front of the television cameras in those eight months, in the quarter-finals of the UK Open and again, the match went to a deciding leg.

In the previous round, Taylor had recorded the highest-ever televised three-dart average, a colossal 114.53 against Wes Newton, and before that he threw a nine-darter against Jamie Harvey.

Going into the 2009 PDC World Championship, Taylor joked there had been a photograph of him with the trophy on his mantelpiece for the last two years where the trophy itself usually stood.

The bookmakers reckoned the trophy was heading back to the Potteries with him, and the form he was in meant only one man was capable of stopping him...

Taylor was seeded to meet him in the final.

Taylor dropped only three sets – and just a handful of legs – on his way there with wins over Steve Grubb (3-0), Michael van Gerwen

Phil Taylor v Raymond van Barneveld

(4-0), Kevin Painter (4-1), Co Stompe (5-0) and Mervyn King (6-2) and van Barneveld came through the other, tougher half of the draw.

Ronnie Baxter took him to a seventh and deciding set in the third round and James Wade pushed him hard in the last four after van Barneveld had thrown the first nine-dart leg in the championship's history in his quarter-final win over Jelle Klaasen.

Somehow, Taylor had to find a way to better that. He would have a nine-darter in the final, he told himself, and he appeared in the mood to do it.

Taylor won the nearest the bull, handed the throw to van Barneveld, then raced to the opening two sets without dropping a leg. Taylor should have led 3-0, but missed three darts at a double, allowing van Barneveld to nick the set.

The fourth set would be crucial.

Remembering how he let van Barneveld back into the final two years earlier from 3-0 down, Taylor knew he couldn't allow the Dutchman to build any momentum and level the match at 2-2.

Both players found an extra gear in that fourth set.

Taylor started with five successive treble 20s – and van Barneveld responded.

There were seven maximum 180s in the opening four legs – Taylor threw four, van Barneveld three – and in the deciding leg, van Barneveld missed two chances to level the match and Taylor nailed double eight to lead 3-1.

It was the story of the match.

Van Barneveld stayed with Taylor in every fiercely competitive set that followed – until the legs when it really mattered. That was when van Barneveld missed and Taylor hit.

The fifth, sixth and eighth sets also went all the way to a deciding leg – and Taylor won the lot.

That eighth set – and the match – came to an end when Taylor nailed treble 19, then double 12 to complete an 81 checkout.

That finish gave him three-dart average of 110.94, the best in both the PDC World Championship and a PDC final.

Predictably enough, Taylor held both the previous records.

"This was so satisfying after not winning the World Championship for the last two years," said Taylor, and in the press room afterwards van Barneveld looked exasperated, close to tears.

Five of the eight sets went to a fifth and deciding leg, indicating a close match, but the score still read at the end Taylor 7, van

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Barneveld 1. The score seemed cruel on van Barneveld, but he knows better than anyone that finals are won by the thrower who holds his nerve under pressure and on this occasion, that was Taylor.

“He hit everything, so what can I do?” van Barneveld told reporters. “I averaged 101.50 and still lost 7-1.

“Whatever I’m doing I can’t play at that level. I don’t know how to beat this man.”



Andy Fordham v Mervyn King

2004 BDO World Championship final

THE morning after the night before, Andy Fordham woke up with a trophy and absolutely no idea how he got it.

Thankfully, the newspaper headlines helped fill in the gaps in his memory...

Nobody did less to help darts clean up its 'pie and a pint and another pint' image than Fordham.

He looked like an extra from the *Not the Nine O'Clock News* sketch where 'Fat Belly' and 'Even Fatter Belly' threw darts to keep themselves occupied while waiting their turn in a drinking competition.

Fordham admitted: "The only reason I started playing darts was because there was drinking involved!

"My football team used to train on Wednesdays, then they would head to the pub to play darts. I went along to have a few beers and to watch them play. They were short of a player one night, so I stepped in. I was shit, but darts had a grip on me. I played at every opportunity. I would take my darts everywhere in case there was the chance of getting a game."

Fordham spent more and more time in pubs and had to swap the 'Whippet' nickname of his youth for something rather more appropriate. Bobby George called him 'The Viking' after an exhibition match and if he hadn't come up with the name, someone else surely would have done.

Fordham weighed a salad-dodging 30 stones, was unshaven, had hair down his back and was forever thirsty. In a film of his life, Brian Blessed was a shoo-in for the lead role.

One look at Fordham and the argument that darts is a serious sport played by self-disciplined athletes is instantly lost. But then he never pretended to be an ambassador for anything. Fordham was just being himself; an affable enough pub landlord who liked a drink.

He raised eyebrows and a few smiles in the press room during the 2004 BDO World Championship when he announced he had employed a fitness coach.

Just because darts wanted to be taken seriously and be recognised as a sport, it didn't mean Fordham had to take himself seriously.

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Fordham put down his drink for long enough to qualify for the World Championships at the Lakeside Country Club in 1995 – and headed straight for the bar when he got there to prepare for his first-round match against Nicky Turner.

“It was my first time on television and I was really, really nervous,” he remembered. “I drank half a bottle of brandy, a crate of Pils – and it worked. I won. So I kept doing it.”

Fordham went on to reach the semi-finals, losing to Richie Burnett, and also reached the last four the following year, then again in 1999 and 2001.

Wins over Brian Derbyshire (3-1), Tony West (3-0) and Darryl Fitton (5-4) took him through to the semi-finals for a fifth time in 2004 and a match with three-time world champion Raymond van Barneveld.

Van Barneveld usually beat Fordham and was fancied to do so again. “I did an interview with Dutch television before the match and I told them I was getting closer and closer to Raymond,” said Fordham. “I said he was worried about me.”

At 3-0 down, Fordham’s chins were on the floor.

“I thought it was all over,” he admitted.

“I had nothing to lose, so I just threw darts and they went in. Raymond told a newspaper afterwards that he thought aliens had come down from space and interfered with my game during the interval, but I never felt anything.”

How much had Fordham drunk before the match? “Shedloads,” he said.

In the final, he would meet Mervyn King and he was an altogether different character.

He wore a ‘what are you looking at’ expression and, though yet to win a major ranking event, he was a world finalist in 2002, losing to Tony David, and was throwing well.

King was the width of a cigarette paper away from a nine-dart leg against Tony O’Shea in the last four at Frimley Green – and if either player was going to run out of steam in the best-of-11-sets final, it clearly wasn’t going to be him.

King had breezed past O’Shea 5-1 in their semi-final, while Fordham had been taken all the way to a ninth and deciding set by van Barneveld.

The bookmakers made King the favourite – just.

“Mervyn is one of the best players I’ve ever seen and if he is on his game, you have to play very well to beat him,” said Fordham. “But his

Andy Fordham v Mervyn King

head can go all over the place. He starts thinking about things and it affects his game.”

Maybe he would start thinking about the crowd. Fordham, who had proved his big-match temperament by winning the 1999 World Masters, reckoned “98 per cent” of them were on his side and added: “It probably had an effect on Mervyn.”

They cheered Fordham when he waddled on stage looking like an athlete from the ankles down – he was wearing trainers – but he didn’t look like much of a darts player when he started the match with a throw of 30.

King also took a while to settle and the opening two sets went against the throw. Fordham pulled away to lead 3-1, but King, putting everything into every dart as always, drew level at 3-3.

Fordham held his throw in the seventh set to edge ahead 4-3 and the eighth set would be crucial.

It went all the way to a nerve-shredding fifth and deciding leg and with King just 80 points away from levelling the match, Fordham took aim at 139 for a break and a 5-3 lead.

Showing a sniper’s nerve, ‘The Viking’ nailed treble 20, treble 13, double 20.

He was now only a set away from victory.

John Part, the 1994 BDO world champion, knows a decisive dart when he sees one and he told BBC viewers: “That’s a heartbreaker for Mervyn.”

As always, King relished the fight. He stuck his chest out, threw 140s and grabbed the opening two legs of the ninth set. But he ran out of steam and, as King’s form dipped, Fordham rediscovered his fluency.

He levelled the set, then took out a scruffy 61 finish on double eight with his last dart to win the match.

Then he just stood there and sighed, trying to take it all in. Fordham was the BDO world champion and he couldn’t quite believe it.

The crowd – including his underemployed fitness coach – were on their feet clapping and cheering and although King told him not to cry, Fordham had to dry his eyes on the sleeves of his XXXXXXL size shirt.

“I’m an emotional bloke,” he said later.

Much of the above is news to Fordham...

Asked for his memories of the greatest night of his darts career several years later, he admitted: “I was that drunk I don’t remember

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it! I've seen the match on DVD and it looks like I had a great time – and I'm sure I had an even better time after it.

“I was half-pissed all the time. I'm not proud of it. It's just what I did to cope.”