



THE BRISTOL BOMBER

Steve Brown is one of the emerging stars of world darts, and he feels ready to win major titles, as *Jon Day* discovers

Last winter, a journalist asked a confident and emerging darts player for his thoughts on the 'old guard' within his sport.

Unfazed and undeterred by the ramifications of saying anything that would upset them, he replied saying there would be a big shake-up of the top 32.

"There is no room for journeymen anymore," he said. A backlash behind the scenes ensued.

The player in question was Bristol's Steve Brown, a firm member of the new breed of fearless young darts players.

He is intent on making his mark on the professional circuit and is ready to shake up the established order.

The world number 32 has enjoyed his best start to a year on the PDC Pro Tour. He has climbed his way up the rankings and is making a huge impression.

"Flash told me I was good enough. He told me to go for it"

Now on verge of breaking into the top echelons of the game, many believe he possesses all the right tools to become a darting superstar.

That comes as no surprise to those that know him closely. He's endured a long and winding road in pursuit of his dreams, but his life has always revolved around the sport in some form.

"I grew up watching my dad play for the county and various pub teams. He ran many successful darts pubs, so I was brought up in and around that environment.

"I gave up chasing the dream of becoming a professional footballer at 16, so I turned to darts after that. But I always saw it as a hobby and never seriously considered it as a career."

But all talk of pursuing a life in darts took a back seat when Brown and his partner had their first child at the age of 19.

"My priorities changed after having John, my eldest son, and it altered my perspective on life. I needed to find a stable living for my wife and kid, so any thoughts of taking up darts full-time were a non-starter."

In the early years of his son's life, Brown plied his trade as a plasterer. But he never gave up on chasing his ambition of emulating his darting heroes like Bob Anderson and Eric Bristow.

It was impossible for him to even consider any other career path. He picked the game up again at 23, and has steadily risen his way through the ranks over the past eight years.



"I have always had a knack for it. I played in the local county leagues and had a few successes there."

But Brown's career started to take off after receiving the ultimate seal of approval from a source very close to home.

"I actually got into professional darts after meeting Mark Dudbridge, a fellow Bristolian.

"Flash played on our local scene at the time, and he went on to reach two consecutive PDC World Championship finals at the Circus Tavern.

"He told me I was good enough to play professionally and encouraged me to go for it."

Becoming a full-time professional darts player in the modern era is a strategy of high risk for high reward.

Some players rely on the gratitude of others to get a foothold within the game, from fellow professionals or generous sponsors.

Dudbridge believed that Brown was good enough to forge his own career in the PDC.

"I started taking darts seriously after I met Mark. I had aspirations to play on TV, and I always thought I was good enough.

"But I needed a professional player to push me in the right direction, and Mark was my inspiration.

"He sponsored me in the early years of my pro career. I am glad to say that I paid him back pretty quickly."

Subsequently, he quit the day job to focus on a full-time darts career, a sacrifice that all the top players within the game have had to make at some point.

The gamble is starting to pay off. He won his first PDC floor tournament in February, and is beginning to familiarise himself with the bright lights of the televised stage.

His ascent through the rankings has coincided with a huge boom in the sport's popularity.

Major PDC events attract vast crowds, and sponsors are queuing up to pay vast sums to back the televised events.



Above: Brown pulled off a huge shock in the first round at the Ally Pally in December, beating former BDO world champion Jelle Klassen

Darts is more fashionable than ever, and the sport has never been more lucrative for its participants.

But it is far from easy for the pros in the modern era.

"There are so many great dart players out there on our tour. The prizes are huge, which brings a huge level of pressure.

"The PDC tour is brutal. There is no room for complacency"

"Every dart thrown matters. You have to be mentally and physically prepared for every tournament.

"There is no room for complacency, and the best players show no mercy. The dream could all be over in a blink of an eye.

It has been a ruthless lesson for the dart player nicknamed 'The Bomber'. Adjusting to life as a professional was difficult in the early years.

"The PDC tour is brutal. But when I started out in 2006, I just treated every tournament like a holiday.

"Luckily I performed well enough to secure a regular place on the tour, but I never made it to the latter stages of the floor events. I lacked the allround professionalism and ruthlessness that the very best players displayed."

He feels it has taken him four years to discover the right routines and find the right approach to succeed.

"Darts is a living solely based on your winnings. If you're not winning you won't be around for very long.

"The game is my main income. At this stage in my career, I can't afford to have two or three bad months.



Steve BROWN

FACTFILE



Personal

- ▶ Age **30**
- ▶ Birthplace **Bristol, England**
- ▶ Home Town **Bristol, England**
- ▶ Walk-on music **My Generation, by The Who**
- ▶ Darts **22g Eric Bristow Harrows**
- ▶ Laterality **Right-handed**
- ▶ Organisation **PDC (since 2006)**
- ▶ Order of Merit **32 (£66,500)**

Tournament results

- ▶ PDC World Championship **Last 32 2011**
- ▶ World Matchplay **Last 16 2010**
- ▶ World Grand Prix **Last 16 2010**
- ▶ UK Open Qualifier 1 **Winner 2011**
- ▶ UK Open Order of Merit **2011**
- ▶ **4th (£10,800)**



"The reason I do it is that I want my kids to have the best things in life as they grow up.

"I want to help them out with their education, buying their first car, or their deposits for a mortgage.

"You are spending long periods away from your family, so you've got to go and make it profitable."

After a tough apprenticeship against the big boys in the PDC, Brown has sought to gain any sort of advantage he can over his rivals.

Like many of the top professionals, he has a mind coach, a growing trend within the sporting sphere, to help him focus on his own game.

"If I can make any advantage over my opponents - I will. My mind coach has helped me focus on the mental side of the game and helps me with maintain my concentration levels.

"He gets me to write the top 32 players in the world and note down their biggest weaknesses.

"I have it with me at tour events. So it is just my job to remember them, and that allows me to bring them down a peg or two in my own mind."

It's his deep psychological approach to the game that has helped Brown adapt to life in the unforgiving and pressurised darting spotlight.

But his ability to blend in with the hundreds of players competing on the tour has also helped him.

"It is a cliché, but we are all one big family. I am close to many of the players, which is no surprise to me because I tend to get on well with people anyway.

"I find it a lot easier to get on well with the players. Some prefer to keep their distance, and that's fine, but I

feel that is counterproductive.

"It is important to have a positive mindset, and backing away from conversations with fellow players is not my style. But I know some players who do, which is hugely frustrating, but that is there problem. I focus on my game."

"It is tough, but I wouldn't change any of it for the world"

Compared to some players around him in the PDC rankings, Brown is relatively inexperienced on the major televised stage. He only has a handful of appearances under his belt.

But he has made his mark on the various floor tournaments over the last two years, regularly reaching the latter stages of events away from the TV.

As he attempts to make his ascent up the steep slope towards the top of his profession, will he succumb to the pressure of the bigtime stage?

"I thrive off playing on TV. I have always felt comfortable, and I think I know how to work the crowd to my favour.

"If you are a natural showman then you flourish on the big stage. I put myself in that bracket, because I feel like I was born to be there."

Unlike some of the top players, Brown has avoided the temptation to jazz up his darting persona. He is focused on doing the business on the dartboard. But he may experiment with a few ideas in the future.

"I might turn into Tarzan and enter the arena on a rope or something."

Joking aside, it is hard to see where Brown would be able to find the time to choreograph any such routine.

He combines his hectic professional career with an equally frantic life away from the oche.

"Away from the tour, my life is surrounded by kids 24/7. I run my darts academies for about 30 kids on Tuesdays, and that concept in going from strength to strength.

"My wife and I look after two foster kids, as well as our own son. So life is always busy. But I love it all. At the end of the day I don't like sitting around and doing nothing"

Caring for foster children changed the 30-year-old's entire outlook on life, more so than when he turned professional.

"I was a bit nervous going into it. But my wife's family all are involved in foster caring, so we have had the best support and advice possible.

"It is tough, but I wouldn't change any of it for the world. I realise how lucky I am and how lucky my kids are. It is just so rewarding, and that is the biggest thing."

As those within the game have become aware of his role as one of the first ever darts coaches, through the Steve Brown Darts Academy, he was pleasantly surprised when one of the game's top professionals came asking for his advice.

"A well-known player asked me for some tips and pointers over Facebook recently. It blew me away.

"I suppose I have fallen into that role now, as people within the game have found out about what I am doing with my academies, but it was still very flattering."

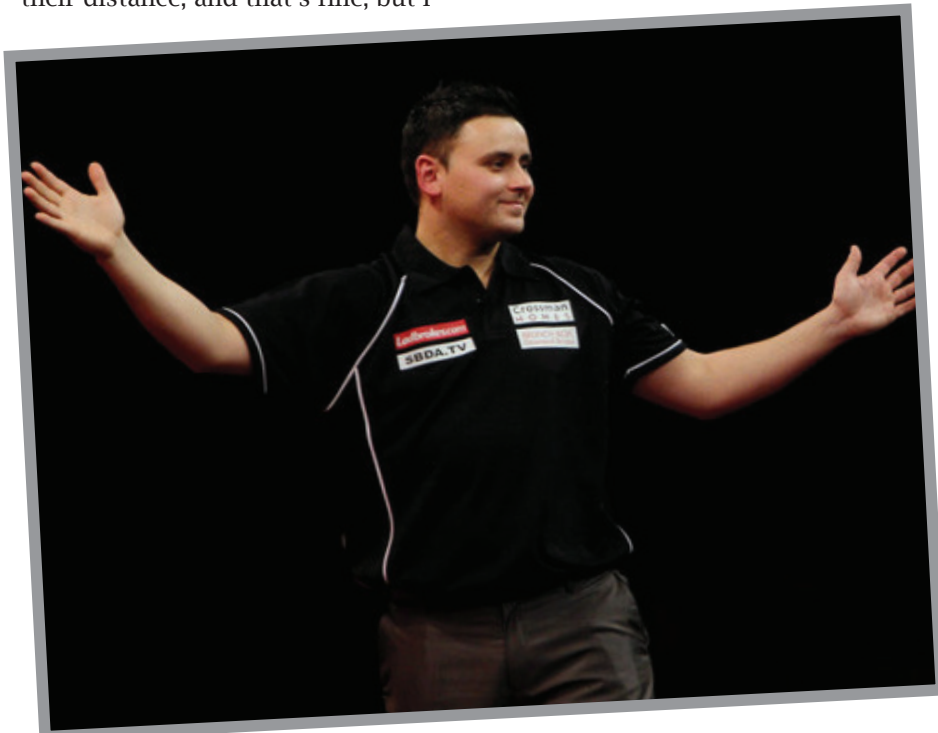
Possessing a ruthless streak of confidence and unwavering self-belief, Brown feels that his time has come to stamp his mark on the PDC.

"As each month goes on, I feel like I am becoming a better player. I am more professional in my approach, and I am gaining more experience. But I still have a way to go yet."

"I am very optimistic about the year ahead. It is the best to a year I have had in my professional career. I go into every tournament believing in my ability. I can win every title going."

You get the feeling that he is at the beginning of his journey towards darting greatness.

Is Steve Brown a champion of the future? With his fierce determination and a strong will to succeed, few would bet against him. 🍀



Above: Brown believes he can take the PDC circuit by storm this year. He is one of the new breed ready to take the challenge to Taylor and co