



Words | Jon Day

When Steve Brown's eldest son wanted to follow in his father's sporting footsteps, he was faced with a difficult conundrum.

A promising and hugely talented professional darts player by trade, Steve wanted to give his young boy a chance to learn the game.

"It quickly became evident that there was no safe environment to my son to play darts," says Steve.

"There was no environment that I was comfortable leaving him in. I didn't want to him to play in a scruffy old shed or in his bedroom."

He refers to the sport's engrained pub culture, which makes it difficult for youngsters to pick up and play the game in an appropriate setting, away from the local boozier.

From picking up on his son's newfound appetite for his sport, and the lack of suitable places for him to play, he spotted a niche.

This spearheaded the formation of his very own darts academy – the Steve Brown Darts Academy (SBDA) – which gives budding darts stars of the future a flying start in the game.

The SBDA is based at the Bull Inn, a pub on the outskirts of Bristol. It is owned by Steve's father Mark, a former county darts player himself.

REACH FOR THE DARTS!

A revolution in youth arrows to spur on the next generation of superstars

From the outside, the Bull looks like any other local pub.

Delve further and you find that this place is more than just a standard boozier. It is the centre of the Brown family's darting excellence.

"My dad has run many successful darts pubs. He gave me permission to convert his pub's old function room into a darts room.

"Two weeks later we had a safe place for the kids to play. I started bringing my son John and a few of his friends for practice sessions in the new room. They loved every minute of it."

Still derided by some as merely an old-fashioned pub sport, darts is now a serious business. With the right dedication, along with natural ability, it can make multi-millionaires out of its greatest players.

But regardless of the lure of fame and fortune, Steve is driven by his pure love of the game.

Despite the pressures of playing on the fiercely competitive professional tour, he has managed to find the time in his hectic life to create something revolutionary in his sport.

"Other sports have academies. Why should darts be any different?"

Nearly a year on from opening, the SBDA has established itself as the pioneer for youth darts.

It is the place where up to 50 kids aged eight to 16 play the game with their friends in weekly sessions, in a supportive and relaxed environment.

The fact that nobody with the game had ever thought of setting up a proper youth academy is something that astounded Steve.

“There is such an untapped market for youth darts. The governing bodies – the BDO and the PDC – never gave any consideration to it.

“The BDO system works, but it is stale. They play in tatty old clubs and pubs, and they are no places to teach kids about the game.”

“The PDC focused on the elite side of the game, with little consideration. But they are starting to support the youth side of the game now.”

Steve sees himself as something of an innovator.

“I was the first to recognise the fact that something was lacking, and act upon it. I feel very proud of when all the kids I coach turn up week after week for our coaching sessions with huge smiles on their faces.”

As you walk through to the rear of the Bull Inn, and wind your way up the stairs onto the second floor, you are greeted by Steve’s revolution in youth darts.

“The beauty of darts as a kid is that there is no prejudice. You can be any build, size or gender”

There must have been 30 kids in the room, all of varying ages, shapes and sizes. The room had five dart boards on one side, all illuminated and immaculately placed.

Each board had a queue of about five players all waiting to throw. Dart upon dart was being unleashed, all simultaneously landing, and the sound of flying tungsten reverberated around the room.

In true competitive children’s spirit, each pupil tried to outclass the other. Perhaps it was the lure of playing their mentor in front of a large crowd at one of Steve’s exhibitions later on in the day.

They were banging in trebles for fun all afternoon, including the smaller

kids who had use a step ladder to claim their darts out of the board.

Some took the time to mimic the throwing actions of their favourite players, to varying degrees of success.

Above all their enthusiasm for the game was infectious, and they loved the sheer thrill of throwing big scores and showing them off to their mates.

Steve has high aspirations for his academy, and hopes to expand the game’s broadening appeal further by encourage more youngsters to try darts.

“The beauty of darts as a kid is that there is no prejudice. You can be any build, any size, and any gender. You can come from any background, any nationality. It doesn’t matter.

“As soon as you step up on that oche, you’ve got the same respect as everyone else in the room, regardless of what trainers you’re wearing or what you look like.”

Around 24 kids turned up on the academy’s opening night. The large turnout surprised everyone at the Bull, but the standard of darts was even more impressive.

“They were throwing 180s for fun. It was astonishing. They said they had been practicing in their bedrooms because they had nowhere to go.”

Below: Steve teaching his darting pupils in one of his academy sessions





Left: Academy founder Steve Brown is rolling out the SBDA brand nationwide through Rileys



Future Power? SBDA pupil Josh McCarthy (L) beat 15-times World Champion Phil Taylor (R)

He wants to ensure that the kids are provided with the very best coaching possible. He refrains from singling out the star performers and makes sure that all of the academy members are treated in the same way.

"I wanted to avoid making the academy elitist in any way. In other sporting academies it is often the case that the kids who need the most help end up sat there watching the good kids play.

"So I devised a practice routine for my academy sessions to make sure that every kid throws the same amount of darts as everybody else.

"The objective for the kids is to beat their score from the previous week - not to beat anyone else's scores."

Every dart player loves hitting maximum 180s. But Steve, as a seasoned professional player himself, understands the importance of teaching his pupils the fine art of checking out on the doubles.

"Trebles for show, doubles for dough, as the old saying goes. Though all the kids want to do is hit 180s.

"It is important to teach them the art of checking out on a pressure finish. They learn off each other, so when they see someone hit a big checkout, they think 'wow'.

"That checkout will stay in their minds, and they will remember it because they have seen one of their friends doing it."

Along with forging new friendships and learning a new sport, Steve has spotted a remarkable improvement in their mathematical abilities - all thanks to playing darts.

The evening sessions inadvertently double up as a maths revision period.

"Their quick maths is fantastic and their maths teachers love it."

"To be a competent darts player you need a decent rhythm with your throw.

"If you can't count, then you're going to break up your rhythm, which leads you to making mistakes."

"One of the principle aims of the academy is to produce a conveyor belt of professional players"

Whilst giving expert coaching to all members, the image of the academy is at the heart of the SBDA's success. Inspired by the academy models in football, cricket and rugby, his pupils adhere to a strict dress code.

"We want the kids looking 100% professional. I am aware that the game has this pub culture, and we are trying to lift it away from that.

"I want their shirts to be the best. I want them to play with the best equipment. We want them to look smart, wearing black trouser and black shoes.

"We also have a grading system, similar to judo. They start off with a white shirt and progress through to a black shirt.

"It helps the kids improve their game stage by stage, and it makes

them feel part of something big."

One of the principle aims of the academy is to produce a conveyor belt of professional players.

Steve has his eye on nurturing the next Phil 'The Power' Taylor through his academy set up.

"One of my pupils has been selected to play for England. Watch out for the name Josh McCarthy in the next few years. He is a really promising talent.

"He threw a 15-dart leg to beat Taylor at an exhibition last year. Some scalp!"

In tandem with his professional career, Steve is hoping the success of his academies flourishes over the next few years.

His brand is about to go nationwide through the Rileys sports club chain. More academies like the one in Bristol will be opening across the country.

"I would take immense satisfaction in being responsible for introducing thousands of kids to the game."

The stereotypical assertion of darts players is that they hone their skills with a pint and a fag in one hand, and an arrow in the other.

Academies like Steve's will go some way to changing that perception of the sport, particularly to the younger generation.

"Darts is a working class golf, and that's how we would like it to stay. We want the game to be accessible to all walks of life."

He is a model professional, and he teaches his pupils to follow the same values and that he teaches through his academies.

"I think the SBDA has got huge potential. But if I don't get rich out of it, I would love to say in 40 years time that I started that innovation.

"I am really keen for it to work." 🎯