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Life

Dart of gold

Beating the Brits at their own game



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In the sport of darts, the hotshot professionals have nicknames.

There's Phil (The Power) Taylor, Peter (One Dart) Manley and Adrian (Jackpot) Lewis.

The reigning world champion, who hails from Oshawa, Ont. - although most elite players are British or Dutch - goes by the Star Wars-inspired moniker John (Darth Maple) Part.

Some have tried to christen Winnipeg's world-class dart warrior Gerry (The Irish Rover) Convery or Gerry (The Closer) Convery, for his ability to pull out a win when the pressure is on.

But Convery, a former Canadian champ who has competed in the PDC World Darts Championship in England for the past four years - finishing as high as the top 16 - just doesn't have the flashy ego to make a nickname stick.

"I'm more laid back and easygoing," says the friendly Irish-Canadian competitor, a 52-year-old grandfather who has worked for Manitoba Hydro for 23 years.

Still, Convery can play the intimidation game. While posing for a photographer, he folds his arms, puffs up his chest, juts out his chin and jokes, "D'ya want me like this? Like the cocky Brits?"

Because Part, the famous Canadian, makes his full-time living by playing darts overseas, and because the dart universe is confusingly governed by two rival organizations, Convery qualifies as the top-ranked player in Canada.

This weekend, he's in the thick of the provincials at the West Kildonan Legion.

As president of the 100-member Manitoba Darts Association (MDA), he's also gearing up for the biggest "darting" event to be held here since 1987.

First, in May, about 80 young players will compete here in the Youth Nationals.

Then the following month, about 200 male and female players representing every province will converge on Winnipeg for the Red River Classic warm-up tournament (June 6 to 8), the Canadian Nationals (June 10-13) and the Canadian Open (June 13-15). The latter attracts players from England, Scotland, Wales and the U.S.

It's all happening at the Victoria Inn, where 100 dart boards will be set up in a gigantic convention hall, with seating for spectators.

Convery and the MDA board need a wealth of enthusiastic sponsors and volunteers to pull off the ambitious event. "This is our pinnacle," he says.

Manitoba has some terrific dart players - probably due to our long winters - but Convery says participation in the sport has suffered since Sport Manitoba slashed its funding from \$32,000 about 10 years ago to \$13,000 today - a pittance compared to dart support in provinces like Saskatchewan, Alberta and Ontario. "It has baffled me for years," he says.

The province has tended to question darts' legitimacy as a sport, he says, and to associate it with alcohol consumption. Convery contends there's no more drinking among dart players than among hockey players, curlers or other amateur athletes.

"Darts has always had a bad reputation because of the drink," he says. "It's not fair to crucify one sport."

Without adequate funding to subsidize top players' travel to other Canadian cities, it's extremely difficult to foster excellence, he says. He hopes that the proposed inclusion of darts as a demonstration sport in the 2012 Olympics will help to improve its image.

When Convery was growing up in a village in Northern Ireland, darts were played in the pub every Friday night and broadcast on TV every Saturday. He watched the game and knew the names of the star players, but he was into team sports, particularly soccer.

"I played semi-professional (soccer) when I was 16, 17," he recalls. "I had a tryout with the Glasgow Celtic. I never threw a dart in Ireland."

When he crossed the ocean as an immigrant at age 21, he never imagined that 30 years later he would be back in the United Kingdom - cheered on by proud supporters in Ireland - competing in the spotlight on national television.

Darts is "the hottest ticket going" in the U.K., he says, with lucrative sponsorship deals and TV broadcasts generating about two million British pounds (C\$3.9 million) in annual prize money. In January, Part took home 100,000 pounds (C\$195,000) for clinching the world championship.

Even in Canada, Sportsnet has been airing the Premier League, in which the world's top eight players do battle in a different sold-out British arena each week.

"I work for a living," says Convery in his appealing brogue. "The guys in England, out of the top 32, probably 12 or 14 are just (dart-playing) professionals. That's all they do."

Convery played soccer after he first settled in Winnipeg in 1978, but an injury sidelined him in the mid-1980s. He and wife Teresa found the winters here shockingly harsh. When someone invited him to join a dart league in about 1987, he figured it would help pass the winter months. Teresa has never played, but has always supported his passion for the game.

Competitive by nature, Convery soon bought a dartboard and began spending long hours methodically practising in his silent basement. His two kids never took any interest. "Just me and the board," he says.

When the kids were nearly grown, about 10 years ago, he got much more serious about the game and started to travel to weekend tournaments in earnest. He has competed in every Canadian province, and has been known to travel six weekends in a row. He says he hasn't kept track of his lifetime winnings, but basically earns enough in prize money to break even on his travel costs.

Dart-playing, he says, is a skill that must be honed and maintained. Dedication and perseverance are the only secrets. When he was at his performance peak about five years ago, he was practising about six hours a day, seven days a week.

He is also a runner, and says many people don't realize the level of fitness and stamina it takes to play darts for 12 to 14 hours a day, in tournaments that can last for seven days. "I laugh when guys say dart players are not athletes," he says.

He reminds anyone who asks him for secrets that he played in tournaments for about 15 years before things started clicking for him.

Whether throwing in his Monday-night men's super league at the legion at Ellice Avenue and Empress Street, on stage with TV cameras and 5,000 spectators looking over his shoulder in England, or in the annual Las Vegas Desert Classic, he says it's all about concentration.

"Darts is 100 per cent mind games," he says. Some players will go for fake washroom breaks to disrupt a match, jingle coins in their pocket, or hum to distract their opponent.

One old trick that's sometimes used locally is to declare "The line is wrong," suggesting that there's something off about the distance to the board, just to make a player second-guess himself.

Like many elite players, Convery doesn't watch his opponent throw, and usually doesn't find out the opponent's score until the match is over.

"I don't see ya, I don't look at ya, I don't talk to ya," he says.

He uses a three-finger grip, taking aim by holding each dart just under his right eye, almost touching the lens of his glasses. He says his throwing style is awkward, but it works. He thinks it's a huge mistake to break down and analyze one's throw.

"He does have a bit of a twirl to his dart when it leaves his fingertips," says his doubles partner of more than 20 years, Stan Brooking. "It rotates off his fingers. It works for him."

Injuries are rare in darts. But there is a mysterious affliction called "dartitis," in which the player becomes unable to let the dart go. "It can finish your career," says Convery. "It's horrible to watch someone go through it. It's not clear if it's physical or mental."

The Holy Grail - or hole-in-one - of darts is the perfect nine-dart game. "In Canada, I've never seen it done in a tournament," Convery

says.

He has never once achieved it - not even alone in his basement. "I've shot a lot of 10-dart and 11-dart games. There's a young fella in England right now, an up-and-coming pro, hitting an average of five or six nine-dart games a day.

"That's unreal. Just unbelievable. It's hard to fathom when you haven't done it once in your whole life."

Convery says many of the top players today are in their early 20s. That makes him a veritable dinosaur, but he doesn't rule out the possibility that when he retires, he could establish a base back in Ireland and try life for a few months as a professional darter.

Ask him to name a dart-career highlight, and he doesn't hesitate. It happened not in the glare of British big-money competition, but in a setting that was more about Canadian pride and the pure love of the game.

It was in 2003, when he made the four-man, two-woman Canadian team that went to the biennial World Cup of darts, held that year in Epinal, France.

"It was absolutely super - unbelievable," he remembers. "There were 42 nations there. There's no money involved; it's all prestige. You're representing your country. That's the goal at the end of the rainbow."

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Vital Signs

Raised in Mayogall, Northern Ireland, halfway between Belfast and Londonderry.

Was one of 10 children of a labourer father and homemaker mother. Their Catholic household also included two cousins, for a total of 12 children.

Emigrated to Canada at age 21 with his wife and baby son, to escape the "troubles" in Northern Ireland. Followed a brother and settled in Winnipeg.

Lives in Garden Grove. Manages the Manitoba Hydro pole yard at 1840 Chevrier Blvd.

Currently the top-ranked Canadian dart player, Convery has used the same set of three 24-gram darts for about 10 years. He paid \$120 for them. He wears out and replaces the dart board in his basement about once a year, at a cost of \$60.

Despite his Irish roots, he has absolutely no lucky charms or superstitious rituals when it comes to darts. "The only ritual is practice, and lots of it," he says.

Wife Teresa works for a pharmaceutical company. Son Kevin, who grew up playing hockey, is a doctor. Daughter Michelle, who grew up figure skating, is a nurse. Neither has ever shown the slightest interest in darts. But Convery thinks there might be hope for his two-year-old granddaughter. "I got her little magnet darts," he says.

For information on sponsoring a dart board or volunteering when Winnipeg hosts the Canadian Nationals in June, visit www.manitobadarts.com or contact Convery at 694-5909.

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