

Silver celebrations for umpiring duo



The 2024 World Indoor Championships at Potters Resorts, Hopton-on-Sea, marked a special anniversary for two World Bowls Tour officials. Allan Thornhill and Mike Davies both celebrated their 25th year of officiating at WBT events. **Sian Honor** talks to both about their umpiring life so far

Allan Thornhill was just 21-years-old and the youngest umpire in the country when he qualified with the English Umpires Association back in 1989.

Thirty-five years later, he has reached the very top of his game, and his face is well-known on the bowls circuit both indoors and outdoors.

Allan started bowling at the age of 14 and discovered a love of marking club singles games and watching other officials on the green.

"I was also encouraged by my brother in law's grandfather who was an umpire and he helped me with the training and supported me through the qualification," he recalled.

"The biggest hurdles for me were being accepted as an official with authority. I was pretty shy then and I just had to prove I knew what I was doing and earn players' respect. It took a few years and experience but once I had my foot in the door as it were, I got as many games under my belt as I could."

It wasn't long before Allan was noticed at a local level and he applied to become a county grade umpire in 1991 and a national umpire in 1996.

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"That opened so many more doors for me because I had the opportunity to officiate at the national finals at Worthing and which were amazing experiences," he said.

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Three years later, Allan was invited to a Junior International series in Worthing in 1999 which meant he qualified to be an international grade umpire.

He recalled: "Everything then went a little bit bonkers and 2000 and 2001 were the busiest years of my career. With the Manchester Commonwealth Games in 2002 around the corner there were lots of scouts around the country looking for suitable candidates and really that all started in 2001.

"However, in 2000, I got a letter out of the blue asking me to officiate at Potters at the World Challenge for the Bryant Cup. This was essentially the selection event for myself and Mike Davies for the World Indoor Pairs which was a separate tournament then.

“The following year, 2001, was just mad, with multiple test series’, another junior international series in Wales and selection interviews for Manchester.”

Allan has now officiated at six Commonwealth Games and was appointed as Chief Technical Official for Birmingham 2022.

COMMONWEALTH HIGHLIGHTS

“All six Games have been memorable in many different ways. Arguably the most amazing honour has been marking the gold medal singles match between Bobby Donnelly and Jeremy Henry in the most appalling weather in Manchester. I was so nervous and in the zone, I forgot I had a scorecard for three ends!

“Then I remember watching the quarter-final matches knowing that if England got through to the final I would not play a part in it, but then being told while I was in the changing room that I would mark the singles was the best news ever. Of course, being appointed CTO in Birmingham was incredible but it was really hard work; I think over the course of the 12 days I walked around 200,000 steps.

But what an honour to lead an amazing team of ITOs.

“Delhi was also special because it was just so random; hot, bug infested and suffering from Delhi belly. I was so pleased that the Team England doctor suggested I lose a bit of weight when we met six months prior to the Games. Glasgow was a fantastic atmosphere with big crowds and great team work, and who would forget that Alex Marshall and Paul Foster pairs match against England and the celebration after two of the most incredible bowls you could hope to see.

“Australia? Well, what is there not to like, I would move out there tomorrow if I wasn’t too old. Gold Coast 2018 was such a great experience in such a beautiful place, finished off with a few days holiday in the forest afterwards.”

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

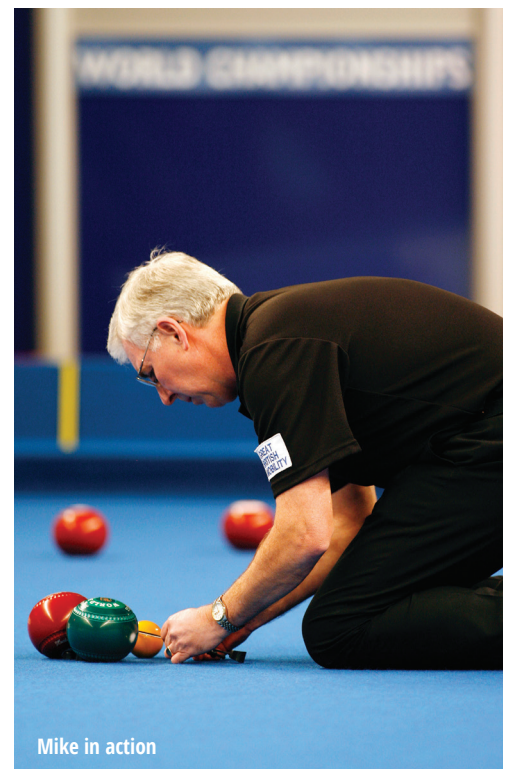
In January, Allan was presented with an award from the World Bowls Tour in recognition of 25 years’ service to the WBT.

He said: “It has been an absolute joy to be involved for so long. I’m not saying it has all been plain sailing as there have been several times when I have wanted to walk >>>

Allan (seated left) with Neill Bryce, Francis Fletcher and Dan Bluett during the 2024 World Indoor Bowls Championships



Allan at the Commonwealth Games in Delhi



Mike in action

Left:
An early marking
duty photo with
Allan and
David Hubbard

away from it all. But I keep bouncing back from the lows thanks to the incredible highs that are experienced on that portable rink.

“My absolute highlight has to be marking my first World Indoor Singles final in 2006 when Mervyn King defeated Greg Harlow.

“I would like to continue for a few more years with WBT as their chief official. I am blessed to have an amazing team alongside me who are more than capable and extremely supportive, they are a dream team. I am also still heavily involved in the World Bowls Laws Advisory Group and have a few projects in the pipeline for that.

“Plus, I am the development officer for the English Umpires Association which is a busy role at the moment as we realign all of the training and development across England. Officiating wise, I still enjoy working some of the local domestic and national competitions in my area and I also have the IIBC World Indoor Championships coming up in April. I have been very lucky.”

SPOTLIGHT ON MIKE

Mike Davies was compelled to undertake his marker's course after realising that he didn't know a rule whilst playing in a father and son competition in 1984.

“I'd only been bowling for a few years and was on the green with my son who was about 11,” he said.

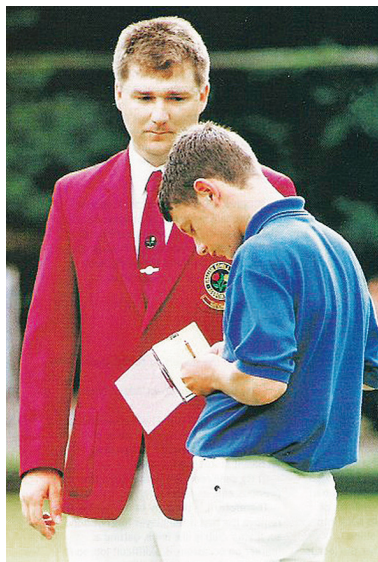
“The mat was about two-foot from the ditch when the skips went back to bowl and we didn't have a clue what to do about it. We went into the clubhouse, and they said we needed an umpire. I was persuaded to get into it from there; I took my examinations and that was it!”

Right from the outset, the thrill of officiating for Mike came from helping other people.

“I thoroughly enjoyed watching all the games and answering questions. Players really appreciate you which is lovely. You do what you can for them, and they want an answer, even when it is really close. I always think it's nice when you get it right.

“Good marking is about being able to give the players the information they want. You need to have the positions of the bowls that have been played in your head and be ready when they ask you so you can answer straight away.”

Mike worked his way up the ranks until he became an international umpire in 1999 after working at an international series in Jersey.



“I have never really felt nervous, I have always felt quite confident in what I was doing,” Mike said.

“When I first went to Potters, Brian Daly helped me a lot when I first started, I went on for my first singles match and he came to me after and asked why I kept swapping over sides. I was told to stay on one side because of the cameras.

“After a few times you get into it, and you really do pick things up as you go along.”

Mike has officiated at several British Isles championships, the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002 and at Potters for the last 25 years.

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He says he feels lucky to have been involved in some great matches.

“One memorable one was when Paul Foster played Ian Bond. Ian needed a three to stay in the game. Even though the bowls were a yard apart, he took all three out with one bowl!

“In another game I was marking, when I centred the jack, it rolled back an inch or two. I did it again and it happened again, and the players just couldn't stop laughing. It turned out that when they'd put the cameras up it fell down on the rink. It must have made a hole which nobody knew about.

“Sometimes when the players can't see if there's a gap between the bowl and jack, they get down on their knees and I recall a photo where me, Paul

Foster and John Price were all on the green at different angles.

“This year at Potters, I marked Alex Marshall and Greg Harlow's first round match which was brilliant.

“I have been so lucky with all the players and officials I have worked with over the years.”

Mike got into bowls through his brother and since 1980 has qualified for the national finals nine times, winning the National Triples in 1996.

“That was a big highlight for me,” Mike said, “And we also won the county title three years running.

“I started after playing football and I also played skittles but once I began bowling, I just wanted to keep going.”

Mike says he enjoys umpiring indoors and outdoors in equal measure and it makes him sad that the numbers of people taking courses now has ‘dropped terrifically’ over the years.

“There is a definite lack of umpires coming into the sport, people do not seem to want to do it as much now,” he said.

“Outdoors, I love the Middleton Cup – two of you are covering but you have to be really on your toes to keep up with everything.

“Another element during the summer season is sorting out the greens an hour before play – it's amazing how many greens have not been set up properly and when you tell them they can say ‘oh, we've played like that all season so far!’”

“Indoors, I love Potters. It's always the highlight of my season. I'm just getting a bit older and don't do the final week anymore as it's getting a bit too much. It's shattering with all the concentration, so I usually just go up to support Allan.

“I help with the testing for umpires and some marking courses to try and get some more people involved in the officiating side.

“I also travel to different clubs in my area talking about etiquette on the green. It's common for new bowlers to pick up bad habits from people who have been playing the game for many years.

“Overall, I just like to help people and enjoy finding out answers to people's questions. Everyone I have met along the way has made it special.”

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FOOTNOTE: The WBT honoured Allan and Mike with special presentations during the championships.