

UP FOR THE BLACKTHORN CIDER CUP

Playing as The Uffculme Bellies in the Sampford Peverell & District Skittles League, we had ended our local campaign with a runners-up spot in Division A, after just beating off relegation the previous year. Starting to really gel as a team and scoring well home and away, entering the country's most prestigious skittle competition was high on our agenda and our hopes were running high of doing well.

So our Blackthorn British Skittles Championship campaign got underway with our first group stage match: an 'over-the-border' skirmish away against Redskins from Wellington who had qualified to the last two Championships Grand Finals. It started off as a close affair and we were all level after two hands but alas, the home team got into their rhythm and put up 5 unanswered spares. The standard was set as we failed in our opening match losing 296-338.

A home game was next against Spudlers A, a team made up of top players individually selected from our home league, so for us it was always the one we wanted to win. Fired up and desperate for our first win, we managed to go 15 pins up after the first 2 hands. 6 pins were clawed back on the third, but we tightened our belts and pulled a further 5 pins on the last two hands to run out 321-307 winners. Could this be the turning point?

Our next match was the away leg against Spudlers. The game was nip and tuck and after the first hand they were 12 up. We started to peg back and went into the last hand only 6 down. Then they hit three spares to knock the stuffing out of us for a 287-308 loss.

To prepare for our final and most critical "must-win" match against Redskins, we went on a mid-season, warm weather, training week to the sunny Spanish island of Majorca. Redskins were already through to the next round as group winners so this was going to be tough. Legs of 57 and 72 got the away side into the swing. We replied with 73 and 63 to end 7 pins up and still all to play for. The single end was next and we increased our advantage to 20 pins. They never really got to grips with using rubber, rather than their more familiar wooden balls and, in the end, we cruised to a fabulous 361-303 victory and a ticket through to the first knockout stage.

We waited in anticipation for the results from Group 4 to see who we would be playing in the first knockout stage. Three teams from Devon were battling it out and the group was very tight. Word came through and the preparation began to take on seasoned opponents in the form of group winners Mashers from Barnstaple. Playing the home leg first, we needed a big win. We started poorly with 58 against 67. Legs of 74 and 72, against 64 and 60, saw us 'chip' away at the lead and move ahead by 13 pins. But Mashers hit back and reduced the deficit to 7 pins going into the last leg. We put on the pressure for a final tally in our favour 330-326.

A slim 4-pin lead going into the away leg meant it was always going to be tough and tough it was. To hit 14 spares in 40 hands is good but not against 22 spares in what might have been the highest scoring match in the championships. The Mashers hands of 102, 100, 81, 111 and 99 showed that this was a team that could go all the way. At the end of the game the totals were Bellies 392 – Mashers 493, (an average of over 98), and a total pin count of 885!

Our journey had come to an end and we were out!

The finals were played at Sand Bay Holiday Village at Weston-Super-Mare on 22nd and 23rd September. The first night comprised of Men's and Ladies open events, in singles and doubles, which gave everyone a chance to get some practice in for the following day's main events.

As a finalist in the press officer competition, I was invited along to the team finals on the Saturday and so fellow 'Belly' Glen, and myself came along to check it out. The first impression on entering the main hall was the noise. With ten alleys and up to twenty teams playing at once, as well as spectators cheering on, it hits you like an express train out of control! We looked at each other and unanimously headed straight to the bar to order some cider and then straight to the alleys to watch some skittles.

We decided to follow the progress of the teams we had played against in the qualifying rounds. First it was the turn of Redskins who started off well with a lead of 15 after the first leg but in the end were pegged back over the next four legs to end up losing by 7 pins to Force 8 from Kingsteignton, Devon. This was the third year in a row they had lost in the first round and so were very disappointed to say the least so we all decided it was time for another cider! Redskins went on to reach the semi-finals in the plate event, so they could at least hold their heads up high after just falling short against 2004 and 2005 Champions Skimmers.

In the quarter-finals we watched Mashers, the team who had knocked us out. By coincidence they were playing Force 8 who we had just watched. We said after they had knocked us out that they could go all the way. They were far too strong for their opponents and won this game by 46 pins.

So we now came to the semi-finals where no team likes to lose. Mashers were not at their best for this game and although it was quite close, ended up losing by 17 pins to the eventual champions, The Cotswold Cavaliers.

It was soon time for the Finals. By now, it was evening, several more ciders had been downed and we were ready to cheer in the teams. The lights were dimmed and the atmosphere started to build. The entrance of the finalists was amazing. The finalists from each event were led out to rousing applause and deafening fanfare music that proved a hit with their supporters. As the games progressed, it was soon becoming apparent which teams were heading towards victory and those to defeat. The matches were great and when the presentations were made and it was announced that I had won the press officer award, I will never forget the moment walking up to get my prize of £100, Blackthorn fleece and well received crate of Blackthorn Cider accompanied by James Bond theme music, which I have to say, went down well and matched my outfit! Now I realised why Rachel asked me to wear a DJ!

After the presentation there was a professional comedian who kept everyone in stitches, followed by the disco until 3am and then karaoke until much later. Thanks to the ladies for keeping up with us on the dance floor – you know who you are!

Summing up, it was a very professionally run event and thanks must go to Blackthorn for their great support and Rachel and her team of judges and helpers. I

know Rachel's vision is to see skittles eventually covered on television and given the coverage that darts has had over recent years it would be good for the game to encourage others to take part. We have had some good nights in this championships and look forward to having another go next year. My advice to other teams who are thinking about the Blackthorn Championships for 2007 is have a go because if you are lucky enough to go all the way you will have an experience you will never forget.

You never know, we might just meet you in next years final and if we do... mine's a Blackthorn – thanks!

Paul Watkins

Uffculme Bellies, Sampford Peverell & District Skittles League

Blackthorn British Skittles Championships 'Press Officer of the Year', 2006.