

# Battle of the Sexes

## Are men better than women at bowls?



**David Rhys Jones**

The voice of bowls

**W**HEN I caught up with England's Commonwealth Games women's singles champion Natalie Melmore, she admitted she was a tad worse for wear after attending her graduation ceremony in Plymouth the day before. But, still in upbeat, working mode, she was rushing to get off to a TV interview with the BBC on Plymouth Hoe.

Having received her 2:1 criminology degree certificate, as well as her sporting colours from Plymouth University, she was delighted that her dissertation - on the legal stance of European countries to the Islamic headscarf - was to be published.

Brazen as ever, I asked her: "Do you agree that men bowlers are so much better than women?" Then I stood back, listened carefully, and was taken aback by her thoughtful - and ultimately honest - reply. "Yes they are - though I am loathe to admit it - but it's absolutely NOT due to any physical reasons, rather a lack of competition, which is all down to history and the place of women in society," she declared.

"For a start, there are more men playing bowls than women, and there's a greater sense of competition in the men's game," Natalie explained. "It's not until you are stretched mentally and physically that you improve - and most women do not face that challenge at their village club.

"I know that exposure to different kinds of pressure I've had over the past couple of years during training and in the Commonwealth Games themselves has improved my game beyond recognition."

### **WOMEN CAN BE JUST AS GOOD**

Natalie believes that the top women bowlers are, at least potentially, 'as good as the top men,' because they play what is often called 'a man's game.' She states that this sort of game is very rarely, if



Commonwealth Games singles champion Natalie Melmore.

ever coached at grassroots level, so, sadly, most women bowlers do not progress.

"Too often, in mixed events, it is assumed that the woman is going to lead, and the man should skip," she adds. "But that is not written in stone, and there is no real reason for players to adopt gender roles."

Call it chauvinistic if you like, but the ethos that was accepted as the natural way of things in the D W Grace era, was one of: 'Men's role is in the workplace, at war, or on the sports field; a woman's place is in the kitchen - or at least at home!'

Having said that, the potential of the sport as a recreation for young women was recognised from as early as one year post the Victorian era. Witness the 1902 headline in 'Girls Realm': 'Bowls - a Graceful Game for Girls!' I kid you not!

### **THINGS ARE CHANGING**

But society, (Big and Small) has changed. Indeed, it is still changing - and, in order to survive, our sport shall have to change too. One of these changes is the increase in popularity of mixed bowls.

More typically, bowls clubs are finding that the new norm in terms of recruitment is the arrival at the club of married couples of pensionable age, who are

looking for some activity they can pursue in their retirement years. Cue the birth of the mixed friendly.

Surely there is NO reason why women should not be the equal of men in a sport that relies far more heavily on skill than on strength. You want evidence to support the theory that women can hold their own? Well - here we go:

- I can point you to the wonderful women of Wiltshire, who, in an annual battle for bragging rights, showed their mettle by defeating their menfolk, 139-101 - and actually won on five of the six rinks.

- In May, as part of their preparation for their assault on the Johns Trophy, the Duchy's women took on a Bowls Cornwall men's team, and beat them 116-112, while a similar challenge match saw Devon's women chalk up a 125-108 win over their men

- In Somerset, Bath star Joan Walmsley followed in the footsteps of 2010 champion Angle Watkins by winning the county open singles with a 21-20 win over Yeovil's Brian Colvin in the final.

- The notion of staging a truly 'open' i.e., gender-free singles competition is fairly new - and the Somerset 'open,' won by Louis Ridout when it was introduced in 2009, has since been lifted twice by

members of the fairer sex.

- In August, the Optika Weston-Super-Mare (Ladies) Open introduced what they coyly called a 'unified' singles event - and that, too, was won by a woman as Clevedon's junior international Stef Branfield beat Clarence hope David Scott in the final.

### AMY BUCKING THE TREND

Even now, however, an unwritten rule decrees that women, who have a fine touch and can draw beautifully, must play lead, and men, who are more aggressive, should skip, dictating tactics playing the glory shots, and delivering the woods that 'matter.'

As Natalie, who played lead when she helped Griff Sanders to the national mixed pairs title in 2009, observes it was reassuring to see her England colleague Amy Gowshall skipping her Cleethorpes club-mate Alan Dent to an outstanding 19-6 final victory over the defending champions to win the same title.

However, Amy was not, as reported last month, the first successful woman skip in this event. Back in 1988, Myra Smith, then playing out of the Aveley club in Essex, skipped club mate David Wakefield to the national mixed pairs title. Myra is now a member of the Clockhouse club, while David plays for Drums BC.

### COAXING THE COACHES

WAR has been declared. Do you live in England? Are you a bowls coach? Do you actually know the name of the coaching organisation to which you are affiliated? Are you being kept informed?

I bet you thought you belonged to the English Bowls Coaching Scheme (EBCS), because that's what it says on your certificate. And, at their recent meeting, the EBCS voted against disbanding and throwing their lot in with the Bowls Development Alliance (BDA).

That's easy, then. You are an EBCS coach, and you belong to the EBCS. Or do you?

Undeterred by the EBCS's negative decision, the BDA, who are funded by Sport England and supported by Bowls England and the English Indoor Bowling Association, have offered an olive branch - or is it a bribe? - to members of the EBCS to decamp and sign up with the BDA at a knockdown price of £8.

So, at a stroke, we have TWO national coaching bodies, one run on a shoestring by amateurs who know a lot about bowls, and the other generously funded by

### OBITUARY - CEDRIC SMITH

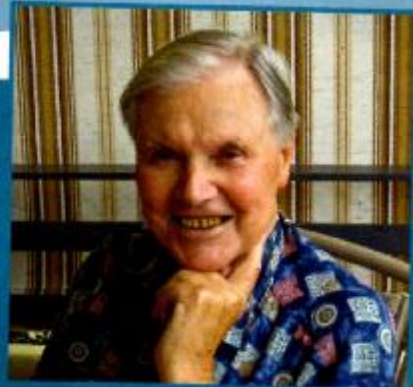
I SUPPOSE few people in the UK will remember the debonair and stylish Hertfordshire lead Cedric Smith, who played bowls for England for 12 years, but who recently died in Australia, aged 86. One man who remembers him fondly is the legendary David Bryant, with whom he won a pairs bronze medal in the very first World Bowls in Kyeemagh, New South Wales, in 1966.

"Cedric was a gentleman, on and off the green," said DJB. "Immaculate, intelligent, charming and a consistently good drawing player. We became very good friends and kept in touch over the years, even though he was the other side of the world."

Not only did Cedric pioneer radio coverage of our sport for the BBC from the national championships at Mortlake, he was involved in the early days of coaching, contributing to the booklet, 'Bowls for Beginners.'

Bowling at Muswell Hill as a teenager, Cedric was spotted by the legendary Jimmy Carruthers and the man who won the inaugural EBA singles title in 1903 predicted a great future for the youngster.

After moving to Barnet, Cedric was drafted into the Hertfordshire side in 1950, and made his England debut six years later. It was while playing in the very first



Former England international, bowls administrator and broadcaster Cedric Smith died recently in Australia where he had lived since the late sixties.

World Bowls in 1966 that Cedric met Lorna Young, an Australian nursing sister. They got married and lived in Barnet for two years before deciding to make a new life 'Down Under' in the Sydney suburb of Connells Point, where his devotion to our great game continued as a member of the Hurstville club.

His well-modulated voice became well-known on Australian radio, and he became a highly respected official in his role of State Councillor for New South Wales District 13.

Described recently in the Bowls New South Wales news bulletin as 'a remarkable man,' Cedric's involvement in bowls spanned seven decades.

professionals who know a lot about sports management, but precious little about bowls.

The EBCS, proud of their roots, points to the skilful pioneering work done by such stalwarts as Harry De'Ath, Jimmy Davidson and Gwyn John, who got the EBCS off on a firm footing in the 1980's.

Its modus operandi was far superior to the 'In the Groove' package produced 'Down Under,' because it was far more flexible. It didn't prescribe an 'ideal delivery,' allowing people to develop their own natural style, but kept an eye on things like balance, finding a line, smoothness of dispatch and economy of movement to aid consistency.

It may seem strange that the BDA's way forward involves putting bowls coaching in the hands of someone whose area of expertise is in rhythmic gymnastics, but so what? If she has the administrative skills to cope with a national coaching set-up, that's fine by me.

As an outsider - but keenly interested observer, I sense that the EBCS has lost its way, and has become something of a political battleground. There have been

clashes of personality and a lack of true leadership in recent years.

From the start, the EBCS was politically 'independent' of the national associations, even though they worked closely with them, and was subject to a degree of monitoring by 'Big Brother.'

There was a feeling that they were a 'democratic' organisation that could steer their own course and determine their own future. And that, I believe, is why the coaches of the EBCS resisted the overtures of the BDA, dug in their heels, and kept their own identity.

In my view, the EBCS has reached a point where they need shaking up and re-modelling, but in a professional rather than a homespun way. Even though the BDA's mission statement restricts them to selling the sport to elderly people, they have the credentials (and resources) to take coaching forward.

So, where do we go from here? Coaches everywhere (in England) have to make their own minds up. Do you stick with the ailing EBCS? - Or do you give your allegiance to the BDA?

Answers on a postcard please!