

Psychedelic Bowls

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VERY FEW, if any readers, will remember when black-and-white films gave way to colour, but I'm certain a goodly number will recall the same transition in television.

By contrast, the idea that bowls should be anything but black or brown did not receive official approval until 1998, but it took a court case in Belfast to decide that, in Ireland at least, as long as bowls passed the bias test they could be any colour you wanted them to be.

Bowls in the world indoor championships are red or green, and the rink is electric blue, and if you visit the world outdoor championships, as I did in 2012, or the English national championships at Worthing or Leamington, you will find that the idea of colour has caught on big time.

COLOUR NOT CAUGHT ON EVERYWHERE

My area of North Somerset votes Conservative with a big 'C', but must also be conservative with a small 'c', because most of my club-mates, and members of neighbouring clubs still propel black bowls down the rinks, indoors and out. Your area might be the same.

15 years after it all started, I still raise eyebrows and provoke ribald comments with my bright red balls – and, as I glance across the greens, I see very few coloured woods being trundled. My missiles usually stand out like a sore thumb.

When I got them – my Scarlet Pimpernels – some 12 years ago now, I played in a so-called mixed friendly match in the next county, and placed my bowls on the bank

FACT Approval for coloured bowls was passed in 1998.



Players compete with a whole range of different colours nowadays.



"I'll hold your pink bowls for you Mark".

behind the rink on which I had been drawn to play.

One of the opposition ladies, spotting them straight away, reacted swiftly and strongly: "You're NOT going to play with those monstrosities, are you?" she shrieked. I was mortally wounded. What an offensive thing to say. My woods are part of me. You know what I mean?

I felt like turning to her and saying: "You're not going to play with a hair-style like that, are you?" However, I refrained, because she might have taken it personally!

COLOUR CATCHING ON

But let's get back to the history of coloured bowls. First, there were red, blue or green bowls available, then yellow and pink became popular, and eventually, to some people's horror, white bowls became the thing, particularly down under.

It was in November 2008 that I witnessed Mark Walton and Leif Selby, both unquestionably red-blooded males, playing in the final of the Hong Kong International Classic singles at the Kowloon Bowling Green Club, where Mark's pink bowls cut a pretty dash alongside Leif's white ones.

Speckled bowls became all the rage – grey-and-white, red-and-black, blue-and-grey, and very tasteful they are too – and there was even an attempt, in crown green land,

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to produce see-through bowls, though the composition left them too light in weight to be of any use to the competitive player.

The introduction of colour has given our sport a shot in the arm, both in terms of the bowls we roll, and the clothes we wear. Who'd have thought the dowdy monochrome game of 20 years ago would have developed into a blaze of colour?

Not everyone's cup of tea, of course – some people just don't like change. Just ask some of my mates in North Somerset! And ask those cricket-lovers who detest the notion of playing that great game in track-suits or pyjamas!

I have even heard of a few bowls clubs who have debated the issue of coloured tops for ages at their AGM before resolving to register their new coloured shirts with Bowls England. The colour? – WHITE!

Many years ago, my predecessor as bowls correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, the one-and-only Donald Newby, emerged from the darkness of the press room, and, blinking



Robert Weale rolls up on the blue portable carpet. Robert was an early casualty but it is usually the top 16 who thrive at these competitions.

at the brightness of the sun in Worthing, asked innocently: "Which is the team playing in white?"

In those days, of course, everyone, but everyone, played in white – but there's no denying that, with the introduction of colour, bowls has become much more attractive and easier to watch – and more accessible to people of all ages.

THE AUSTRALIAN 'ATHLETES'

In Australia, in particular, bowlers of all ages arrive for a game looking as if they are athletic men and women preparing to engage in a 'proper' sport. Think of the strides that women bowlers have made since hats, tights and gloves were no longer compulsory.

That's all very well – and I make no apologies for applauding the moves that have made bowls more attractive. BUT, if we have given our sport a much-needed make-over, why are our clubs losing members? And why are fewer bowlers entering the national championships and other competitions these days?

Why is it getting harder to find volunteers to fill roles like club or county president, let alone positions that demand a bit of hard work, like secretary or treasurer?

But that's another story that we can explore in another issue!

Is Success a Portable Transition?

BOWLS IS a simple game. All you have to do is roll a ball in the right direction, at the right speed, and you finish on the jack every time. Ask Stewart Anderson!

Line and length – there's not a lot to think about, is there? It should be easy, but, like the board game Othello that I had for Christmas, it takes a minute to learn, but a lifetime to master! – But hey, that 'T' is neither here nor there!

Some of you seem to think the players on the World Bowls Tour have got it easier than the rest of us; apart from their recent experiment on the club green in Blackpool Newton Hall during the International Open, they parade their skills on a perfect surface – the portable rink.

Most outside observers feel that the top 16 are so much at home on the portable rink that they have an unfair advantage – and that theory seems to be borne out by the fact that the seeded (or ranked) players have a very high percentage of success against the in-form qualifiers.

KNOWING THEIR SURROUNDINGS

This success can be put down to a combination of factors. Perhaps they know every inch of the portable rink; perhaps they are now immune to the trappings of television, like the lights, the proximity of the spectators, the cameras, etc. – or perhaps they are genuinely better players.

Critics thought the top 16 might be found out when the World Bowls Tour opted to stage the International Open on the club green in Newton Hall, a building that once served as the winter quarters for the elephants from the famous Blackpool Circus.

Perhaps they did encounter difficulties there that they don't face on the portable rink. The Newton Hall rink was several metres longer than the portable rink, for instance, and, although it was reasonably true, the players said it was 'a bit of a push'.

But were they fazed? – Judge for yourself... Yes, as many as five stars – Stewart Anderson, Paul Foster, Greg Harlow, Robert Weale and Jason Greenslade – did make an early exit, but only five losers out of 16 is not that bad. Par for the course, you might say.

Yes, I know three unseeded players made it through to the quarter-finals, and Pat Briscoe was a revelation, but there was nothing to suggest that all you have to do is take the elite players off their preferred surface and they will be all at sea. The top 16 are not where they are for nothing. They are all quality players. Especially, it seems, the one-and-only Alex 'Tattie' Marshall.

NICE CHAPS

Moreover, I can vouch for the fact that they are all (or nearly all) nice guys; they are NOT a bunch of prima donnas, spoilt brats, pampered football-style Individuals or sporting hypochondriacs who are ready to carp and complain about everything under the sun.

They are grounded sportsmen, dedicated and professional, but also friendly and, for the most part, laid-back and comfortable in their own skins. The salt of the earth. Honestly.

But, you should have heard them at Potters this year! The excellent rink provided by Dales Sports was good enough for them to produce some of the most miraculous bowls ever witnessed – but they all agreed that it presented more problems than usual.

THE OCCASIONAL PROBLEM

Problems? – What problems? – Well, the speed of the carpet varied, from 'flying' to 'pushy', according to the time of day, the outside temperature, the size of the crowd, and whether the air-conditioning was switched on. It was never the same during the game as it had been during practise.

One by one, the legends of our sport – winners and loser alike – paraded themselves before the press after the game, and attempted to analyse what made the rink so changeable and unpredictable. They looked bewildered.

We were bewildered, too, when, after one cracking encounter, one player told us how the rink had speeded up uncontrollably during the game, whilst his opponent swore that it had got slower and slower. What were we supposed to make of that?

The lines were difficult to find, we were told. Give it an inch more 'grass', and it would run faster, an inch less and the bowl would pull up short. At first, the bowls were bending beautifully off a wide line, but, as the game wore on, the line to the jack became straighter, and wide bowls just hung.

And all this after the combatants had turned on a veritable exhibition of quality bowls that suggested there was nothing wrong with the rink at all!

Ladies and Gentleman of the Jury, I suggest that in the rarefied atmosphere of the World Bowls Tour, there is a tendency among the luminaries of our sport to think too much, and to over-analyse the playing conditions.

Remember, lads – right direction – right speed – and Bob's Your Uncle.

But, there again, I've never played for money and ranking points on the portable rink – so what do I know about it?