

October 23, 2005

## Bull's-Eye: TV's Next No-Limit Wager

By [JOE RHODES](#)

IF you had predicted two and a half years ago that the next great American sports television phenomenon - right up there with Nascar, figure skating and the "fitness personality" John Basedow - was going to be poker, lots of supposedly smart people would have laughed, pointed and called you names.

Of course, that was before the summer of 2003, with the Travel Channel's World Poker Tour and ESPN's edited-like-a-reality-show update of the World Series of Poker (with the perfectly-named Chris Moneymaker, a Walter Mitty in a baseball cap, winning the \$2.5 million jackpot). The combination turned Texas Hold 'Em into a national craze. Televised poker suddenly popped up on Bravo, Fox Sports and even NBC. Viewers, especially young, male, beer-drinking, truck-buying viewers, went, as they say at the tables, all in. And the ratings have shown no signs of diminishing.

Which leads to the inevitable question: If this is how millions of Americans, some of them not even drunk, want to spend their TV-sport-watching hours, what else might appeal to them? Bowling? Fishing? Professional full-contact shuffleboard?

Michael Davies, the executive producer who has made a fortune bringing British television properties like "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" and "Wife Swap" to America, thinks he may have the answer:

Darts.

"The last thing I'm going to do is run around town trying to tell anybody that darts is going to be the next poker," Mr. Davies said, in a recent telephone interview, "but darts had a lot to recommend it to American television. It fits into that intersection of American popular culture and sports and regular life, which poker has readily occupied. So there are some similarities."

Enough, apparently, that ESPN has signed a deal with Mr. Davies to broadcast a made-for-television darts championship next year as a World Series of Darts; there are to be eight hourlong episodes and the series is tentatively scheduled to begin in July. The invitational tournament will include the 16 top-ranked players in the world, most of whom live in Britain, and 32 Americans, who will be chosen through a series of regional qualifying tournaments. The top prize will be \$100,000. "Unless an American wins it," Mr. Davies said. "And then we'll add a zero. If an American wins, the prize will be \$1 million."

Mr. Davies said that the events would be held next spring at a casino location on the East Coast of the United States and broadcast next summer on ESPN with a format very much like that of the World Series of Poker.

"What makes poker work on television are the personalities, the players, their idiosyncrasies, their

conversations, their body language, their humor," said Mark Shapiro, ESPN's just-departed executive vice-president of programming, who authorized the deals for series. "And darts has many of the same built-in factors. So we're gonna roll the dice."

Televised darts is already a huge hit in England, where legends like the 12-time world champion Phil (The Power) Taylor, a former factory worker, and Andy (The Viking) Fordham, a 400-plus-pound saloon keeper, are as famous as the soccer heroes David Beckham and Michael Owen. Millions of British cable-TV subscribers ponied up £22 (about \$39) to see them battle it out in a crowded tavern last November, only to be disappointed when Mr. Fordham, who claimed to have drunk copious amounts of beer that day, collapsed and forfeited the match.

"These guys are characters, and that's one of the things that got ESPN very excited," Mr. Davies said. "They don't look so perfect. They've got strange regional accents and odd facial hair. They've lived a lot of life and they look like it. And they are also superb at what they do."

What they do is stand 7 feet 9¼ inches away from a woven-fiber dartboard positioned exactly 5 feet 8 inches above the floor and throw steel-tipped darts, three per turn, at specific spots on the board. The scoring is complicated - each player starts with 501 points and deducts from there, based on where the dart hits. For a player to get to zero, the final dart must be either a double number or a bull's-eye; reaching zero in nine throws makes for a perfect game.

Add in a frequently drunk crowd roaring in the background, carnival-barker announcers screaming out every point and thousands of dollars at stake, and you get a precise sport in an unruly atmosphere, the equivalent of [Tiger Woods](#) trying to sink a putt in the midst of an oncoming rush-hour crowd.

"There's an expression," Mr. Davies said, "that you can take darts out of the pub, but you can never take the pub out of darts. Like poker, it has that kind of underground feel to it. And it really, really works on television."

The televised matches in Britain, produced by Mr. Davies's partner Barry Hearn, are all about close-ups and crowd shots, the players' twitching fingers and unblinking eyes, the placard-waving supporters, the slow-motion replays, the almost hypnotic percussion of the tips hitting the board, thumping out rhythms, three at a time.

"There's something almost primeval about it," Mr. Davies said. "It was a sport developed by archers, getting ready to go to war. And it feels like something so simple that anyone should be able to do it. But doing it over and over again is harder than it looks."

Mr. Davies believes there is an untapped American audience for televised darts, an estimated 18 million amateur players who gather in local watering holes all over the country, play in community leagues, church recreation rooms and their own basements. Glenn Remick, president of the American Darters Association, who is attempting to put together his own professional darts league and televised national championship, agrees.

"There are hundreds of independent leagues in the country that just haven't been organized into a standardized national organization," Mr. Remick said. "There are millions of players out there. Part of our job is to go out and show people that darts is a fun and exciting sport, to help the general public understand that it's not just an excuse to drink beer in public."

Bob Chesterman, the senior coordinating producer for ESPN original entertainment, who oversees the World Series of Poker production team, concedes that the popularity of televised poker "was definitely lightning in a bottle, it's not likely to happen again."

"But darts has the potential to touch some of those same viewers," he said. "The everyman appeal is the same. You could see yourself sitting at that poker table and you can see yourself throwing those darts. For something to catch on, it has to have characters, stories and real competition, man against man. For our audience, that's the perfect equation. And darts has all of that."

Mr. Davies believes that as rights fees for major sporting events get higher and viewers have less time and inclination to sit through three-hour football and baseball games, alternative programming like poker and darts will inevitably occupy a larger percentage of the sports broadcasting universe.

"Televised sports were developed around the idea of carving out an entire evening to show a game," he said. "But in the future, distribution platforms are going to deal with much shorter content. You can dip in and out of a poker telecast in five-minute bits. People watch the reruns as much as the original broadcasts. Sports that people can watch for 2, 5 or 10 minutes will have a much greater possibility to reach more viewers. And that's what networks are going to be looking for."