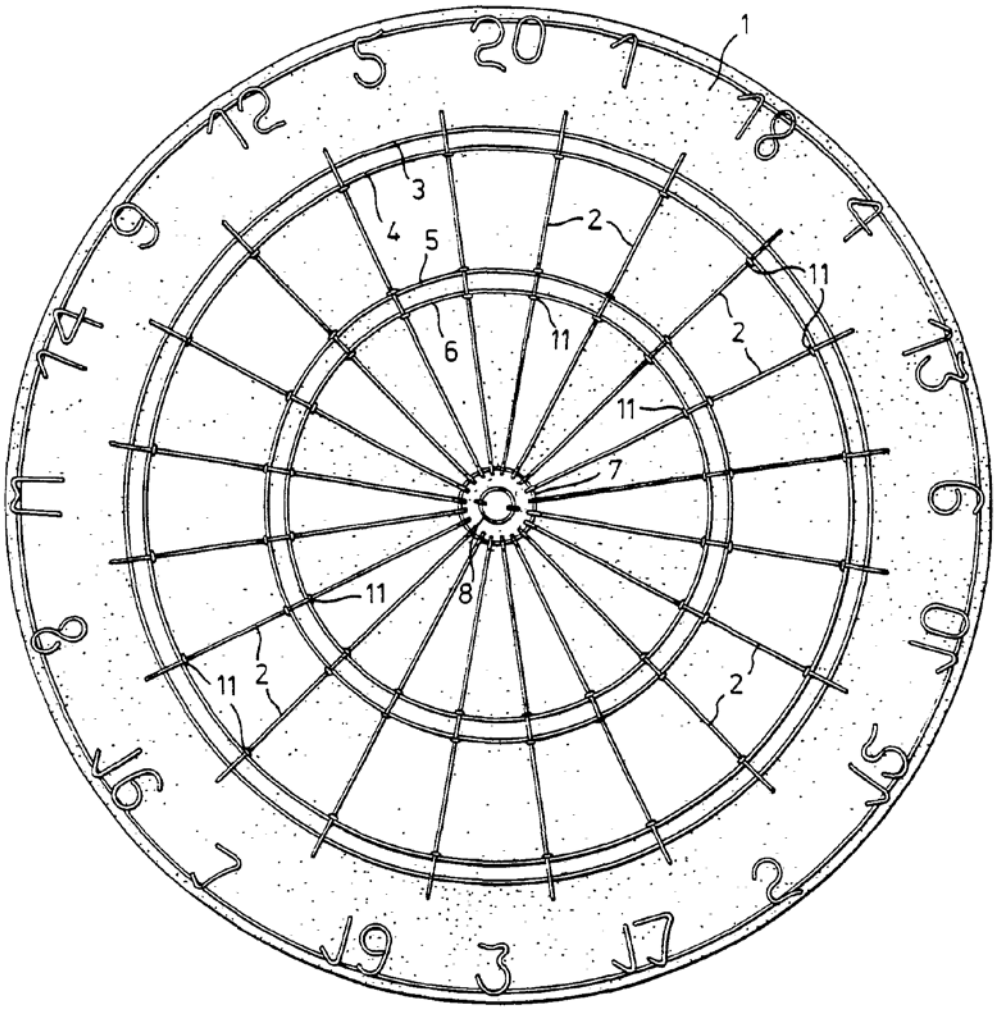
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All quotes are from renowned BBC darts commentator Sid Waddell (1940–2012), known as "The Voice of Darts," also known as "The Thief of Bad Gags" for his one-liners.

Cover image: from a successful patent filing by the Winmau Dartboard Company Limited, September 23, 1986, in which "One or both of two wires (2A, 3A, 4A, 5A, 6A) defining beds on a dartboard of compressed sisal fibres is/are notched on the side adjacent to the other at the point at which the wires cross-over, in order to enable them to lie closer to the face of the dartboard and to be better located thereon. The wires are of quadrilateral cross-section with one of the corners in contact with the sisal fibres so that the opposite corner is exposed to outcoming darts."

That was like throwing three pickled onions into a thimble!

The law in Britain has long held that in establishments where alcoholic beverages are sold one may place bets only on games of skill as opposed to games of chance. In 1908, Jim Garside of the Adelphi Inn in Leeds was hauled before a judge after allowing his punters to place bets on a game of darts. Garside enlisted the help of the local darts champion William "Bigfoot" Annakin to prove that darts was indeed a game of skill. Annakin demonstrated this by hitting any number on the board nominated by the court. Garside was discharged.

Darts has its roots in archery; the first dartboards were sliced from the trunks of trees with the rings offering a primitive scoring guide. One of the first games of war domesticated and brought inside a public house, darts is inextricably linked with the consumption of alcohol because darts is the quintessential pub game.

He may practice twelve hours a day, but he's not shy of the burger van!

Legally confirmed as a game of skill, darts nonetheless falls into that classificatory grey zone between a "sport" and a "game." A sport is generally agreed as being some kind of competitive physical activity governed by a set of rules. A game is, more broadly, merely a form of structured play. Both require skill (even games of chance) and a versification in the rules; both instigate artificial conflict resulting in a win-lose outcome often quantified by a numeric score.

So why is darts so difficult to classify? The answer has to do with whether or not you consider the game to be physical. Growing up in 1980s Britain, televised darts tournaments always seemed to be a channel-change away.

If you're round your auntie's tonight, tell her to stop making the cookies and come through to the living room and watch these two amazing athletes beat the proverbial house out of each other. The atmosphere is a cross between the Munich Beer Festival and the Coliseum when the Christians were on the menu.

These smoke-filled halls were presided over by eccentric commentators in

over-excited voices watching huge, demonstrably unfit (often obese) men with impassive pallid demeanors, dart poised in one hand and pint of beer in the other (for balance).

Darts monikers were always full of the promise of heroic endeavor: Adrian "the Conqueror" Grey, Andy "the Viking" Fordham, Brendan "the History Maker" Dolan, Daryl "the Dazzler" Fitton, Jamie "Bravedart" Harvey, John "Old Stoneface" Lowe, Mark "Top Banana" Holden, Les "McDanger" Wallace, Phil "the Power" Taylor. There are not one but two "icemen": Alan "Iceman" Warriner-Little and Gerwin "Iceman" Price. And my personal favorite, Tony "the Deadly Boomerang" David. The pneumatic beer belly on the player and the tiny piercing weapon in his hand always made for a comic contrast, but the real key was stillness. It seemed that the heavier they were, the more still they were — and so better able to hit that tiny slither of the board above the bulls-eye where one can score a triple 20.

Andy "the Viking" Fordham, before and after weight loss

In Britain, Darts was not officially classified as a sport until 2005, and it has yet to be recognized by the Olympics. But the physical mechanism necessary to be really good at it is the same as one finds in golf, basketball, shooting, ice hockey, tennis and football; it is a capability known as the *quiet eye.*

William Tell could take an apple off your head, Taylor could take out a processed pea.

The quiet eye is a perceptual skill necessary for accurate aim — a period of cognitive processing that occurs just before the physical act of throwing, kicking, or shooting your chosen projectile at your chosen target. In this moment, primed with potential energy, the brain calibrates the necessary combination of force, direction and velocity. Darts requires what is known as a "long quiet eye duration," because the focus is on such a small target. To hit it, hand-eye coordination must be incredibly precise. The dart thrower's ability to resist distraction in the moment of the throw — in that moment before the release of the dart when nothing must move — as though they have reached some still center of the turning world, impervious to all its pulls, existing in an instant of serenity of the psychomotor system, was/is the true skill test of darts' stone-faced heroes. The tension created by this cycle of stillness, throwing, and stabbing is electric and drives a good, well-inebriated darts crowd into a frenzy, while, paradoxically, the action witnessed is somehow so minimal as to be a drama of inaction.

Eat your heart out Harold Pinter, we've got drama with a capital D in Essex!

In order to be a good darts player, you have to achieve some kind of very pure psychological inertia. Like a cod-Buddhist you have to find a perfect inner silence. In a new field called "sports vision" that falls within the remit of sports psychologists, athletes are coached to tune out any internal verbalization, such as "Don't do X," and to replace it with an internal visualization — to focus the eyes and allow the body's controlled calibrations to fall unconsciously in-step with the line of sight. Players are encouraged to find a visual routine that will help them "be" in the moment. The psychologists of this "gaze behavior" talk about hard looks and soft looks, and in those few moments before the shot, previewing the successful throw one is about to perform, like a filmed moment of personal reification.

As Freud and Jung would no doubt agree, you can over-psych for a darts match.

A rather entertaining piece of scientific research conducted in 2008 by the Royal Society in London found that (non-professional) darts players

can boost their scores if they imagine themselves to be taking aim at someone they dislike. In fact, there is a long-standing precedent of using darts in psychological experiments to examine the mechanisms of so-called "magical thinking." A piece of research carried out by Rozin, Millman and Nemeroff in 1986 used darts in a study on "sympathetic magic," in particular the "law of similarity." This idea was in turn derived from research conducted around the beginning of the 20th century by Sir James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*) and Marcel Mauss (*A General Theory of Magic*) on the ritual practices that characterize many early belief systems. For Frazer and Mauss, the law of similarity holds that "the image equals the object," and therefore the action taken on an object affects similar objects. In the 1980s study, the participants were asked to throw darts at five different boards, one with the face of Hitler, one with JFK, one with the face of the experimenter, and two with blank faces onto which subjects were asked to project the faces of the people they most hated and most loved. The researchers observed a drop in accuracy of darts thrown at JFK and the loved face. This set-up was used again in 2007 by King, Burton, Hicks, and Drigotas in a study of features of irrational thinking, otherwise known as gut-feelings. They enlisted 208 participants and paid them for the accuracy of every dart thrown. At first, the subjects were asked to throw at a face-shaped circle. This was then changed to the face of a baby. The throwing accuracy dropped markedly.

They won't just have to play outta their skin to beat Phil Taylor. They'll have to play outta their essence!

Neither experiment actually proved that throwing darts at images one feels antithetical towards improves the motivation to hit the bulls-eye, but both showed that it is very difficult to follow through this conscious act of contained violence on an image one feels any level of attachment to, thus proving a simple quality of the magic of iconic images: that we have a gut-deep physical response to such images, as though they contain the essence of what they depict. The research also proved something about the quality of darts, as a sport that uses the quiet eye but nonetheless engages some overtly violent impulse with a greater psychological consequence than merely hitting a ball.

Magical thinking manifests directly in sport in the prevalence of

superstitious practices from prayer to lucky charms to repetitive behavior. This kind of supernatural causality has been found particularly common in high-stakes domains like politics, aviation and sports, in which there's a lot to lose. Facing the persistent reality that an outcome is unpredictable, a player may feel too many elements are beyond control, so they enlist the aid of "luck." Superstitious practices are about reclaiming the locus of control.

If Cliff gets back in this, it will be the greatest comeback since Lazarus.

But the high-stakes nature of any sport is also what compels the gambling mind. Gamblers are highly prone to magical thinking, because, unlike players, they have no control whatsoever on the outcome of play. Given these superstitious practices, one could make a knight's-move jump between sports-betting and divination. All good gamblers claim to be able to predict the future. Darts in particular resonates of divination; "belomancy" is the ancient act of divination by the use of feathered arrows practiced by the Babylonians, Greeks, Arabs and Scythians. It took many different forms but usually depended on observing how arrows fell or were inclined upon landing so as to indicate the answer to a question posed. A banal evocation of this could be found in the oft-toted phrase "That's darts!"—a presenter's familiar exclamation when something unexpected or extraordinary occurs in a match—as though magic were par for the course and should be factored into any expectation one might have about the game.

Bristow's effect on the audience is like Rasputin used to have on the birds a long time ago.

The dartboard is certainly well-primed for the numerologically inclined. There is even a space on the board to score a 666 (triple 6). Ask a question, don a blindfold, and see how the board answers. It has been done many times. The matter of the perfect dartboard, however, has fascinated mathematicians, enticed by its seeming irrationality. There have been numerous papers on the subject of how the board could be optimized to increase the probability of a high score. On a standard dartboard, the numbers 1–20 are arranged seemingly randomly, though there are 2,432,902,008,176,640,000 possible arrangements for these 20 slices

of target space. The logic behind the standard arrangement is actually to reduce the element of chance and increase a player's possibility of getting a low score when one aims for a high number and misses, so the number 20 is flanked by 1 and 5. The numbering is designed to encourage accuracy. If you are a poor player, it is better to aim at the left-hand side of the board as there is a greater density of high numbers there for you to hit fortuitously. In the wonderful world of macho slang that permeates the game like cheap 1970s cologne, this side of the board is called the "married man's side," because married men always play it safe. A "Wanker's Fifty" is the name for scoring 50 by hitting 20, 18, and 12 with your three darts, coined because poor players often score this when aiming for the triple 20.

The players are under so much duress, it's like Duressic Park out there.

But for the professional player, a Wanker's Fifty would be an embarrassment, as it is the preserve of half-drunk pub players, jibing with each other, hurling darts above the din. The gnomic impassivity of the professional player requires a meditative stillness, darts cast into a perfect void free of all distraction or desire, free of the conscious mind, ruled by the quiet eye and a (beer)gut-feeling. Darts sent hurtling over the "oche," puncture the magic numbers that will unlock their victory.

As Schaden said to Freude in a Bierkeller — there's a difference between respect and fear.

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