

SCOTTISH BILLIARDS: NEW NAME ON TROPHY

The final of the 2017 Scottish Amateur Billiards Championship took place in the historic setting of the Corn Exchange's Billiards Room at the week-end. A new name was guaranteed to be engraved on the majestic trophy, the finalists Alan Shepherd from Fife and Paul Whelan from Dumfries & Galloway having, both by the narrowest of margins, defeated the No 1 and 2 seeds in the semi-finals, Paul McGowan and the 29 times previous champion, Dave Sneddon.

The final was a two hour timed match with a short interval and was officiated by the Scottish Billiards and Snooker Association's top referee Colin Whitelaw from Edinburgh.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it took some time for both players to settle and whilst the scoring in the opening hour was not breathtaking, it was Shepherd who had the better of the opening exchanges which saw the Fife player move into a 30 point lead. Whelan then recovered well, which included a couple of well executed long 'jennies' (a difficult but eye catching billiards shot) , to not only claw back the deficit but move into a 30 point lead himself. Leading up to the midsession break, it was Shepherd who again exerted his authority through a good display of losing hazards, which included a series of nine 'in-offs' into the middle pockets using the red ball, the resulting 46 break giving him a well deserved 185-130 point interval lead.

Following the short break it was Shepherd who continued to impress and, aided by a 32 break, increased his advantage to some 91 points, the Fife player now in the ascendancy with 45 minutes of the contest remaining. At this point Whelan needed something to happen and when an opportunity arose the Annan player grasped it, his 37 point break which was soon followed by an important 25 break, bringing him back into the match. With 17 minutes remaining the lead had been reduced to 22 points in Shepherd's favour. A foul from Whelan with ball in hand and then a subsequent enormous 'kick' didn't help his cause, allowing Shepherd to add the small, but vital at this stage, tally of 14 points which took his lead back up to a relative healthy 36 points with 10 minutes remaining.

Whelan immediately countered and when a massive fluke allowed his break of 18 to ultimately extend to 27 the resulting 9 point differential now made it anyone's match. With the clock ticking down, the lead then passed to Whelan, albeit by a sole point; the spectators then witnessing the lead exchanging between the players no less than 3 times! At this stage it was looking like the contest could finish as it had in the 2014 final which saw the late Hugh Eldon defeat his friend Dave Sneddon by the margin of 1 point! To say that the final few minutes were nail biting, both for players and spectators, is an understatement. With Shepherd taking a 1 point lead with less than 2 minutes remaining but his opponent at the table the match then turned, Whelan making the strategic decision to double baulk his opponent on two occasions when continuation of open play was available, albeit difficult. This proved to be the correct choice and the resulting points saw him with a 19 point advantage when time was called!; the final score 332-313.

Whilst both players would readily admit that the standard of play fell short of their norm, and certainly below their respective displays in the semi finals, this was never the less an intriguing final which could easily have seen either player win, the long standing memory of which will be the closing ten minute exchange; a denouement fitting of this prestigious championship.