



NEXT DOOR, an army of workers in hard hats is hammering away at the finishing touches to Wembley Stadium – capacity 90,000 raucous football fans. But here at Wembley Arena, in the shadow of its new neighbour, 2000 far more sedate spectators are huddled together in darkness around a snooker table fixed in a spotlight. As winter rages outside and icy winds lash London, the world's top 16 players are turning up the heat at the 2007 Snooker Masters.

The stage is set for seven days of dramatic competition. The cast list reads like a who's who of world snooker. There's the reigning Masters champion and No. 1 seed, John Higgins, who's dressed to kill and licensed to thrill in a black bow-tie and waistcoat. The sharp-shooting Scot looks as slick as James Bond, but uses a cue rather than a Walther PPK to hunt down his target, a maximum break of 147 – although the effects on his adversaries are just as deadly.

Co-star and second favourite is Graeme Dott, another Scot. Two years ago, sick of his sport, the pint-sized "Pocket Dynamo"

was seen snapping his cue at a petrol station, but \$500,000 for winning last year's world title was enough to buy some superglue. Often criticised for his sluggish, tactical play, Dott won that world crown in an epic performance which dragged on past midnight. It was a bit like a Shakespearian tragedy. Maybe that's why they hold the World Championship at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre, in the north of England.

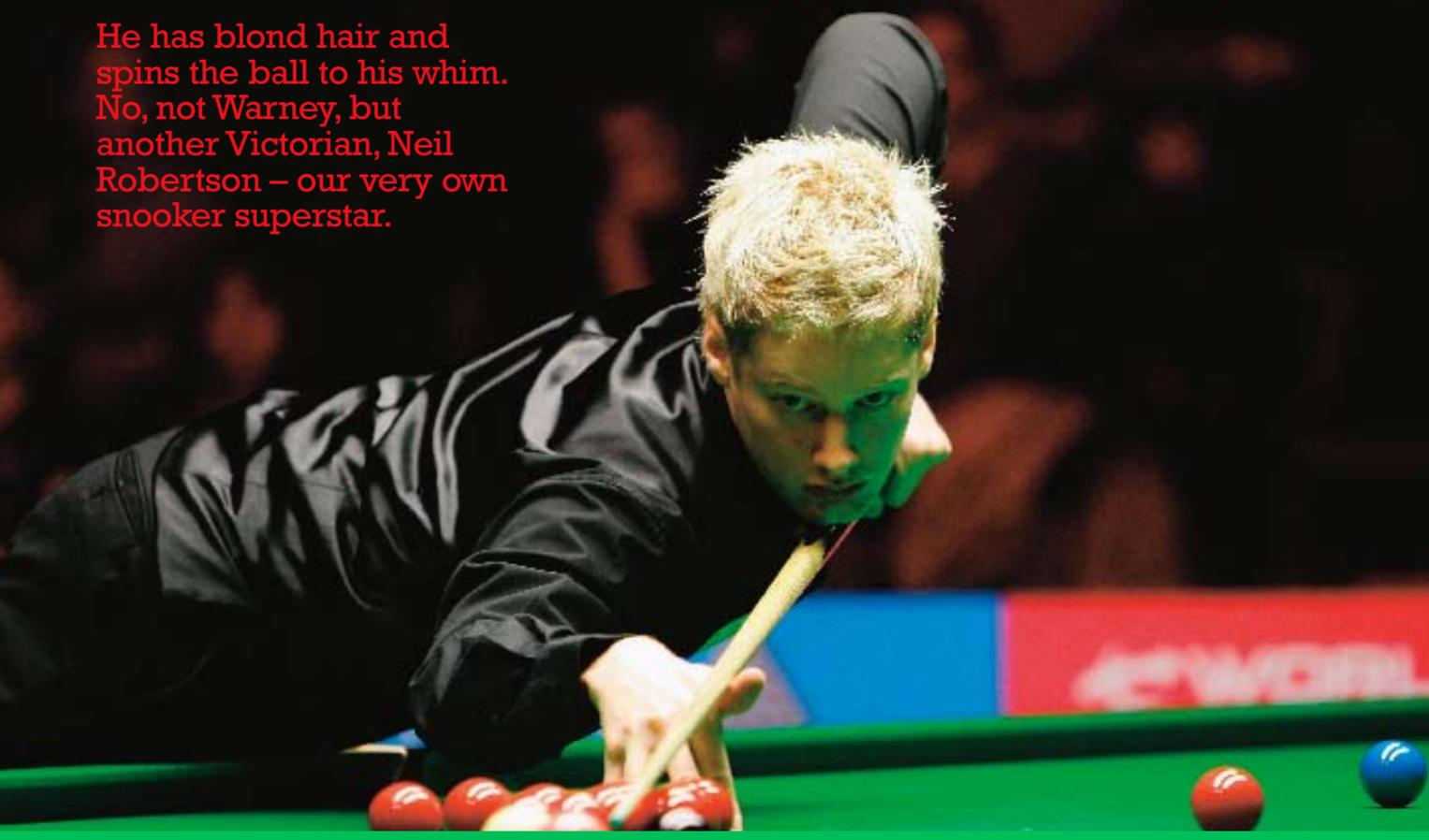
Also treading the boards is Stephen Hendry MBE, the suave Zen master of snooker who, when not hypnotising his opponents at the table, sits coolly in his ▶

CUE ACTION

BY CHRIS HARRISON
PHOTOS BY JULIAN FINNEY / GETTY IMAGES

PRO SNOOKER IS A GAME FOR CANNON-FIRE STICKMEN AND BAD BOYS. NEIL ROBERTSON IS THE LATEST HOT-SHOT FROM DOWN UNDER TO JOIN ITS RANKS.

He has blond hair and spins the ball to his whim. No, not Warney, but another Victorian, Neil Robertson – our very own snooker superstar.



corner sipping water like it's vodka. He dominated snooker throughout the 1990s, when tobacco sponsorship was yet to be extinguished and the prize money was smokin'. With seven world titles and 700 century breaks to his name, Hendry's the most prolific winner in the history of the sport, and has amassed \$20 million in prize money.

Six-time world champion Steve "Interesting" Davis is also top of the bill at snooker's richest invitational event, which marks the half-way point in a season running from August to May. A living legend of the sport who has won over 70 tournaments, he's still wielding his magic wand aged 49 ... and still looking like a schoolboy truant.

Supporting actors include the '05 world champ, Shaun Murphy, whose mascot is a teddy bear in a Superman costume. Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it was a Christmas present from his wife. Waiting in the wings are Peter Ebdon and Ken Doherty, both former world champs and both in with a shot of snaring the silverware. Among the understudies are Glasgow's rough-and-ready Stephen Maguire, who keeps baby sharks in his bedroom, and Ali Carter, who's training to fly 747s in case 147s prove hard to come by. Lesser lights include Anthony Hamilton, aka "The Sheriff of Pottingham", and the colour-blind world No. 10, Stephen Lee. Apparently, only the reds and the brown pose a problem.

Though only a wildcard for the event, teenage Chinese sensation Ding Junhui looks

likely to play more than just a cameo role. The Jackie Chan fan is tipped by experts to become a multiple world champion, and has already made off with some loot by blasting a maximum in the Masters' opening round, pocketing all the balls and \$60,000 – not bad for 15 minutes' work. He's only the second player in the history of the tournament to achieve the holy grail of break building: 15 reds, 15 blacks and then all the colours.

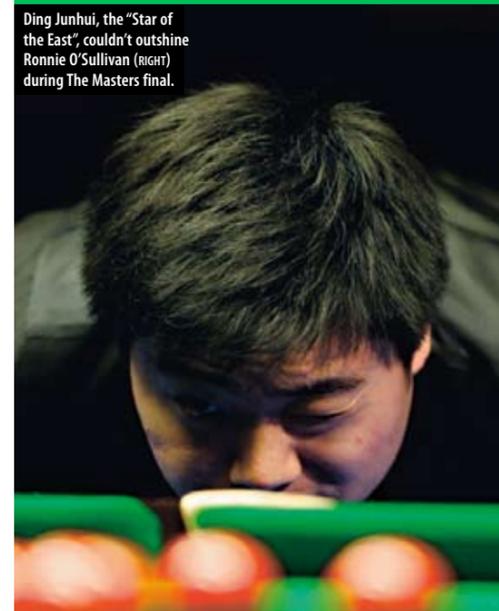
Get the impression the sport is dominated by Brits? Wrong. There's a new kid on the block. From Down Under no less. With painstakingly preened bleached blond hair, he can spin, swerve and slide the ball to his whim. No, not Warney, but another Victorian, Neil Robertson – our very own snooker superstar cueing up to become world champ.

Not since the days of Eddie Charlton (Mr Snooker to you) has Australia had a genuine world crown contender. But they played a different game back in Steady Eddie's era. Same rules, of course, but conservative safety is now the approach of also-rans. Robertson, 24, dubbed "The Melbourne Machine", is part of snooker's exciting new elite – players who smite length-of-the-table drives the likes of which Charlton would've never attempted. The high school drop-out and former under-21 world champ has already amassed around \$500,000 in prize money. Who says hanging around pool halls leads nowhere?

At the '06 British Grand Prix in Scotland,

Robertson, an aggressive left-hander, became the first Aussie to win a world ranking event. Maybe that's why he looks like Warney – he too is showing the Poms how to play a sport they invented. However, despite his historic win at his first pro-tour final (over a Brit called Jamie Cope, who obviously couldn't), Robertson's most memorable victory to date took place in the quarter-final of the same event, when he composed the demise of Ronnie "The Rocket" O'Sullivan – a two-time world champ and the best natural talent to ever grace the baize.

Ding Junhui, the "Star of the East", couldn't outshine Ronnie O'Sullivan (RIGHT) during The Masters final.



Robertson, dubbed "The Melbourne Machine", is part of snooker's new elite and has already won \$500,000. Who says hanging around pool halls leads nowhere?

Snooker's best has gathered at Wembley, but the star of the show will be rough-spoken O'Sullivan ... if he turns up. Provoking yet another scandal in a career of dramatic highs and desperate lows, during his previous tournament (the UK Championship), he abandoned his quarter-final while 4-1 down in a 19-frame best-of encounter with Hendry, his archrival.

Why? He missed a red. Just the one ... but one was enough. "Anyone who knows me knows I'm a perfectionist," said O'Sullivan, explaining the cricket equivalent of Glenn McGrath bowling a wide during his first over and turning his back on an entire series.

It wasn't the first time "The Rocket" had blasted off. His virtuoso performances, both on and off the table, have kept him in the headlines. A sufferer of clinical depression (compounded by the fact his old man's in the slammer for murder), snooker's most controversial character has found it tough to stay focused on a sport that demands mental rather than physical fitness. Taking *Pot Black* literally, he was stripped of the Irish Masters crown after testing positive for cannabis, and was dealt a two-year suspended sentence for assaulting a snooker official. Yet fans adore the prodigious ambidextrous potter who once decided to play a match left-handed and still ▶



TOP TO BOTTOM Budding pilot Ali Carter's game didn't take off at The Masters; Steve Davis, not looking very interested; Stephen Lee, trying to tell the brown from the reds.





Unlike the late Bill Werbeniuk, at least O'Sullivan does his drinking away from the table. **BELOW RIGHT** Stephen Hendry, the greatest of all time.

won 10-3. His humiliated opponent refused to shake either of O'Sullivan's mitts.

Mild-mannered Robertson has steered clear of scandal, but then it's hard to go off the rails when you're practising six hours a day. The boy in the bow-tie rents unglamorous digs in the car park of a snooker centre in Cambridge (80km north of London), and sends footage of his matches home to his father, who then coaches his charge over the phone. This unorthodox approach has somehow secured Robertson a most orthodox cueing action. Elbow straight, gently back ... then *POW!*

Having blasted like a bullet into the top 16, Robertson's marched on England's capital hoping to steal snooker's crown jewels. His first round stoush is against two-time world and Masters champion Mark Williams, the No. 8 seed. Announced by the MC, Robertson receives a surprisingly warm welcome from a bunch of Brits reeling from an Ashes whitewash and loath to applaud anything Australian. Then again, his opponent *is* Welsh.

Williams splits the red pyramid and returns to his seat, from where he watches the remainder of the first-to-six-frame match.

"Robertson's got the game for the modern age: aggressive potting." – Clive Everton, BBC snooker commentator.

A surfie in a suit, Robertson strides to the table and eyes an audacious long pot, something Charlton and Co. would never have tackled. The crowd is still. So is Robertson – poised like a panther waiting to pounce. He's not going to try his luck, surely? Elbow straight, gently back ... then *POW!* Applause erupts as the red disappears into a pocket. One down, 14 to go. After a little over ten minutes, there's not a ball left on the table.

Seemingly oblivious to the imposing TV cameras, a nerveless Robertson charges through the second frame as fluently as the first. Earpieces tuned in to the commentary box afford the crowd expert analysis of the demolition performed by the boy from Oz.

"Robertson's got the game for the modern age," says Clive Everton, the soft voice of snooker on the BBC. "It's become more of an aggressive potting game, and if you've got that you can learn the rest."

Steve Davis agrees: "Years ago, you erred on the side of caution, but you can't do that now and win. Robertson has an air of assuredness when he's at the table. The thrill of competition is clearly entertaining him."

The same cannot be said for Williams – the veteran being taught a lesson by snooker's sparkling new star. Robertson's thirst for taking on improbable pots is leaving the Welshman little to do other than add ice cubes to his drink. What a civilised sport; players even get an ice bucket and a pair of tongs. But the atmosphere is anything but that of a party – the silence is so absolute that you can almost hear the players' brains churning through their shot selections.

Despite Robertson going potty at the table, silence and darkness are a recipe for sleep. The sound of snooker can get soporific, and several spectators have nodded off. The powers that be have debated how to sharpen their sport, or at least make it as colourful as the balls. Ideas have included shot clocks to give slow players the hurry-up, different coloured fabrics on the tables and black spots on cue balls to show spin. My idea is to double the value of balls sinking into certain pockets, either that or bring back Lianne Crofts, the streaker who set the '97 Masters alight. She'd soon wake people up.

Robertson races to a 5-0 lead. Williams is a mere spectator, though a spectator in the spotlight – the loneliest seat in snooker.

"That's the hardest thing about the game," says Robertson. "When your opponent is at the table and playing well, there's nothing you can do about it. You can hardly do a thing wrong and still be beaten. That's why a lot of commentators say that snooker is the hardest sport in the world."

In just under 90 minutes (the shortest match of the tournament), Robertson seals it 6-0. Another Aussie whitewash. If they'd been playing pub rules, Williams would've had to drop his strides and do a lap of the table.

"Just like the Ashes, eh boys?" baits Robertson at the post-match press conference, before racing off to the plush players' lounge to meet his new girlfriend, Chelsey, who shares the pronunciation of her name with Robertson's adopted football team in the absence of his beloved Collingwood.

Snooker's strength is its depth of talent.

In the lead-up to the Masters, each tournament of the current season was won by a different player, with underdogs often snatching the biggest bones. The early rounds of The Masters proved to be no exception, with the top seeds tumbling out. Higgins, Dott, Davis – all sent packing. James Bond had his licence revoked, while Superman Murphy only managed one sequel, crashing out in the second round. But bookies' favourite Ronnie

O'Sullivan was too stubborn to follow trends.

Raising yet another stir, he's been refusing to fulfil his media obligations in protest against what he believes to be his unfair treatment by the press over his walkout at the UK Championship. Instead, he's been letting his cue do the talking, breezing through his first-round bout against Carter – who might need that flying job after all. He then dispatched Dubliner Ken Doherty, who suffered a case of Murphy's Law in the penultimate frame when a routine red kicked and forgot the password to the pocket. After that, O'Sullivan went ballistic, firing off an effortless century break to blast his way into the semi-finals.

O'Sullivan won't win as many titles as other snooker greats. Inward demons and outward dramas will see to that. But few who know a thing or two about the game deny that he's the greatest player ever to chalk a cue.

"The word genius is banded about too easily these days," says Dennis Taylor, a former world champion and commentator. "We've seen a lot of great players over the years, but Ronnie O'Sullivan is the only one that I'd use the word genius to describe."

Nicknames abound in this sport. O'Sullivan has several. But the one that's stuck is "The Bad Boy of Snooker", a moniker he's shared with many other capricious cue-men, including Australia's Quinten Hann. At the '04 World Champs, Hann almost came to blows with an opponent during a match, and later organised a more official fight with a rival player in the boxing ring, an event dubbed Pot Whack. In '05, the former world No. 14 was banned for eight years after being found guilty of intending to fix a match at the China Open, ending a career dogged by rape and assault allegations. (He now plays pro pool.)

But perhaps the most infamous snooker player of all time was the Belfast-born player



Alex "Hurricane" Higgins. Before snooker lost its pub-sport profile, the womanising world champ used to drink and smoke between shots like he was at a mate's barbie. But just like O'Sullivan, he was pure box office. He once head-butted a tournament official when asked to provide a urine sample, threatened to have his World Cup team-mate Dennis Taylor shot and punched a tournament director in the face.

Back at Wembley Arena and Robertson is preferring to maul his opponents *on* rather than *off* the table. In his quarter-final battle with Stephen Maguire, he's attempting to continue his blitzkrieg approach. But Maguire has also been potting well. Not one to mince his words, the cocky Scot has threatened to "smack Neil's arse" in their encounter. It's just banter. The pair are mates. Well, until the man with the white gloves announces in a serious tone: "Frame one. Stephen Maguire to break." The fun then turns formal. A semi-final showdown with O'Sullivan is at stake.

A firecracker start. Robertson rolls in a century break and the crowd prepares for yet another Aussie whitewash. But then Robertson's gun sight strays off target. Several brazen misses hand the Scot a smorgasbord of likely balls, and Maguire punishes the errors to take the match 6-2. Later, a less chirpy Robertson explained his early exit, saying: "After winning 6-0 against Mark Williams, I thought I was going to carry on. I tried to blow him away. It's a learning curve. I've gotta be more patient. I attacked too much when I should have played safe."

Perhaps the game hasn't changed that much after all, and a touch of Steady Eddie in Robertson's armoury wouldn't go astray.

The press are still on O'Sullivan's back, and he's still ignoring them. A man on a mission, he sees off Maguire in an error-prone semi, but winning ugly is the key to tournament success. Victory sets up a ding-dong final against Junhui – the wildcard gone wild. After upstaging Peter Ebdon and Stephen Lee, the Chinese boy wonder made light work of Hendry in their one-sided semi.

In a mesmerising display, O'Sullivan thunders in four century breaks and wins ten of the final 11 frames. The pockets are like buckets. Junhui fights off tears. He's not playing badly, but O'Sullivan's robotic skill is keeping him in his seat. With one frame remaining, O'Sullivan has to convince his distraught opponent not to leave the arena and to take his beating like a man. Given his own recent walkout, the irony isn't lost on the crowd. Junhui is shaken. The audience is stirred. No-one's nodding off today. Snooker's bad boy is clearly doing the game good.

This year, they should've removed the "s" from the end of the tournament's name. At the '06 Masters, there was only one master. ■

After The Master, Robertson went on to blitz Hendry, O'Sullivan and Davis to win the Welsh Open, his second world ranking tournament this season.

"My name is Higgins, John Higgins" – the '06 Masters winner. **BELOW** Junhui looking shaken and stirred during the '07 final.



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