

American Baseball Dart Association (A.B.D.A.)

Contribution by George Haines

The A.B.D.A. spun off from the Pennsylvania State Dart Tournament which is the largest American Dart Tournament and has been around for almost forty years now. There was no sanctioning body for American Darts so you could go from town to town and you find the line is different, everything is different.

It covers all of American Darts, which isn't a huge geography. It covers eastern and central Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and a little bit of New York. That's about it, it doesn't go much beyond that as far as organized leagues go certainly.

It's kind of hard to say how many members shoot in leagues. Leagues vary from 60 members to 120 members, that's based on 16 teams as a maximum, most leagues are not that big. There's a lot of variance on how many members are on a team. There are three or four or five or six, but five is the most popular. I keep an eye on about 25 American Dart Leagues myself. I'm sure there are many more than that so probably 2500 to 5000 members now play organized American Darts.

Well, if you can get them young enough and interested enough they should play until they die. A lot of the players are those who've been around for a while. The younger players are more interested in bells and whistles. Electronic darts, perhaps. Not that there's anything wrong with that, darts is darts. Our game is kind of looked at as an old fashioned game. You know, it's a skill game. I would say that older players are some of the better players, not that all the best players are older, because as you get older your skills sort of go away a little and the younger players, you know the thirties guys, thirty - thirty five maybe are generally still the top players and they still are in the American game. Johnny Kuczynski and Darin Young, they shoot in the same league, upstate American Darts. They shoot every Thursday in the North Side Dart League. I mean they're the top two players and average fifty or better every year and that's about as good as it gets. I'm sure you know that. I mean, I don't care how far back you go, not too many players could average, in league play (not tournament play now) fifty or better. Your better member is the guy who's been around for a while, you know, younger guys come and go. Their jobs move them around. It's pretty much a local game.

Not very many women play. We do have women who play but some leagues just don't allow women to play in their league, it's in the by-laws, it'll say right in the by-laws it's a men's dart league. I'm saying leagues are all different. There's social leagues and there you're going to have more women, there's handicapped leagues, there's open leagues that are, you know, very competitive. Maybe they have a cap on the average for the team so you're not really giving points or getting points, you're trying to balance the team to at least hold them down to a level of play where a particular team isn't going to run away with it every year.

Johnny K and Darin Young, to my knowledge, I don't think they play any leagues other than American Darts. They may have played some electronic darts, because it was available. Up in their area you will find very few dart bars with a bristle board. They practice and can go to Richie's where there's a bristle board because the locals (many of them) compete at the British Style tournaments that are easy to travel to. There's the Ray Chesney and Virginia Beach, and of course Johnny and Darin, they travel all over the world. In upstate PA you find American Darts primarily and maybe find electronic darts up there where Jerry Umberger pushed them a few years back. I would say Johnny and Darin probably play a little electronic but they play American every Thursday in the North Side Dart League.

Like most organizations, the leagues have one or two guys who do all the work. They may have a President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Statistician. You know that's your basic, but mostly one or two guys do all that work. And that's usually what happens. The statistician keeps track of who shot, how many games they shot, what their average is for the year, things like that.

There's usually some money involved. Somehow some way they all have their ways of collecting money, either from the shooters directly or from the establishments where darts are being held or most likely a combination of the two. And, of course, the establishments are benefiting financially because they get a dozen guys or so in their establishments who other wise wouldn't be there. The amount they collect depends on how lavish an affair they are looking for at the end of the year. Some will have a simple banquet or picnic. There are trophies, some have cash prizes, for top high game, top high triple, that sort of thing. But then some leagues have a lavish banquet (phone rings). Excuse me I have answer the phone.

[Johnny K, how are you? Guess who's sitting here with me right now? George Silberzahn. He wrote that book "How to Master The Sport of Darts," yea, yea, you've seen him down at the Ray Chesney I'm sure. He's sitting here interviewing me about American Darts, the leagues. No. Yea, you should get it today or tomorrow. Two O'clock? OK, now you know what it's for, that's me. Specialty. I didn't put a note in there or anything. Yea, yea, yea, OK. He cut his teeth on American Darts. Oh, yea. I was just telling him you shoot every Thursday in the North Side League. Do you shoot electronic darts somewhere? Occasionally, or you still do? At the Towers right? OK. There's no organized bristle boards up there, right? Not that I know of. You all go over to Richie's or you go home to shoot, right? You go to a tournament to shoot bristle right? So your skill level comes from where? You know right where it comes from, absolutely, here tell him.]

Hi Johnny K. Congratulations on your shooting. Ah, I think I know the answer to this but I need you to tell me. Where does your skill level come from, how did you get to it? That's what I thought. Uh huh, I understand that. Can you speak for Darin about this? You both have the same background, right. OK, that's terrific, I won't hold you up any more. Thanks very much. You need talk to George Haines again? OK, hang on.

OK Johnny, hey, good luck in Vegas next week. You'll qualify. Bear down, OK, have a good one, right, see you now.

He has to go out to Vegas Sunday to qualify. He didn't get a free ride this year.

I read in your book, and you're absolutely right, in American Darts there's no strategy to it, at all. It's repetition, it's all offense. And the good thing is, you can tell if you're getting better, strictly by the numbers, 'cause you can't beat anybody any other way. It's just the more points you score, the higher your average will be. Obviously Johnny K's skill level comes from American Darts. He's played since he was a kid, his dad taught him and his brother, and when he got older his dad would take him to the fire house. You know, he got to playing with the guys, he couldn't shoot in the league at first, you had to be 21 in order to shoot because they generally serve alcohol at these establishments. Then when he got to be 21 he joined the league and he was pretty good right out of the blocks.

Some others who came out of there were Jerry Umberger, Jim Watkins and Rick Nye. Rick shot in our A.B.D.A. tournament last year. The first time I met Jerry was at the PA State Dart Tournament. He was the player I was supposed to cover. I didn't know who he was, really, and I was shooting one of my better games, 'cause I wasn't intimidated, I just didn't know who he was. Then finally somebody said, you know who you're covering here, Jerry Umberger. I said, who's he and they said well, he's the winningest active professional dart player in the world right now. Our world wasn't really the whole world, of course, just America and mostly American darts. I think he only beat me by one dart the first game then I fell off to my normal kind of average after that.

I think the rules the leagues use are mostly several pages long and are all a little different. They involve how many players on a team, who's allowed to shoot, some leagues prohibit out of town shooters, even women you know, they draw all kinds of barriers. I'm not sure why, well I do know why, they don't want somebody coming in from out of town and taking their trophies and money, it's that simple. But then there's other leagues that encourage that and because they do they get the best players. The one thing that holds true, no matter what, in American Darts the better players want to be together. Invariably that ends up with power house teams that crush every body and that's not fun either, even for them. They don't want to go out week after week and just crush everybody and win, win, win. See, as an example the North Side Dart League put caps on the average. You can't put Johnny K, Darin Young, Eddie Shoepe, Chris Kuehn, and Mark Wuerstle all on the same team. You're just going to kill everybody. So, lets put a cap on the average, I think they use 210 points for five guys, that's forty two, forty three a man. Darin and Johnny know, if they don't shoot fifty or better on Thursday night, in all probability they're team is going to loose. It's not a big league, there's only about eight teams, I think, but it's a very competitive league and it produces a lot of good averages.

There are three brands of American Darts that are used and it gets to be a geographic thing. Up in the north part of the state they use Widdy darts, the Bethlehem City League shoots Apex, then there's other leagues that shoot the Darto dart that's a little heavier with bigger feathers that seems to easier to throw. The barrels are made of wood instead

of some exotic metal. They're carnival darts, that's really what they are. They are not the most precise dart. That's where the skill comes from. If you take an American Dart player and you put precision darts in their hands they can really produce. They're used to throwing a very light dart that is kind of touchy. The Apex #1 Dart is only about 12 to 13 grams, Widdy weighs 13 to 14 grams, and the Darto is 14 ½ grams.

The dart board is made from end grain bass wood assembled in a butcher block fashion. It is the softest of the true hardwoods. I've done a little research because I have interest in the game. It has this ability to heal itself. It gets full of holes and gets better, to a point, then it will begin to deteriorate. An American dart board should last the average player a life time at home. I don't use a potato here in the shop. (I do in competition!) A potato makes the darts stick better but there is nothing exotic in a potato by the way, it just makes the dart point wet so it penetrates the wood better and gives it better grip.

American dart leagues used to be a city game and most of the equipment is still manufactured in Philly. But you don't find so many American dart boards in the city anymore. The English darts came along in the seventies and took over, because the players were good, they had a skill level that put them at the top immediately. English darts took over the city, and of course, people also moved out of the city to the suburbs. So American Darts moved out of the city into the suburbs and country areas like the Hazelton and Freeland area, the coal regions were always good places to find American Darts. There was a lot of unemployment up there and a lot of these guys had time on their hands and this was a way they could have fun and not cost them very much money. This produced a number of quality players in that neck of the woods. Good competition leads to a good depth of better players.

That depth of talent led to the rise of top players like Johnny Bobby, Camy Melchiorre, and Jerry Umberger. More top shots like Lee Bredbenner, Pete "Primrose" Polinsky, Charlie Mateyak. They were just the best of their day. Some of them crossed over into the English game but most of them didn't and they were some of the best dart players ever, but nobody knows who they are unless you play American Darts.

The game we play is, well that's where the name comes from, baseball. We play one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight and nine, in that order. There's no defense, make as many points as you can with three darts. The triple ring is on the outside of the board, which is the double in the English game, and one reason for our success in the English game is we (American Dart shooters) are not afraid to go after that outer ring. The idea is to shoot for the red, that's our double and it's next to the triple and about twice as wide as the triple and it's your biggest scoring area. It only gets two but if you miss a bit and it hits the triple that's a good thing. If you're trip hunting and you're not getting them you're not going to score very well. And of course if you hit inside the double you only get one. Unless you quit or pass out (I've seen it happen!), you get 27 darts every game and the average comes from the score from your twenty seven darts. There may be a mental advantage to going first or last because some like to know what they need to make so there might be an advantage to taking the hammer. We shoot cork at tournaments to get choice of going first or second. Sometimes going first isn't a bad deal either because you get to

put pressure on. But both competitors get twenty seven darts so it's not like playing 501 where going first is a clear (at least three darts) advantage.

The A.B.D.A. is trying to attract more leagues to participate. We talked about geography, where the game is played. We found the Lehigh Valley area turns out to be a good location to hold our national tournament (run by Keith Bauer) because it doesn't cause too much travel but we haven't attracted players from Maryland, because I just they don't come up to PA. They don't come up here and we don't go down there. If we could get a Qualifier Tournament in MD it would add something to our National Finals. A team could say that because they won their division they got their way paid into the A.B.D.A. National Tournament. That might give them extra incentive to come up and compete.

There are generally five players on a team although I've seen as many as six and as few as three or four. That's where the A.B.D.A. comes in. If you start looking at team averages in the newspaper and see really high ones you may find there are six players (instead of five) on a team and that's misleading.

I have some old records. A few years back we were trying to determine who was the oldest American Dart League and the Delco Dart League claims they are the oldest and I was not able to disprove that. The Bux-Mont Dart League and Delco Dart League both started around the same time but they have records that show they started in 1948 or 1949 and we don't.

We have a "Wall of Fame" that was started with the PA State Tournament and is named after it's founder Michael "Shakes" Lozinak. It's an open tournament, any three players can get together and enter it, only a handful of them have a snow ball's chance in hell of winning it. And we all know that. Now how many other competitions are there where you can compete with the very best, side by side, you know for a couple of bucks. You go to test yourself.

The center of our cork is 63" from the floor. The line, now you get to where we're trying to standardize from league to league. The standard was set about 35 years ago by the PA State Dart Tournament and we picked up on what States uses - seven feet three inches from the FACE OF THE BOARD - NOT from the wall. Not all walls are straight or floors level. So we decided we could also use the hypotenuse from the cork more accurately and conveniently. It's actually one hundred seven and one half inches and there is the line. Some may have a seven foot line, I've even heard of a six foot nine line. That's what divided up the Delco league. We toe this line. The oche is a toe board. We have a curved toe line, and why I've no idea but we've been doing it that way for years. It's based off the cork and we only shoot the cork to see who starts the game. You will find straight lines in some places.

The A.B.D.A. is a hobby for me. I manufacture radio frequency identification devices that people with dementia wear to keep help track of them and keep them in a safe area. Darts is a labor of love for me. I take care of the A.B.D.A. web site.

The best thing about the dart leagues is, it's a social thing. It's quite a mix of people. It's primarily a blue collar game but you have quite a number of professional people, you know, who play in the league. It's a down to earth game. Back in the day it was probably popular because you don't have to subtract numbers and all that stuff.

Start with zero and work up that's all there is to scoring. Forty is sort of a magic number for an average to demonstrate proficiency. If a player is even a thirty five average or better they'd probably be in the top fifteen percent or so of all the players who play the game. That leaves a huge number of people who are below that and they are the players who make up most of the leagues. I think the better dart players don't quite get that. The Hazelton Dart League had twenty eight team when I started to shoot. And that was only six or seven or eight years ago. They had three skill levels: A, B, and C. There were only, really, a couple of teams at the A skill level and over half of the rest of them were in the C level, but they decided, since the North Side Dart League was doing so well with the 210 cap, to have a 195 cap. Well they just threw all the C teams away. There was no way they could even come close, so all of a sudden there wasn't any purpose, except to come out and drink beer. So all of a sudden that league went down to 12 or 13 teams and it never recovered. That's a shame.

The A.B.D.A. was a little bit of a different twist and the fella who started the tournament (John Petrick) and a small group of players created three divisions of play. Division A is capped at 130 for three players, B is capped at 110 points, C is capped at 90. These (C Division) are guys who don't usually play tournaments. We can accommodate sixteen Division A teams in the finals but we have yet to fill the bracket. Now guys are finding out they can go there and win as much money as guys winning the A division. There are trophies too but they are just to document what you did, the money is the real thing. The C division is the thing and the guys are starting to catch on now so things are growing. This was the sixth year for us to run the tournament and now we have Budweiser interested and helping so it's getting better.

For most players American Darts and the A.B.D.A. is a night out. Like pool, shuffle alley, bowling, like that. In a traveling league you get to shoot somebody different every week, and meet a whole lot of different people. Some the craziest you've ever meet to those who are very precise and tactical in their approach to the game. You can try to mimic somebody else's style but it probably isn't going to work for you.

I am very proud though of my best moment in my long and humble dart career which was when VIP Darts won the inaugural A.B.D.A. National Championship in Drums, PA. The team shooters were the late B.J. Gerber, Ed Kanick and George Haines. I wish I'd have found the guys (top players) upstate a few (25 or 30) years ago. I could have become a better player.

For information contact www.vipid.com/abda/