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Evolving Market

Successful In Europe, Electronic Steel-Tip Darting Comes To U.S.

GENEVA, IL — Inventor Rudy Allison is the person who created the basic technology for the soft-tipped, electronically scored dart games that the coin-op industry knows today. But Allison says soft-tip darting was almost a happy accident on the journey to realizing his original intent — he was actually seeking a way to bring the simplicity of electronic scoring to the classic game of steel-tipped darts (see sidebar).

Today, Allison is teamed with his friends, the father-and-son battery of Bill and Steve Pope, as principals of Merlin Technologies Inc. They formed the company specifically to develop an electronically scored, steel-tip darting product. “After traveling a very long road, we think

we have finally achieved our goal of combining accurate, electronic scoring with the feel and action of traditional steel-tip darting,” says Merlin president Bill Pope. That result is the company’s “Wild Bull” dart game.

To date, most of Merlin’s focus has gone toward promoting steel-tipped coin-op darts overseas, although a branded version of Merlin’s dart game, called “Vortex,” has been promoted and is used under license by the American Darters Association. ADA’s leagues combine soft-tip and steel-tip darters and events (see separate story on the ADA in this issue). But now, in addition to ADA’s program, Pope says Merlin is

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Electronic steel-tip darting is enjoying success in European countries where soft-tip darting never gained a strong foothold. Pictured above are finalists in a “Wild Bull” session held early this year in Madrid, Spain. The sport appeals to all ages.

MERLIN BRINGS ELECTRONIC STEEL-TIP DARTING TO AMERICA

ready to re-focus its own direct marketing efforts here at home.

At first glance, the "Wild Bull" game closely resembles an upright, electronic soft-tipped darts game. Several differences become apparent on closer inspection, said Merlin vice-president of sales and marketing Steve Pope. Rather than a target made of independently moveable plastic segments, "Wild Bull" uses an old-fashioned bristle dartboard, with one major difference: traditional bristle dartboards feature a metal spider that sits atop the surface of the board, while Merlin's bristle dartboard features a plastic spider that is integrated completely into the board, and tied to sophisticated electronic detection and scoring systems.

Allison, now Merlin's production director, noted the uniqueness of "Wild Bull's" spider technology. "Our dart detection system works off RF signals, which are shot across the face of the dartboard," he explained. These signals look for darts at a rate of 20,000 pulses per second. An antenna, which sits around the board (in the game, not in the board), picks up a change of signal when a dart hits the board." Exact locations of dart hits are sensed by the system, and scores are electronically tabulated for each player.

"This is totally different from the method employed in plastic darting," Allison further explained, "where the dart is just an object hitting a segment and closing a switch. The electronic pulses in our game also detect when a dart falls out, and tell our game to remove the score of that dart." Not counting darts that don't stay in the board is how the

rules for classic darting were originally promulgated, but the plastic games are not capable of detecting a falling dart, and so the rules were changed. This is also why, in soft-tip darting, players have bounce-outs, which are more common because the plastic target can kick out the dart. However, because the dart did hit and close the switch, even though the dart never stuck, the game keeps the results of that throw as part of the score.

Besides detecting fallen darts and reducing "bounce-outs," other key features of the "Wild Bull" include a patented telescoping cabinet that enables just one operator to install or maneuver the game; no weight limit of darts; automatic player change; scoring of only those darts that stay in the board; the acceptance of both steel and soft-tip darts; eight levels of computer competition; more than 30 games programmed into the computer including 301, 501, Cricket, and high-score; correct score capability; auto-calibration; low-maintenance digital electronics; pre-wiring for bill acceptors and other accessories; a completely programmable system which enables operators to "customize" the operation of each machine; built-in handles and rollers for easy storage; front access to all game components; and internal switches to protect pass codes and customize machine operations.

A programmable system enables operators to change game pricing, adjust maximum number of rounds, adjust credits per game, add new games and monitor coin drops (by day, week, month, year). Modular electronics come with an extended warranty. The unit's modular design enables

easy dartboard rotation and replacement. And, vastly different from plastic games, the Wild Bull has no moving parts, which reduces maintenance, and operators do not have to spend time removing broken-off dart tips from the board.

Steve Pope believes steel-tip darting with electronic scoring is a product whose time has come, and that, in theory, a significant global market already exists. "There are players and leagues around the world, from Europe to Asia, that would enjoy the convenience of electronic scoring so long as the classic steel-tip game is respected and preserved," he explained. "Our equipment is now available to give leagues that opportunity, and to give operators a way to turn a high-potential market into an opportunity for major earning potential."

Pope added: "The leagues I am referring to never added steel darting to their events, because they could not justify the investment. As a result, the steel-tip players in those countries are enjoying other steel-tip dart leagues, but in dramatically reduced numbers when compared to soft-tip leagues."

This situation is important to Merlin, because company executives want to offer "Wild Bull" as a tool that these leagues and operators can use to finally fund the expansion of their leagues by incorporating steel darts. Pope explained, "I look at Japan and Spain as great examples. These countries each have a leading dart association that typically sees 4,000 to 6,000 darters attending any one of their events. They want to expand into steel darts, to grow their leagues and to one day potentially have pro-



PRECISION VISION: At left, British Darts Organization professional and England team captain Martin Adams meets with a young runner up at Wild Bull competition held during the British Association of Pool Table Operators championships in Bridlington, UK, late last year. At right, Steve Pope, Merlin's sales and marketing VP, hopes a little expertise will rub off on him as he poses with the top four darters in the world: (left to right) Phil Taylor, Steve Pope, John Part, John Lowe and Bob Anderson

ELECTRONIC STEEL-TIP DARTS

fessional steel-tip darters grown out of their league for high-profile televised competitions, with all that this implies.

“However,” Pope continued, “these leagues are simply not going to attract new players by using a non-electronic bristle board. That is because these younger, new players prefer electronics, and even if the leagues could force players to use a traditional steel dartboard, they cannot fund this growth without the coin drop represented in our game.” Therefore, Pope concluded, partnerships between Merlin and these leagues are a great match. “The players, operators and the sport all benefit.”

Leading U.S. market research firms estimate some 18 million U.S. dart players enjoy home versions of steel-tip and soft-tip darting in their rec rooms and basements, coin-operated soft-tip darting in bars, and/or free darting in bars on steel-tipped games. Yet only a small percentage of this vast number of players are involved in leagues, and virtually none are playing electronically scored steel-tip darting, as Merlin is just introducing it in the States.

As Pope sees it, “Two major growth strategies are available for Merlin and for first-class leagues like the ADA and others. The first is to attract merely a fraction of those 18 million casual darters to become league players. The second is to recruit brand-new players who have never

played either steel-tip or soft-tip darts.” While acknowledging the first strategy has merit, Merlin favors the latter course for its own efforts.

Converting soft-tip players into “Wild Bull” players is not Merlin’s goal, the executive noted. “Steel-tip players are pretty particular about their sport,” Pope explained. “Many of them feel strongly that steel-tipped darts are ‘real’ darts; they like the weight and the feel of a traditional metal dart and the lack of any sound when it hits a ‘proper’ board. For these reasons, these more die-hard steel tippers appreciate our game and our effort to cater to their sport.”

However, Pope acknowledged that it would be difficult to convert many of these same existing steel-tipped bar players from free play to coin-operated play, even with the added convenience of electronic scoring, simply because traditional steel-tippers are used to playing for free. Therefore, Merlin executives believe the best target market is the “video game generation.” This demographic is more accustomed to electronics and, indeed, expects it, Pope said. He thinks a vast market of brand-new players can be created for steel-tipped, electronically scored darts.

Brand-new players (and even some current devotees of old-fashioned steel-tipped darting) will find significant appeal in “Wild Bull,” Pope firmly believes. Tradi-

tional scoring requires players to keep score with a chalkboard, a mathematical chore that can be complex, especially for beginners. Chalkboard scoring, referred to as “chalking,” can also present a barrier for new players (and cause headaches even for experienced players after a couple of beers and when playing cricket). Chalkboard scoring slows down the pace of the game in any case, Pope added.

“Believe it or not, the mess caused by chalk – spreading throughout the bar and getting on the patrons’ clothes – is causing many ‘publicans’ in London to remove steel-tipped darting from British pubs,” Pope reported. (Merlin has placed an advertisement in this month’s VT that further explains the chalking issue.) Electronic scoring solves all these problems for players, while – obviously – adding profit opportunity for operators and bar owners, Pope said. Bar patrons who have been accustomed to seeing their friends pay money to play soft-tip, will naturally expect to pay 50¢ for the speed, convenience and simplicity of electronic scoring on “Wild Bull,” Merlin officials contend.

Pope pointed to a worldwide explosion of newfound popularity for steel-tipped darting as evidence of a major opportunity for coin-op operators and distributors. This growth is fueled by increasingly frequent cable and satellite TV broadcasts of high-level dart competitions. “We at Merlin are riding that wave, as are many other dart equipment and accessory manufacturers,” he opined.

Summing the matter up, Pope smiled and noted, “Hey, if our predecessors could introduce a larger, plastic dartboard and plastic darts years ago, there are no reasons why we can’t introduce a traditional bristle board for classic steel darts with automatic scoring. We have spent years engineering an accurate and enjoyable steel dart game for existing and new players. We have engineered it with the operator in mind (ease of operation, low maintenance) and priced it competitively for the distributors and operators. Now the key is to attract existing and new players and to drive this demand up through leagues, in partnership with distributors and operators worldwide.”

To learn more about “Wild Bull” or to become an authorized distributor, operator, or league coordinator, trade members may contact Merlin Technologies, 407 Stevens St., Geneva, IL 60134; tel. (800) 669-9597 or (630) 232-9223. The company is online at merlindarts.com and may be reached by e-mailing to sales@merlindarts.com.

THE UNTOLD STORY: The Birth Of Electronic Darting

GENEVA, IL — The game of automatically scored, electronically controlled darting was originally conceived in Ireland more than 30 years ago by a traveling American named Rudy Allison.

While on a business trip to the Emerald Isle to sell large machine tools, he stopped in a local pub in the town of Wicklow one Sunday afternoon and ended up spending several enjoyable hours playing darts – the old-fashioned, steel-tipped kind, using a bristle board target – with his new-found friends, the locals.

Afterward, Allison wondered: why can’t a game be developed that would automatically score the darts and eliminate the necessity of manually scoring? This question kept nagging at him.

Upon his return to the United States, Allison began working on a number of concepts to create just such a product, and over the course of a year he slowly worked out the solution. A plastic-tipped dart could be made that, once thrown, could stick into a perforated plastic segmented target. After the concept took hold, it was necessary to enlarge the size of the nor-

mal board, but this was also good for marketing and revenue, as a larger board, with a bigger bulls eye, would be easier for the average player and could move gameplay along faster, thus generating more coin-drop.

Based on these ideas, a company called Arachnid Inc. was born, and a new darting electronic darting industry has since evolved, worldwide.

From the beginning, however, Allison’s true desire was to create a coin-operated version of a classic steel-tipped dart game with a traditional bristle board as the target.

“When we first began the development of the automatic scoring dart game almost 30 years ago,” Allison explained, “it was always our ultimate desire to revolutionize the industry with an electronic scoring dart game that could be played on a traditional bristle board using steel-tipped darts. Nothing compares to the feel of throwing a steel-tipped dart. It’s the way the game was meant to be played.”

That, however, was easier said than done, and the soft-tip game was first to come to the market.

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