



STEEL DARTING WANTS YOU!

What do a 1964 Ford Mustang, dart leagues and the evolution of steel darting have in common?

It's a case of 'old school' meets 'new school'. A classic case of going back to your roots - with a little twist of course.

That's one way to look at the opportunity the new *Wild Bull® Electronic Scoring Steel Dart Game* is offering you, the player. "I always get a chuckle at trade shows when operators or players take a second or third look at the steel darts we place in their hand," says Steve Pope, VP of Merlin Technologies, manufacturer of the *Wild Bull®*, *Revolution™* and *Vortex™* brand dart games. "Some of them have been playing organized darts for years but have never thrown steel darts. We end up discussing more about the feel of steel darts and the differences associated with them, (from the sound they make when they hit the board, to the weight of the dart in your hand, not having darts bounce off the board, etc) than we do about our game. It's like showing an 18 year old a '64 mustang, who has never driven a muscle car. 'You mean this car will get me to from point A-to-B just like my Toyota but it feels better to drive and is really cool? Why did they stop making these?'"

Pope's analogy has some players, retailers and amusement operators asking, "If they can play both soft-tip and steel on Merlin's new dart game, but with the feel of the sport as it was originally played, why not give it a try?"

Players can use their favorite soft-tip darts or enjoy steel darting; with the choices for the latter having lessened in recent years. Steel players and leagues can now enjoy the convenience and speed of automatic scoring and a more action-orientated fun way to play (more like soft tip) versus some older steel league formats. Amusement operators and bar owners can now justify adding steel darting to locations, as they finally have a way to earn revenue (coin drop) from it.

So if Merlin's games can work with both soft and now steel darts, are they trying to take over electronic darting? "No way," replies Pope. "We have tremendous respect for the manufacturers of soft-tip equipment. They not only produced fun games, but they went out there, changed the sport, and generated tremendous growth of the sport! Who would have thought years ago you could give a serious darter a plastic dart, a different target and tell him to pay-to-play? Now that's marketing," states Pope. Pope goes on to say that Merlin's goal is to compliment the success of electronic scoring soft-tip dart games by offering players a choice. "I encourage operators to place our game next to a soft-tip game. Players can play the soft-tip game for some leagues and on the *Wild Bull®* for new leagues. I believe in players making choices based on their preferences, not based on a lack of options," adds Pope.

Pope states, "This is America, the land abundant options from everything from cellular providers to your favorite brand in bottled water. For years, steel darters have watched as their bristle boards were replaced

by a soft tip coin operated dart games with a totally different target size. They had little choice. Coin revenue and income fueled league development and tournaments, and so, purses for soft-tip rose as the options for steel competition declined. Today, there are still excellent steel leagues and locations, but there are in pockets of the USA. But now, with the *Wild Bull®*, players can make a choice as to their darting preference and in a way that operators and bar owners can also participate. We are just hoping for a balancing act, of similar options, that's all."

The 're-balancing' seems to have started overseas first for Merlin, where they have formed relationships with both premier dart leagues and Distributors. In Germany, Merlin is finalizing an agreement with a long time partner to distribute the game and just this month were invited to place games at a popular German steel event by the league organizer. "Their was lots of press, players and Phil *The Power Taylor's* Business Manager at the event," states Tom Ross, Merlin Sales Representative. Ross adds, "The game was well received and we have been monitoring chat rooms from the players. They are all stating they were really surprised by the accuracy of our game. Word spreads fast, so we are excited."

In Spain, Merlin, fresh off a joint event in Madrid, is working on a partnership with the Spanish Federation of Darts (FEDE) to add the *Wild Bull®* and start an electronic steel division at FEDE. Details on this Madrid event are on Merlin's website.

Merlin has also developed friendships with Unicorn, the PDC and has Electrocoin as its Distributor in the United Kingdom - not to mention sales relationships throughout Europe and Asia.

Aside from overseas markets, Merlin has begun selling the *Wild Bull®* to Operators and Distributors throughout the United States and is currently looking for new partners. *Wild Bull®* games have begun springing up around the USA, and not just in predominately steel areas. Pope explains, "We are proud of our product and have been accused of being crazy to invest the amount of time and money we have in developing it. We wanted to ensure our game was perfected before we released it. We are now ready to focus here at home."

According to Glenn and Gloria Remick, the ADA is using a version of Merlin's game,

called the *Vortex™*, at the league level. Merlin states that the ADA has leagues using Merlin's game in several different states and one County competing exclusively on the product. However, the ADA has not yet approved it for use at the Tournament level. When asked about this Pope responds, "We continue to work closely with the ADA. We view them as a long-term strategic partner. After making adjustments to some of the features in the game needed for tournament play, we are confident you will see the product at all levels of the ADA. Our job is to produce the best product and the ADA will ensure the product exceeds his players' expectations. It's a team approach and we value this relationship."

So is there a common denominator in all of Merlin's partnerships and what does it mean for you, the player? "All of our partnerships are founded on trust, business potential and doing what is best for the sport of darts," states Pope rather emphatically. He goes on to add, "People see how long we have been working on this game. There is mutual respect and trust. The business potential speaks for itself. Our game, no matter what it earns, represents a 100% increase in revenue versus a bristle board hanging on the wall. When a *Wild Bull®* is placed next to a soft-tip game, it usually earns 'new coins' versus drawing players off the soft tip, and is a respectable earner. So, quite often the Operator is making a decision to add our game into a location, next to an existing plastic game, because the bar owner wants to have the best of both world's and to set his place aside from this competitors."

Aside from this scenario, Merlin tells *BEN* that the other type of customer for the *Wild Bull®* is the bar with the traditional board that was removed years ago or that is currently dying a slow death (as the bar owner requires income (coin drop) to properly maintain and to justify the space required to play darts.) "Keep in mind that darting requires space and the bar owner has pressure to place other equipment there, like a golf game or another table for food. These other options make money. For this reason, even some old-school steel tippers who are not looking for the automatic scoring our game represents, still appreciate our game," concludes Pope.

According to Merlin most of their future league partners want to add steel darting to their leagues, but have been unable to justify the investment. Merlin has now given these leagues a tool to help justify their entry into steel darting. Pope adds, "These league Directors can now bring steel competition and its league play into the 21st century to compliment to soft-tip play. The play will be faster (due to automatic scoring), with less down time, smaller teams and more action. Again, give players choices, and help grow the sport," concludes Pope.

So, if you are interested in Merlin's *Revolution™* home game, the *Wild Bull®* Coin-op game (advertised in *BEN*) or you want to learn about their products, leagues or becoming a sales associate, distributor or amusement operator, visit Merlin's website at www.merlindarts.com or call 800-669-9597 and keep an eye on future news about their products in *BEN*.

