



## INTERVIEW: MICHAEL CALLAGHAN

Winning a sensational five tournaments out of five so far this season, meet the British number one whose darts game looks a million dollars...

St. Helens is a northern industrial town with a proud sporting history. Its all-conquering rugby league side are one of the game's giants and were crowned de facto world champions in February this year.

Local darts sensation Michael 'Bully Boy' Smith is also a world champion, defeating Michael van Gerwen in imperious fashion at the Alexandra Palace while many were still nursing New Year's Eve hangovers.

The town's darting dominance extends further, however. On the British disability darts circuit, one man has swept all before him, winning the first five tournaments of the season. His name is Michael Callaghan.

Callaghan is known as 'Dr. Evil', or simply 'Evil' for his passing resemblance to the follicly challenged criminal mastermind from the Austin Powers movies. Thankfully, Mike does not live up to his nickname. A father of two, he lives with Lorraine, his wife of 25 years, and an eight-year-old Bichon Frisé/Westie cross called Lucy, who does her best impression of a guard dog, despite sporting a limp.

It is clear the Callaghans are very much in love, often finishing each other's sentences. Lorraine performs several roles at the same time – as emotional and physical support, tour organiser and number one fan. The pair are heavily involved with the British Disability Darts Association, in whose events Mike has swatted aside all comers this season. There are two categories – standing and wheelchair. Players with a wide variety of physical impairments are brought together under the two umbrellas to make sure numbers are healthy and matches can be arranged. Mike and Lorraine explain how they came to be involved with the BDDA:

M: "I played for Merseyside for a year or just over a year."

L: "He ended up in so much pain."

M: "It was difficult. The cost of it as well. You're paying to go away for two nights down south somewhere."

L: "It was costing us three or four hundred pounds for him to have one game of darts."

M: "It could only be three legs of darts; you could win three-nil, or you could lose three-nil, and that was it. It's a lot of money for three legs of darts. The atmosphere was brilliant."

L: "But the days ended up so long, and he was in so much pain, weren't you?"

M: "That's when I just wanted to quit altogether."

L: "I said, 'Is there anything else that's available?' And then we found out about disability darts."

Callaghan was born with a curvature of the spine which does not allow him to stand, or indeed practice, for long periods. Despite this barrier, he is playing better than ever this season, averaging close to 90 on stage in an event in Abergavenny. Mike explains the difficulties he went through as a child, the effects of which he lives with every day:

"They tried to take a bone out of my dad's hip to straighten my spine, but that didn't work. They took me in aged nine and I had my tenth birthday in there."

"They put a metal rod in. My body rejected it and started pushing it out. There were bits of metal you could see coming out of my skin. They had to take that out. I got to age 16 and I said, 'Don't touch me any more.'"

Mike has been playing for almost 40 years, but came seriously close to quitting the game a few years ago. He manages his condition with an admirable stoicism, which staggers even his wife. He said: "I gave my shirt away! I said, 'I won't be playing any more. If I come back, it'll be in a wheelchair.'"

"Then I thought, 'I'm going to have to do something,' because I can play in a wheelchair, but I don't want to. I just think if I do that, that's just giving up, isn't it?"

L: "We've been together so long, and I still can't believe he gets up every morning and he's in pain. I just can't get my head around that."

The current British standing number one has found a new lease of life playing in the BD-DA's short format round-robin tournaments. There is a palpable community spirit running through the events, despite the logistical issues related to cost, travel and work commitments that affect the participants:



Mike Callaghan practises at his home in St. Helens



**BDDA players mingle at the Winmau Classic in St. Helens**

M: "Everyone says it's a family, and it is like a family. They all say that, don't they? Welcome to the family – if we get a new player."

"I always say we're getting disabled people off their bums – some of them are stuck on their bums all the time! – out of the house and getting them doing something."

As the BBDA's current in-form standing category player, Mike attends the events for more than just community spirit. His impressive recent winning streak means he is in line to finish the season as both world and British number one. But, as Lorraine explains, things were not always this way:

"Mike lost eight finals in a row! They all kept saying, 'He's going to win this!' and I was like, 'I've watched this so many times,

I've been here, I've watched him lose.' He's so laid back. It's me, I get nervous."

Finishing the season as number one is a labour of love for the Callaghans – they make a financial loss on every tournament Mike attends, with the exception of the recent Winmau Classic, which took place less than half a mile from their home. Prize money in disability darts ranges from the paltry to the non-existent, and shirt sponsorship has been tricky to obtain, with hundreds of Lorraine's requests left unread or ignored. Lorraine is rightfully proud of her husband's achievements so far this season:

"He's done so well if he can get to number one – at least he can say he's been a world number one. When they looked at his scans, the guy who was looking at them couldn't believe he could

walk in."

M: "I walked through the door, and he said 'Michael?' I went, 'Yeah?' he said, 'I expected you to come in in a wheelchair.' That's not a good start!"

L: "He should be number one by Antwerp. He should be, really, before Antwerp. We said we'll go anyway, just to make sure. If he doesn't get that opportunity again, I wouldn't want him to get so far and not get it."

M: "I might not be in that position again, you never know, do you?"

The degenerative nature of Callaghan's condition mirrors that of other disability darts competitors. This means that, for many, success in the standing category may only be fleeting, until the transition to wheelchair darts is made.

One notable example is Basingstoke's Steve North, who spent ten days in an induced coma after being hit by a car. Not long after entering the BDDA, North was told he would require a second amputation. To this day, he plays standing darts with dual leg prostheses. His darting nickname? 'Two Legs Down.' There is a streak of black humour that runs through the circuit, to which Lorraine can testify:

"When we first started, the amputees would say things like, 'I've won more legs than you've got!' They all have such a laugh. That's what you want out of it as well, don't you?"

With the COVID-19 lockdowns disproportionately affecting those with disabilities, Mike admits to taking drastic measures to help raise a smile:

"I have been known to try and raise morale during lockdown. I took some funny photos! During lockdown there were a couple of people depressed, weren't they? I got these England shirts ready for this Oostende tournament."

"They said, 'take a picture just in your England shirt.'"

"I took it – just in my England shirt. My arse was hanging out! I'd been away to a tournament, I came home. It was my birthday. My brother had put it, full blown, in the window. He'd had it blown up."

L: "We went to Bridlington and the lads had it on the back of their shirts!"

M: "Like I say, it raises morale! We're walking around the venue, darts players everywhere, and they've got my arse on the



**Mike retrieves his darts whilst sporting his famous shirt**

back of their shirt!"

Mike poses for a photograph in his Dr. Evil stage wear and proudly shows off his various England shirts. He is looking forward to representing his country in the BDDA equivalent of the PDC's World Cup of Darts.

There are a few photographs close to his heart – as well as an Everton sign and a darts 'walk-on girls' calendar – on display next to his practice board. One of them captures the moment Mike booked his

place in the final of the World Disability Darts Association World Championships in 2020:

L: "He said he was going to quit, and then he got to the world final."

M: "That was the winning double. I'm looking at Lorraine, thinking: 'Oh my god, I love you.'"

Yet more evidence that despite being named after a super-villain, Michael Callaghan certainly does not behave like one.

Words and photos: James Cranford