

2020 at Bray Bowling Club

Author: Patrick Brosnan

This was going to be the strangest of years for bowlers (and everybody else).

January

In the Winter Champion of Champions, Bray's Peter Gough travelled up the M50 to Aer Lingus where he defeated that club's John Conway. In the next round, despite having home advantage, he was narrowly beaten by Joe O' Brien of Greystones.

The longest bridge in Ireland opened to traffic. The 900m Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Bridge crosses the River Barrow, south of New Ross, to link Wexford and Kilkenny. The British finally achieved Brexit. At 11pm GMT on 31 January, Britain officially left the EU after 47 years of membership. There would still be a transition period lasting a year.

February

An inaugural darts evening was held to make use of the club's newest facility. It was organised by sharpshooter, Peter Gough, and a respectable group of varying ability turned up to try their luck. The sport now became a regular Friday night feature.

An Irish general election was held in which Sinn Fein topped the poll in many constituencies. No party had an overall majority so talks began to form a government.

The ladies section held the second of two historic meetings around whether or not to drop down into Division 2, a league that requires a team to field only three rinks. This was as a result of going out short so many times the previous summer. Some were in favour of the change but some were not and a few threatened to leave if it happened. In the end they decided to stay in the top tier but would use men to fill any gaps in the side.

Northern Ireland's Graeme McDowell claimed his first European Tour title since 2014 with victory at the Saudi International.

Despite the best efforts of Storms Ciara and Dennis, the Winter League group phases finished towards the end of the month. In Section 3 Bray B finished a respectable 4th of 7 while Greystones finished in 6th place. In Section 2 Bray C finished 5th of 8. However it was Section 1 that saw the fireworks on the final day. Captain John Cheevers hobbled in on his new knee to see his Bray A team pull off another great escape by beating (thus-far unbeaten) Dun Laoghaire B 4-1 at home. It was a result that enabled them to edge past the Leinster Lions by one and a half points to claim second spot in the table and a coveted place in the quarter finals. Dun Laoghaire B still won that section while two CYM teams topped sections 2 and 3. Meath and Westmanstown came through from the northern sections.

It should be noted that the Leinster Lions is a bowling academy for which giving game experience to their young bowlers is more important than progressing in competition. Therefore the teams they put out are not always their strongest so it makes little sense to

judge them on their final placing in the table.

At a men's section meeting various topics were kicked around. Ladies and men playing in one another's teams would happen only to prevent a team going out short. However it became evident that more clarity on the rules was needed from the two associations. The club had arranged an inexpensive deal with a nearby chipper to provide the Division 1 post-match meals. Those unwilling to participate would not be picked for the team! Another issue was the opening of the bar before the meal. This could not happen until one of the two barmen on the team had finished their game which was often rather late.

In the Winter League quarter-final, Bray A were drawn against CYM B at North Kildare. In a strong wind (Storm Jorge was approaching) the star-studded Terenure side proved too much for the valiant seashiders, winning by 14 shots. It was the 29th February – leap day.



Illustration 1: Bray A. Back: Dave McMahon, Eddie Kelly, Danny Heffernan (skip), Tommy Quinn, John Dunne, Peter Gough, John Browne (skip). Front: Margaret Doran, Phyllis Brett (skip), Terri McKeon, Margie O'Leary, Patrick Brosnan.

March

The family-owned Dubray Books which had started in Quinsboro Road, Bray in 1973 was sold to Eason Retail. The business had grown to nine bookshops and the sale price was around the €4m mark.

The semi-finals of the Winter League were held in Bray's own Failte Park. CYM B and Leinster A progressed to the final at the expense of Crumlin A and Dun Laoghaire B respectively.



Illustration 2: Winter League S/F at Failte Park: Dun Laoghaire v Leinster.

In a historic move to counter falling female membership, the LBLI were prepared to allow one man to participate per rink in their matches.

Then life (and bowling) as we knew it came to a sudden halt as the deadly Coronavirus pandemic, Covid-19, emerged from China to sweep the planet. It spread from the ski slopes of Northern Italy and Austria to other parts of Europe including Ireland. To avoid contagion, people were encouraged to avoid touching each other, to cough into their elbow and wash their hands a lot. New medical terminology was heard in the media. Anybody with the symptoms had to inform their doctor before "self-isolating" at home. "Contact tracing" was then initiated to find others they might have infected. We were in the "Containment Phase".

Despite these measures the virus spread to various parts of the country and people began to die. At first bowlers had laughed nervously as they touched elbows instead of shaking hands at the end of a game. But when the situation worsened Failte Park had to be closed to all bowling. The LBLI and BLI cancelled all their Summer competitions. The same was happening for other bowlers (and sports) around the world.

As infections and deaths rose, the government's aim was to "flatten the curve" of patients needing acute care in order to prevent hospitals being overrun. This was the "Delay Phase". Schools and colleges were closed. Public gatherings were banned. Sporting events around the world were postponed including the Euro 2020 football finals and the Olympic games in Tokyo. That the Cheltenham race meeting went ahead appalled many.

Eventually the government ordered a "lock-down". People not providing essential services were told to stay at home except for necessary shopping, caring for family members or taking exercise within two kilometres of home. Employees would also work from home if possible. You were advised to avoid straying within two metres of anyone that did not share your home ("social distancing"). The over-70s, considered particularly vulnerable, were confined to their homes ("cocooning"). Bray's groundsman, Chris, now only visited the club to cut the grass.

April

The Gardai set up checkpoints on major routes to discourage people travelling to holiday homes for Easter. Where they did make it through, the locals, fearing contamination, were not happy to see them. As infections showed no sign of abating, the lock down was extended by three weeks into early May.

Some Bray bowlers occupied their time by sending entertaining pieces to the club's

Whatsapp group. This did not suit everybody so Eoghain Brady renamed it the Bray Bowling Banter Club while simultaneously setting up Bray Bowling News which would be restricted to actual bowling news (even if there wasn't much these days).

Members could also avail of a rebate on their annual subscriptions given that their bowling had been curtailed.

Care homes for the elderly around the country began to be identified as Covid-19 hotspots and the government rushed to help out the beleaguered carers. Around Europe certain countries began to ease their restrictions but Ireland was not yet in that position.

The Spring weather was proving superior to normal and people made the most of it. The streets were filled with walkers, joggers and cyclists, all trying to keep their distance from one another. Plants struggled with the dry conditions and gardeners were kept busy keeping their charges alive.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of UEFA Euro 2020 and as a result, Stephen Kenny took over the coaching of the senior Ireland football team early from Mick McCarthy.

May

By the the start of the month the curve of Covid-19 infection was flattening so the Government produced a road map on easing the restrictions. This was to start on 18th May. In the meantime people who had been cocooning could go outside their homes for some exercise. Also the 2km limit that was in place for exercise for the general population was extended to 5km.

Phase 1 of the roadmap allowed for a limited resumption of non-contact sports including lawn bowls. Bowling bodies around the world, BLI included, were producing protocols for playing safely in these times. When the Bray BC Executive met however they decided against re-opening the club in May. This was so as not to cause a rift in the membership between those who could attend and those who were not yet allowed to do so.

Some clubs did reopen including CYM. Of course the first bowl delivered there, captured on Facebook, had a wrong bias!

June

The BLI Executive confirmed that there would be no leagues, cups or championships this year. Clubs that opened would confine their activities to social bowling while adhering to BLI and club protocols. Westmanstown B.C. would retain the presidency in 2021. Bray B.C., who would have had the presidency in 2021, had no objection to postponing it for another year.

The country opened up more for Phase 2 and Bray BC decided to join in. Three rinks were opened to accomodate roll-ups of up to four members each. Pre-booking had first to be done by phone with the ever-patient Roddy O'Leary, and strict anti-contagion measures had to be observed. No spectating or hanging around was permitted but at least we were on the green again!

The keener bowlers were quick to return and there were some fancy new bowls on show. However with the ongoing threat of infection and the lack of competition, most members continued to stay away.

Was it predictable that, as bowlers returned to their sport, the warm, dry weather was replaced by something more Atlantic? Plus ça change...

All international bowling events were cancelled for the year as was the Irish men's Senior Inter-Association Championship. This event was to be hosted by the BLI in Dublin and would now happen there in 2021.

After long and tortuous talks by various politicians, a government was at last formed. Fianna Fail's Michael Martin would lead a "historic" administration composed of his own party, Fine Gael and the Greens. 140 days had elapsed since February's general election.

As the government continued to ease the COVID-19 restrictions at the end of the month so too did Bray BC. Though we were still limited to three rinks, each could now involve up to 6 people playing together. Roddy was honourably discharged of his booking duties as people could now reserve a slot using the diary in the kiosk. Members could also arrive on spec and use any free rink, provided they updated the diary. Ditto spectators. If anyone were to succumb to the virus the diary could then be used for contact tracing.

Two experienced bowlers were admitted to the club: Mark Hughes from Bank of Ireland and Theresa Martin's son, Zach, from Railway Union.

July

To compensate for the lack of competition, the BLI organised mixed singles and pairs competitions. Each club participating would hold their own tournaments with winners and runners-up going forward to the finals in September. Due to concerns over the virus the Bray executive chose not to participate.

The club did however organise its own mixed pairs competition – the "51551 Wash-your-hands" trophy! Teams, picked by lot, were divided into four groups. Each team would play all the others in their group with the top two going through to the knock-out phase.

Pandemic or not, Irish thieves were still active. A member who had left their car unlocked at the club had money and a watch stolen.

August

Neil Booth visited Bray on a Saturday morning as part of his 50-plus club charity challenge. Manager of the men's Ireland bowls team, Neil plied his club trade at Old Bleach, Co. Antrim. At Failte Park he was beaten by our own Niall Shelley. It was a very short game but, in fairness, Neil did visit five other clubs that day including Rosslare.



Illustration 3: Niall Shelley v Neil Booth in Neil's charity challenge.

In another hard fight Bray's own world lightweight champion, Katie Taylor, once again defeated Belgian bruiser, Delfine Persoon. The event, held at Brentwood, England, was a rematch of their WBC title fight and was a more convincing victory this time round for the Irish woman.

By the end of a wet August the league phase of the mixed pairs competition was complete and we were set for the knock-out rounds in September.

There was also an eventful executive committee meeting. The visit of Knock BC to Bray was deferred to safer times. The request by Blackrock BC to use Failte Park for their Winter League matches was turned down. In fact Bray would not now themselves be participating in the competition. Reasons given were: the rising tide of Covid-19 cases country-wide, concerns about groups travelling together in cars and also worries over visiting teams. The committee were also unhappy about members' general lack of vigilance around the virus. Some were not writing their names in the rinks or visitor books and the social distancing on the green was hit-and-miss. As a result the committee decided to reduce the number that could play together on a rink from six back to four for four weeks. They also issued a warning that the green would be closed if members' behaviour did not improve.

September

BLI & AWBL Club Participation 2020					
	BLI Singles & Pairs 2020	Winter League 2020/21 (No. of teams)		BLI Singles & Pairs 2020	Winter League 2020/21 (No. of teams)
1. Aer Lingus	√		13. Ierne	√	
2. Bank of Ireland			14. Kenilworth		1
3. Bray			15. Leinster		2
4. Blackrock	√	2	16. Leinster Lions		2
5. Clontarf	√	1	17. Meath		1
6. Crumlin	√	1	18. North Kildare	√	2
7. CYM	√	1	19. Railway Union	√	
8. Dun Laoghaire	√	2	20. Shankill		
9. Greenhills		1	21. Skerries		2
10. Greystones			22. Sportslink	√	2
11. Herbert Park			23. St James's Gate	√	1
12. ICICYMA	√		24. Westmanstown		3
			TOTALS	12	15 (clubs)

Illustration 4: Who was in and who was out of the year's inter-club competitions.

The hon sec, Frank Devlin, cheered up the membership no end with the announcement that there would be an internal Winter League. Teams would be decided once all

interested members had made themselves known.

If the Summer had been a washout, it fell to September to bring us some decent weather. In the pairs competition, bowlers battled through the knock-out rounds. The quarter-finals saw the exit of the last of the ladies, Terrie McKeon and Theresa Martin, who surrendered a 9-1 lead against Niall Shelley and Aiden King. The semi-finals proved memorable to judge by Eoghain Brady's concise summary. "It all went down to the wire, two matches, two drawn games, two extra ends and both favourites knocked out! 30 odd supporters turned out to see a thrilling 10-1 deficit turned around by Pat Tracey and Mick Dunne who, along with Aiden King and Niall Shelley, advanced to the final of the 'Worthless Cup'".

All around Europe the numbers of Coronavirus infections were rising and Ireland was no exception. County Dublin was placed on "Level 3 of the Framework for Restrictive Measures". Unfortunately this meant that the BLI singles and pairs competitions had to be cancelled and also that all Winter League matches were postponed. Later in the month the Irish bowling world was shocked to hear of the death of rising star, Cathal Gillen, of CYM. The son of bowling legend, Ian, he was only 25.

In the 2020 Tour De France, Irish rider, Sam Bennett, took the coveted Green Jersey (best sprinter). The last Irishman to do this was Seán Kelly, 31 years previously. Both men came from Carrick-on-Suir, Co Tipperary.

The mixed pairs final was took place in beautiful Autumn sunshine and pitted Pat Tracey and Mick Dunne against Niall Shelley and Aiden King. However anyone in the sizeable crowd expecting to relive the excitement of the semi-finals was to be disappointed. Showing top form, Shelley and King raced into an early lead. Despite the best efforts of Tracey and Dunne, they never looked like clawing back the deficit and the match was settled with a few ends to go. Shelley and King went home €50 richer and, more importantly, the only club champions of 2020.



Illustration 5: Spectators at the mixed pairs final.

In the absence of normal competition this year, this tournament was a great success, providing stiff competition for bowlers and high entertainment for spectators. The hard-working organisers, Roddy O' Leary, Bernie Tracey and Owen Byrne, were owed the gratitude of all.

October

Only about half the membership was bowling these days. Some of the rest, particularly

concerned for their own health, avoided unnecessary gatherings. Our longest serving member, Tommy Cahill, was a notable exception, being unable to put caution above his love of the game.

The coronavirus situation deteriorated country-wide and soon all counties were put under level 3 restrictions. In response the Bray executive reduced the number of rinks in use from six to three and the internal winter league committee (John Browne, Pat Crinnion, Terri McKeon, Niall Shelley and Bernie Tracey) postponed the competition until January. Level 3 also prohibited members living in County Dublin from crossing the boundary into Wicklow.

Still the number of infected entering hospitals rose so the country was moved to the highest level, 5, for six weeks. For the second time in the year Failte Park was closed to bowling. The only regular there now was groundsman Chris.

The interrupted 2020 Six Nations rugby championship finally resumed though in empty stadia. Ireland finished a disappointing third, losing their final match to France in Paris. The new Ireland football coach, Stephen Kenny, introduced a novel, possession-based style to his team but it was not enough to stop them losing to Slovakia 4-2 on penalties in the UEFA Euro 2020 play-off semi-final in Bratislava.

November

CYM's Paul Moorehead passed away after a two-year battle with illness. In his day he was a top bowler and a British Isles trips and fours champion when with Leinster in 1982.

Ireland's Katie Taylor won her 17th professional fight in a row when she outclassed Miriam Gutierrez at Wembley Arena, London. It was the Spanish boxer's first professional fight outside Spain and her first defeat.

A three-man hedge-cutting crew from the council descended on the club to reduce the tall hedges on two sides of the ground to match that of Adelaide Road. Armed with chainsaws and a shredder they did a thorough job, leaving the green much more exposed. It brought back memories to club veterans of how the wind could whip in from Galtrim Road to wreak merry havoc with the bowls. Still maintenance would be alot easier now.



Around the world there were more than 120 Covid-19 vaccines being developed and some of the larger efforts were in final clinical testing (Phase III). There was good news, indicating efficacy at 90% or higher. The world could look forward to mass vaccinations in the coming months - and more bowling!

December

With Christmas approaching the government moved the country back to Covid-19 Level 3. Bray Bowling Club reopened for rollups. The shorter Winter days meant only three time slots per day were in operation – 11, 1 and 3. With this in mind, groups were asked not to monopolise the popular morning slots and members were restricted to three sessions per week. But it was good to be back!

The Dublin football machine rolled-on to a record sixth All-Ireland senior title in a row when they beat Mayo 2-14 to 0-15. Limerick claimed the hurling title with victory over Waterford.

A new strain of the coronavirus emerged in England which was more contagious than the original. With Christmas just days away, inbound flights from Britain were halted. For those affected Christmas was indeed cancelled! When the new strain reached this country our restrictions went to full Level 5 so the club was closed to bowling for the third time. Chances of that internal winter league were slipping away.

There was good news for Ireland though when the UK and EU, after a final, big push, successfully completed a Brexit trade deal. Britain is this country's biggest trading partner. She officially left the EU at 11pm on December 31st.

What a year! The first since organised bowling began in the country that none of the normal competitions had been played and clubs shut their doors for long periods. At least no one would ever take their sport for granted again. And with vaccines on the way, there was hope for better times ahead.