Key markets play important role as darts and PDC expand

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By Daniel Smith

The Professional Darts Corporation began life in 1992 as the World Darts Council, a breakaway from the rival British Darts Organisation, the governing body formed nearly two decades prior. The PDC now boasts a portfolio of more than 10 top-tier professional international events, including the ‘crown jewel’ events: the World Darts Championship and Premier League Darts.

These two competitions in particular have driven the growth of the PDC, which in 2015 recorded a net worth of £5.9 million ($8.3 million), an increase of more than 36 per cent on the previous year. An impressive result for a non-Olympic sport with roots in British pub culture. Attendance and television viewing figures, along with developing online and social media interaction, have been key factors in the continued growth, and the two flagship events attract the highest numbers.

Matt Porter, the PDC’s chief executive, feels that packaging the sports in a “sports entertainment” style rather than purely sport has been vital. He observed: “It’s the whole package - the colour, the lights, the drama, the players that are characters themselves. And I think the fact that darts is a game that is pretty much played everywhere around the world means people can relate to it.”

A lack of barriers to entry at a basic level is also an important aspect for darts, being an individual competitor sport with low equipment costs in comparison with other professional sports. As Porter explained: “There’s nothing to stop someone in Russia from being the best player in the world. There’s literally no barrier to his ability, we just have to get him competing at the top level more often.”

Developing affiliated tours across the globe is helping with this push to increase the number of competitors taking part in events in new markets, but the key territories of the UK and Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia continue to be fertile ground for the PDC.
PDC’s UK broadcast partner Sky, which holds rights until 2018, has rebranded one of its regular Sky Sports channels as Sky Sports Darts for the last two World Championships, dedicating all coverage to the sport for the duration of the tournament (and also simulcasting matches on other sports channels).

The final of the 2015 World Championship broke darts viewing records in the UK, peaking at 1.7 million and averaging 1.24 million as Scotland’s Gary Anderson won for the first time, beating England’s 14-time champion Phil Taylor. Alexandra Palace in London hosted the 50,000 people in attendance across the tournament, as it has done since 2008, while there were upwards of 4 million combined viewers on the dedicated Sky Sports Darts channel. Television viewership across the 14 days of the event rose by 25 per cent on the 2014 figures and the tournament displayed further growth signs for the 2016 event as 66,000 tickets were sold.

Although the 2016 final did not hit the same peak television audience, when Anderson won his second consecutive title by beating Adrian Lewis, it did record a viewing share of 3.7 per cent and the total peak audience across the tournament for all individuals was in excess of 11.6 million. Sky’s dedicated darts channel was a success again, recording a total peak audience of more than 3.8 million, although failed to hit the heights of the previous year. From the Friday afternoon quarter-finals to the final, the total average audience across both

![Sky Sports Audience Figures for 2016 World Championships Quarter Finals Onwards (000s)](image_url)
channels showing coverage combined rose steadily from 366,000 to 886,000, with the second-highest peak, after the final, coming for the Friday evening session of the quarter finals, at 833,000.

Viewership was consistent as the peak audience only dropped below 200,000 once (for the first Friday afternoon session). This session was also the only one to record an average audience of less than 100,000.

Sport1, the commercial sports broadcaster and long-term PDC broadcast partner in Germany, has also enjoyed a viewership rise. In the last five years, the average live total audience (for viewers aged three and above) has risen from 240,000 to 460,000, a two per cent total viewing share and 4.6 per cent of the target audience of 14 to 49 year olds. This included a record-breaking peak audience of 1.86 million viewers for the 2015 final (and average of 1.36 million).

 RTL, the free-to-air commercial broadcaster in the Netherlands with rights to PDC events up until and including the 2017 World Championship, has also displayed impressive audience figures. Matches are shown on the RTL7 channel, and with two previous Dutch winners of the World Championships in Raymond van Barneveld and Michael Van Gerwen, plus van Gerwen’s recent success across a number of PDC events, the Netherlands’ place as a key darts territory is understandable. RTL7 recorded audiences of 1.7 million and 2.05 million in 2013 and 2014, respectively, as van Gerwen made the World Championship final on both occasions.
For the 2016 event, RTL7 recorded an average audience across the tournament of 566,000 people aged six and above per broadcast, an 11.6-per-cent share. The most-watched round was the semi-finals which featured two Dutchmen in van Barneveld and Jelle Klaasen, notching up more than 1.56 million viewers.

Fox Sports Australia, the pay-TV broadcaster and rights-holder in the country, showed coverage across its Fox Sports 1, 2 and 3 channels. The live final was watched by a projected audience of 10,000 on what was an early Monday morning slot due to the time difference. Highlights of the final in the more favourable timeslot of Monday evening were seen by 18,000 people. The highest projected audience was for the quarter-finals that took place on Friday evening in London (Saturday early morning in Australia), with 33,000, adding another 21,000 for highlights on Saturday afternoon.

The commercial strides made by the PDC helped guarantee the highest prize fund in the history of the event; for 2016 a total of £1.5 million (and £300,000 for the winner) was offered. This figure will rise after it was announced in December that betting firm William Hill had extended its title sponsorship of the event for another five years until 2020, with prize money by that year expected to exceed £2 million.

The PDC also utilised its numerous social media platforms to promote the competition as content across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Vine and Snapchat increased fan engagement. The strategy included pre-tournament interaction such as archive moments of previous competitions to build up to the start of the event, plus graphics, results, fixtures and statistics, videos, photographs and interviews were able to be viewed and shared by followers.

Total reach for the PDC’s Facebook platform was 8.55 million, leading to 18,000 page likes, 186,500 post likes and 2.25 million video views. Twitter followers increased by 15,250 between the beginning and the end of the tournament as 36.8 million impressions were recorded, with 36,500 retweets and 1.1 million video views.

Likewise, the PDC YouTube channel received 1.1 million views, amounting to 2.52 million minutes of video footage viewed. The number of followers of the PDC’s Instagram account increased by 11,800 while Vine had 7.1 million loops from 83 videos and Snapchat had 4.53 million unique users and 56.1 million story views.

Social media presence is at its most effective when working in tow with broadcasters of an event in order to drive attention, and the aforementioned figures only relate to the official PDC channels.

While the World Championships is the pinnacle of the PDC’s portfolio, the Premier League, which takes place annually with weekly matches across various locations in the UK, Ireland and (as of 2016) the Netherlands, is also popular.
Viewing figures in the UK for the final of the Premier League, which after the first year was played on the same night as the semi-finals, have grown from a seven-day average of 130,000 for the first final in 2005, to 334,000 for the 2015 event. Since the finals moved permanently to the O2 Arena in London in 2012, the average viewing figure on Sky Sports 1 and 2 has not dropped below 290,000 viewers. Sport1’s coverage has also continued to attract larger audiences, growing from a 130,000 total average audience (aged 3+) in 2012 to 240,000 after the 2015 tournament, and it was already averaging 210,000 as of 21 March this year after seven rounds of fixtures.

Away from the key markets, the PDC has contracts with broadcasters in New Zealand, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Scandinavia, and Asia among others, offering events including the UK Open, World Matchplay and European Championships an international footprint. While it might be too early for some of these markets to gauge specific audience numbers, looking at online traffic around events and affiliation tours does give an indication of darts’ development. In countries where data is available for the 2016 World Championships, such as Hungary, Denmark and Italy, it is clear that the sport is still in the early stages of growth but has some promising ground to build on.

Using broadcast deals to lay the foundations has been part of the PDC’s global development strategy. By showing viewers the product on television first, interest can then be built before cementing support by bringing events to these areas, as Porter explained. “If you look at our World Series,” he said, “that’s going into territories where the events are live on TV - Middle East, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and now China - so by showing people the product on TV first, when it’s not something they’re used to, we are giving them an education and a birth into the product.”
However, the PDC recognises the need to adapt its media offering depending on the market it is working with, rather than focusing on a “one-size-fits-all” approach for every nation. Understanding cultural differences of the sport, according to Porter, is a challenge: “Its origins over here are as a pub sport even though it isn’t really that anymore at our level but that’s not the case in every territory. For example in China there isn’t really a pub culture. In Japan they have a culture of specific darts bars and then you’ve got territories like Australia where they have a big ex-pat market, the Middle East is the same so it’s about tailoring our offering to each individual market.”

The PDC also has its livepdc.tv online streaming service, which is available dependent on geo-block restrictions to subscribers for a monthly or annual fee. The channel shows live coverage and highlights of its events, while deals with Sportradar and Perform mean the two distribute live coverage of events from the Pro and European Tours and World Series to their media and betting clients. In light of its tailored approach, livepdc.tv does not currently produce unique programming and content away from the events themselves, as the widespread demand is not there. Instead, the focus, according to Porter, is just as much on the new generation of viewer as the old: “There’s a whole new generation of darts fans now who don’t know that Phil Taylor beat Dennis Priestly at The Circus Tavern and that doesn’t really matter as such because they can watch the new stuff and enjoy that instead.”

The live platform is scheduled to change after the PDC announced a five-year deal at the end of March with digital agency Rippleffect and video streaming specialist StreamAMG to launch a new video streaming service that merges the PDC’s main website with livepdc.tv. The new platform is aimed at growing subscriptions to its live service and attendances at events, and is expected to launch ahead of the inaugural Champions League of Darts in late September.

This tailored approach has helped promote darts in the UK by offering coverage across both pay-TV and free-to-air platforms. In addition to Sky’s long-term association with the PDC dating back to its inception, ITV4, the general entertainment and sports channel of the UK free-to-air commercial broadcaster, also has the rights to the European Championship, Players Championship, UK Open and The Masters. Furthermore, the Champions League of Darts, a new event in 2016, will be shown on the BBC, the public-service broadcaster. Prior to this deal, the BBC had shown every World Championship sanctioned by the rival BDO between 1978 and 2016 (although for the last two years it has shared coverage with pay-TV’s BT Sport).

Another challenge has been the issue of gambling legislation in different territories, due to the prominence of gambling sponsors for many of the tournaments. It is something the PDC is constantly working on, and according to Porter will change the landscape for the PDC over the next few years.

Looking ahead to the future, Porter believes the growth of darts will only continue. The PDC’s approach to promoting the sport since the inception of the company has seen them
“take risks with the right intentions to grow the sport globally and increase the depth of players.”

“I think we’ll be stronger than ever domestically”, he said, “because our events will be more established and we’ll continue with our international growth. I can’t see anything other than another period of growth.”

While the sport faces a challenge in now further increasing its international footprint, there are many positive signs looking ahead. For Porter, this includes the diversity and depth of players taking part in tournaments.

He remarked: “We’ve now got 128 professionals and a further pool of 300 to 400 domestically and then the same number overseas who play in our affiliated tours in different territories. We’ve got a tour in Scandinavia, in Australia, in Russia. So the next thing will be to see champions coming from one of these new markets.”