

England Students Team Manager Jon Shapland assesses his squad

The England Students pool team for Glasgow '08 shows a high turnover of players from that which was triumphant by a record margin at Leeds '07. That is not to say that I am at all unhappy with the team at my disposal though. The graduations of Martin Pratt and my talismanic former right-hand man Paul Edwards aside, all of those to have been in Leeds were present at the trials for Glasgow; and all but two were out-qualified by players who bettered them on the day!

Without being harsh, it would be fair to say there were a few players only there to make up the numbers at last year's inaugural trials. This year, however, out of a total of sixty-one nomination forms received, forty-three could quite easily make a strong case for a trial at the least. As it turned out, the 32-player field comprised those, and only those, who could lay claim to (at least) one of the following criteria:

- a 60% average for their university team in Coventry;
- a last-32 finish in the Billiards Boutique Individual Championship;
- having been a previous English Universities team member; or
- a more-than respectable record from the world of mainstream pool.

Without further ado, allow me to give you a run-down of my team...

Returning from last year's English Universities team are Wolverhampton's Joseph Tonkin and Cambridge's Rob Cork. Indeed, both were actually with me when I first took up the role of Team Manager in Swansea '06. Joe has previously been an Individual Championship semi-finalist, was the tournament MVP at Leeds '07, and in the world of mainstream pool is now into his second season on the IPA's UK Tour. Rob's involvement at representative level actually stretches back further than my own, and with the graduation of Edwards, Rob is now the longest serving player for the English Universities. Rob is a thoroughly class-act on and off the table, and I could not have hoped for a better candidate to succeed Paul Edwards as captain of the English Universities.

Coming through the trials undefeated was Cambridge's Pete Atkinson. Pete may have flown in somewhat under the radar to many, but for those who know him away from Coventry this will have come as absolutely no surprise. Pete won no fewer than four of his five matches on deciding frames, including many high-pressure finishes against three members of last year's English Universities team. Having lost his first match, Warwick's James Murphy stormed right the way through the one-loss bracket to become the only English-based player to secure a place at both the snooker and pool Home Internationals for 2008. James went on to win a perfect twelve frames out of twelve in the snooker, and will add major firepower to the pool team if he can maintain that sort of form.

Completing the list of successful trialists were Warwick's Kushal Vadi and Newcastle's Nick Veuger. Now, granted that I only see the majority of university pool players once a year, but this is all I have to judge on, and from what I have seen for myself these are easily the two most improved players on the university

pool circuit over the last twelve months. I take my hat off to these two players, their workman-like style of play reminds me very much of my own, and they will add the balance that any team needs to maximize its chances of success. In Kushal and Nick I have two very competently-skilled players who I furthermore know will make good decisions under pressure, a quality that cannot be underestimated in the pressure-cooker environment of the showpiece event of university pool. For any team to be successful it needs players who win frames they have no right to win just as much as it needs the big finishers.

Joining the six successful trialists are my two direct picks straight onto the team for Glasgow '08, Anglia Ruskin's Rich Wharton and the University of the West of England's Lee Morris. Rich is an experienced IPA Tour player (currently ranked inside the top-100), but is nonetheless still young and extremely hungry, exploding onto the university pool scene in 2008 with a debut win in the Individual Championships. Lee's achievements in mainstream pool are astounding in quality and numerous in number – indeed, he required a separate sheet of A4 paper attached to his nomination form to list them! Arguably the most impressive are captaining Wales' Under-21 team as well as representing the full men's team. Not since the arrival of Paul Edwards on the university pool scene have I been as excited about working with a player as I am about Lee. When all else has failed and it comes the time for one to pull out an absolute god-shot or lose, Lee is one of those rare breed of players that seem to have be able to find the shots within themselves.

All this talk of our own team, and not a mention of our opponents yet!

Clearly the teams from the Emerald Isle will be the main obstacles to this England Students team maintaining my 100% record as Team Manager. Northern Ireland will call upon the talismanic 1998 Federation rules world under-18 champion Glen Spalling from the University of Ulster, Coleraine, whilst also boasting IPA Tourist and Individual Championship runner-up Raymond Todd of Queen's University, Belfast. Not playing in the UPC-BUSA inter-university events, the Ireland Students players are a largely unknown quantity, but if they can get Graham Baitson and 2007 European Champion Stephen Dempsey to travel they will also surely be a force to be reckoned with.

Whilst they do have a few more-than-capable players, Wales Students have only Cardiff's pool of talent to draw upon this year, and with Mark McCulloch now graduated to the role of Team Manager one would imagine that, whilst they should nonetheless have a very steady team, Scotland Students will lack the firepower to challenge for the title. That said, the chances are that one of these teams will beat one of the "big three" over the course of the weekend, so we underestimate them at our peril!

All-in-all, the Student Home Internationals promises to be a truly great event this year. With the three British teams and the two Irish teams finally coming together to test themselves against the best from all five countries, as well as the added benefit of it being a hotel event, Glasgow '08 should be a tournament to remember for all involved."