



# One Foot In The Gammon

Monthly Backgammon in Ealing Newsletter

**BGIE**

**Issue 4**

## *What's that coming over the hill??*



*Is it a monster?*



***Yes it's a monster.....tournament!***

See page 15-16 for details

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# Editors page

Dear All,

As I sit here contemplating life and keeping my spirits up by listening to Ian Dury blast out Sex & Drugs and Rock 'n Roll, I had previously been wondering what on earth possessed me to start a monthly newsletter about Backgammon. I mean, my life used to be so exciting, never knowing where I was going to wake up, perhaps in a beautiful woman's arms, or on some council estate behind the rubbish bins with a dead cat for company, or even on the little island in the middle of Barnes pond with no idea of how I got there. Once I even woke up on a beach in a faraway land with little or no memory of what I was doing there, although the beach in question turned out to be Brighton. Now all I seem to worry about is newsletter content, and watching the faces of our committee member's glaze over as I rant at them for not getting me enough copy to share with the faithful readership.

It was yesterday that I had that Eureka moment whilst playing the lovely Anna Clarke. Anna, as most of you know, is one of the nicest people to play Backgammon. Friendly, chatty and always ready to offer advice if you request it. I asked Anna why on earth she volunteered as TD at the Hippodrome, as I couldn't understand why anyone would offer their services for a bunch of BG players (some of whom can be very annoying and ungrateful) when they can instead just play the game they love. She (very cleverly) replied "why do you write your newsletter?" to which I couldn't think of a reply until she followed up with "**because it's a challenge and we care!**"

So to sum up, whilst I have had a very difficult few days what with committee issues, newsletter content, bad back, dodgy knee and an incontinent dog on steroids, (look out for my article in next month's issue called "early morning piss patrol") those seven words changed everything and I think I might just make them my family motto. Thank you Anna!

Darren Woodcock

Editor

## **CAPTION OF THE MONTH**



**We have the Lock & Stock, just missing the two smoking barrels!**

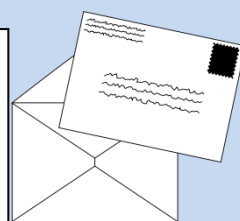
It's competition time and a very big thank you to Peter Bennet for giving us permission to use this unusual photo taken at Coombe Abbey, our new venue for the UK Open

We are offering a bottle of wine for the best caption so please email your entries to [dwoodcock@tallyhoeevents.co.uk](mailto:dwoodcock@tallyhoeevents.co.uk)

The winner will be published in next months' newsletter.



## *Letters Page*



*Dear Auntie Darren,*

*I couldn't help notice that all 4 players in Division 1 of the London League this quarter are Ealing regulars. Also, that 5 out of the last 7 winners of that League are from your club! Why is it that you guys are so awesome?? If I join, can I also expect to be propelled to the top? Or on the contrary, should I stay away because I just wouldn't be able to compete at your level??*

*Rookie101*

Dear Rookie101,

Well, what can I say? We are a dedicated bunch and we don't spare any expense on bribes to the organiser of the London League - check out his Harley Davidson when you get a chance ;-)

Seriously, we are really lucky to have a group of very good players which, by the way, goes well beyond the four that you mentioned. That said, we really try our best to welcome all levels of players, including beginners: you can play at all our tournaments for as little as £3 registration fee (even £0 on your first visit to the club!) and you don't have to wager any money at all until you feel comfortable to do so. If you join, you will be indeed playing some very good players along the way, but the way we see it, this will give you a chance to learn from them without having to risk losing your shirt. Plus, you never know, anyone can beat any opponent on a good dice day, and you could claim some pretty good "trophy wins" in the process.

As to whether you should expect to be "propelled to the top", well, that is truly entirely up to you and how much work you want to put into it. Don't forget, though, that this is first and foremost a game for fun, and also that unfortunately there is not enough money in BG to entertain many dreams of professionalism, so you may want to keep that day job rather than going "all in" on our game. That said, I reckon that any dedicated player can make it to a very good level within 1-2 years.

So do join us whenever you feel like it! And join also the London League while you're at it by simply sending an email to [chelseamuffin@aol.com](mailto:chelseamuffin@aol.com) – it is truly one of the best ways to get into our local BG scene and it's only by populating it entirely with Ealing players that we will manage to keep our hold at the top!

Darren

Dear Editor,

*May I say I think for the most part Tony Lezard's National Rating System for BG players is very good. However, I do not agree with the fast tracking for the first 400 experience points. This comes from Hungarian Arpad Elo's rating system for chess. I'm not sure whether it should be used for chess but it certainly should not be used for backgammon. This is because of the high luck element in backgammon, so that some players can be lucky in their first 400 experience points which will elevate their ranking, unnaturally, for some time to come.*

*The weakness of the fast tracking has not come to light in chess as a player's rating for his first 20 games (say) will be very similar to his rating for the next 100, as chess is almost all skill.*

*I know of no good rating system in sports that rates early form more highly than recent form. I realize that after the first 400 experience points there is an inbuilt weighting in favour of more recent BG matches, but the damage is often done in the first 400 experience points to distort the ratings table.*

**Concerned from Cockfosters**

Dear Concerned,

We passed your comments onto Tony and he very kindly took the time to put together a very interesting article relating to your concerns on page 6.

**Editor**



# UKBGF Ratings by Tony Lezard



Tony Lezard is a member of the UKBGF board. He is responsible for, and the author of, the UKBGF ratings website.

Tony Lezard, creator and administrator of the national ratings service at <https://results.ukbgf.com>, explains what the ratings formula means and why the bar for changing the formula should be set very high indeed.

I sometimes receive suggestions for how the formula used for the national ratings service could be improved. It's hard to argue that the current formula is unimprovable, but hastily changing it causes its own problems, even if the rationale for making a change is sound. Let's examine this more closely.

## What do we mean by changing the formula?

The rating we are all familiar with is the result of applying a single [formula](#) repeatedly over a list of match results, with the players' ratings being what comes out at the end. If the sequence of results changes (usually by adding new results at the end), the formula is recomputed over the entire sequence again.

For each match result in the sequence, the ratings formula is applied twice, once for the winner, once for the loser, taking as its input the ratings of both two players and the current the players' experience level, returning a number by which the rating will change:

$$\text{rating\_change} = f(\text{rating}, \text{experience}, \text{opponent\_rating}, \text{points\_won})$$

where `points_won` is the match length, or the negative of that quantity, according to whether the player in question won or lost the match.

The change in rating is computed and applied for each player in the match, and then we move on to the next result in the sequence and repeat the process. Most of the time, we can save ourselves a lot of computational effort by making use of the property that when a result is added at the end of the sequence, you can use the current ratings as an intermediate result in the calculation of the new ratings.

It is important to note that there is only one formula, iterated over all the results in the sequence. It is incorrect to declare that “henceforth” the ratings formula will be something else – what you are actually doing is saying that the date of the match is now a dependent part of the formula:

$$\text{rating\_change} = f(\text{rating}, \text{experience}, \text{opponent\_rating}, \text{points\_won}, \text{date\_of\_match})$$

and internally the function  $f$  compares `date_of_match` to some hard-wired value and applies either the old formula or the new one.

So a change in formula is necessarily a retrospective change, applied to every result in the match sequence, however, a ratings formula with new data required and an embedded discontinuity is ugly and lacks credibility.

Keeping the date out of the calculation and using a new formula throughout is definitely cleaner, but it creates a new oddity. If a formula change is implemented, then history is erased: all historic claims of reaching some particular milestone like an impressive rating never happened. You might, or might not, be able to replace those occasions with other milestones, but you no longer own the particular achievement you thought you did.

It could also have the effect of changing past winners of competitions such as the Holland Park Ladder, which rely on the output of the ratings formula applied to a subset of the results.

### **It's all about the rank**

For most people, their ranking in the ratings table is the statistic of prime importance. The rating is a proxy for how good you are at backgammon, and the actual numbers are somewhat arbitrary, but everyone wants to be the best!

So when we consider changes to the ratings formula, it is crucial to look at how it will affect people's rank in the table. A change in formula will shuffle the rankings about a bit, and without knowing anything more about the change, you would expect about half the players will go up in the table and half down, with a few staying in the same place.

There won't necessarily be an equal division of winners and losers. A change whose only effect on the ranking was to shift the player at the top of the table to the bottom would improve the ranking of every player except for that one. However, the total ranking change must cancel out to zero.

### **Rationales for change**

You might want to change the ratings formula for one of a couple of reasons.

The first is where a participant in the ratings system has come forward with an impression that there is an unfairness in the ratings table and it is not accurately reflecting backgammon ability. The suggestion is an effort to provide a remedy.

This does inevitably single out one group of players in the ratings table at the expense of another, pushing them up the table as the others go down. This immediately creates a tension in the debate, and careful justification that will be broadly accepted by all participants is required to explain why the new formula is a better proxy for playing ability.

The other grounds for suggesting a change are technical ones, such as a provable bettering of the theory developed by Arpad Elo, or a superior development of it for the specifics of backgammon. This does not have to be motivated by any perceived issue – it could be a paper presented independently by researchers disinterested from the UK ratings. So far I have not seen any examples of this type of work, but it would be interesting.

### A worked example

Let us consider one recent suggestion I have received (from Chris Hamilton). Chris suggests abolishing the “K-factor” – the boost given to new players designed to accelerate them to a more representative rating when they enter the table.

Intuitively, one would expect this change to clip the wings of the less-experienced players and pull them towards the centre of the table, and indeed we do see higher-experienced players moving towards both ends of the table relative to their less-experienced counterparts.

In more detail, Chris’s change would improve the ranking of 41% of all players, while 58% would go down, and 1% would stay the same. Compared to an overall average experience of 401, in the top half of the table the average experience of those whose rank increases under this change is 974, and in the bottom half, the average experience of those who go down in rank is 605. Conversely, the experience of players who go down in the top half, or up in the bottom half, is below the average.

The pull towards the centre is felt by everyone: all of the top 100 players’ ratings go down, by an average of 63 points.<sup>1</sup>

### The 50-50 rule

Is this a reasonable change to be making? Perhaps. If you are a strong player with high experience, or a weak player with low experience, you’re going to come out well from it so there’s a point in its favour.

As noted previously, you’ll find that roughly 50% of players will benefit in the rankings from any given change, incentivising them to support the proposal regardless. It can be hard to disentangle ‘pure’ consideration of whether a change should be made from the fact of what it will do to oneself personally in the ratings table.

<sup>1</sup> Figures correct as of the end of Friday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2017.



In practice, we can't poll everybody in the table as we can't verify everybody's identity. But one cohort who we do have verified contact details for is UKBGF members, and it is the UKBGF's own ratings table so that sounds fair enough. But this introduces a new bias: 71% of UKBGF members are in the top half of the table, and they have a lot of experience between them – an average of 1,243 points. In the example we have been looking at, they stand to gain more than most.

Viewed from a certain vantage point, passing a resolution for this proposal could look like a self-serving clique manipulating a ratings system that has been provided for all backgammon players in the country to inflate their own rankings in it. While this is unlikely to be how the voting members feel about it, impressions count.

But the fact is that every way of adjusting the formula will contain within it this property of about 50% of players benefitting personally, and there will always be potential for resentment and schisms involving aggrieved parties as a result.

One way of accounting for this effect would be to take 50% of the vote as a given and require that the proposition impresses a majority of the players who are going to lose out, i.e. a 75% margin overall. This might sound like overkill, but there is also another factor to consider.

### A question of integrity

I don't know if the formula we use on the UKBGF site is mathematically the best one there is, but one thing I can say for it is that it has pedigree.

The formula traces its lineage via Elo's chess formula(e) to Andreas Schneider's First Internet Backgammon Server (FIBS), which launched in 1992. From 2005 I implemented the formula unaltered for the MCC Backgammon Society and the London Clubs League, initially just to keep track of the club members and gauge their playing strength. Again, no changes to the formula were made when my software began to drive the UKBGF national ratings in 2014, and none have been made since then.

The virtue of never changing the formula means no one can possibly be accused of having an axe to grind, or a hidden agenda at play. It's a selection brought to us by history that the UKBGF didn't make. Like a dice roll, it may be good or bad, but at least it's *fair*.

Once we start tinkering with the formula, we destroy that impartiality forever. We become open to accusations of manipulating it in favour of one group of players over another. If we leave it alone, then for better or for worse, it remains an independent adjudicator.

## The Difficult Position

It is not my opinion that changing the ratings formula should be inconceivable, but I do believe that there needs to be a compelling case for any change, ideally with a mathematical foundation. If it passes that test, there should remain a strong barrier to putting it into effect – for example, requiring it to secure 75% of any vote on the question, and perhaps also limiting how frequently a proposal or one similar to it may be voted upon. The 75% threshold is not without precedent: an amendment to the United States constitution requires ratification by the same proportion of states.

We've seen how any formula change can have unexpected consequences, and how implementing a change will cost a fair chunk of reputational capital for the UKBGF, and risks fostering division in the backgammon community.

And we've also seen how all change proposals have the potential to carry a large number of voters along with them without much effort.

Making the formula difficult to change strengthens the ratings as a resource for all, and would in turn strengthen any successor should one be adopted in the future.

© Tony Lezard 2017



## Poetry Corner



### "Enigma Variations" by Chris Hamilton

1

Always with a ready smile,  
he plays by instinct and some little guile.  
Seek him here or seek him there,  
Siddiqi seated everywhere.

2

Politeness is his middle name,  
he builds upon his scope for fame ,  
but should he lose , shook horror, flop,  
he stays transfixed, quite rooted to the spot.

3

Once more he rises from the ashes,  
to cheat the reapers flailing scythe.  
The bell that tolls, tolls not for thee,  
as Zeus bestows 5 lives for free.

4

The Gregory Peck of BG world,  
he always has a friendly word,  
once a pupil, now much more,  
a master, in the sky he soars.

5

He fails to think outside the box,  
that baffles those beside him.  
The dice are shaken, never stirred,  
with clocks and scramblers now preferred.

6

Her tower of strength is Aragorn  
who sweeps aside the goblin hordes.  
She speaks old Elvish (Greek to me)  
and gammons orcs on wooden boards.

7

Cigar in mouth, he contemplates .....,  
as numbers crunch and whorl around,  
equations form and coalesce,  
and "soon" he finds the play that's best.

8

He rolls the dice from underhand  
and holds a piece by lemur grip.  
Struck down, he bounces back so well  
and runs to three score ten in pips.

9

He's like a speeding Rolls at chess,  
he rarely flops at poker.  
To roll a 6 must " Sing a Song",  
as normal handshakes all but gone.

10

The dragon enters breathing fire,  
and makes the last remaining point,  
he'd like to play a holding game,  
but leaving leaves him quite dismayed.

11

I thrice did offer him a kingly cube,  
and thrice he did refuse.  
Then Gandalf cried "You shall not pass",  
As White Beard raised his magic staff.

12

He touched all those around him,  
before his train ran out of track.  
The Jelly Hoot has sadly gone,  
But how his wit and passion shone.

13

He plays by feel and memory,  
far better than most sighted men.  
Tormenting harpies in his thrall.  
An inspiration to us all.

14

Gently doth she walk through life,  
while reaching out to kindred folk.  
The wind of change blows through her hair,  
above the breaking waves set fair.

15

Man at his best , he plays for fun,  
his backgames often lead to gammons won,  
but never does he get annoyed,  
in spite of prowling dogs or raucous noise.

# Classified Ads

## **The James Ahern Foundation**

*"Enabling the pursuit of passion"*



[www.jamesahernfoundation.org](http://www.jamesahernfoundation.org)

The Foundation is a small charitable trust founded in North London. Its aims are to help disadvantaged young people achieve their dreams: *enabling the pursuit of passion*. (See this month's feature on page 13)

## **The Castlebar**

**84 Uxbridge Rd, Ealing, W13 8RA**

**Tel: 020 8567 3819**

**A Backgammon friendly bar serving great food and drinks, and superbly run by Abel and his team.**

"This is a regular haunt of mine as it's always very welcoming. If you get a chance try the Full English breakfast, then drink beer until lunchtime and enjoy the fabulous homemade burgers!" Editor

## **Parade Fruiterers 7 St John's Parade, Mattock Lane W13 9LL**

**Family run greengrocers trading in Mattock lane for over 50 years. Sourced and hand-picked daily to supply the residents of Ealing with the best fruit and veg available at very reasonable prices.**

If any BG players would like their fruit/veg delivered to the Bowls club on a Thursday evening then please contact me on the details below. Editor

dwoodcock@tallyhoeevents.co.uk

Telephone 07834549700

# The James Ahern Foundation



The Foundation was formed in 2014 by Maria and Terry Ahern. Their son James had tragically died in a road accident in August. James had a passion for helping others and stories of his acts of kindness emerged in the aftermath of his death. His parents therefore decided to turn this into a force for good: The James Ahern Foundation.

The aims of the Foundation are simple: to help young people achieve their dreams. So far we have provided grants for varied aspirations such as singing lessons, drama, the arts, sports grants and funding trips to Africa to help build a

Current projects involve sponsoring a group in Southgate which aims to reach out to young people through Chess! So that got us to thinking, what about a similar project with Backgammon.

James had a proud Greek heritage through his mother Maria, and like all good young Greek boys he was taught to play Backgammon, or “Tavli”. So if there is a will, the Foundation would be keen to support a group aiming to reach out to young people in a social setting, to meet and play the game. Perhaps, like in Greece, they could slap their pieces with gusto!

For more information about the Foundation, or to support them, just visit the website at [www.jamesahernfoundation.org](http://www.jamesahernfoundation.org) or contact by email at [info@jamesahernfoundation.org](mailto:info@jamesahernfoundation.org)

**Editors note:** I have known the Ahern family for many years and there are no words I could ever say to Maria and Terry that could help alleviate the pain of losing their only child. James was a magical character, full of life and love, he had time for everyone from every walk of life, and sprinkled happiness around like it was going out of fashion. His funeral reflected his magical qualities with a huge attendance in the hundreds, filling the church, the aisles and overflowing into the grounds of the church.

I feel the strength of feeling we all had for their son has given Maria & Terry the strength to try to make something good come out of such a tragedy, and so The James Ahern Foundation was formed. I hope you will all support this worthy cause in all our future joint ventures.

# Diary of Events

DATE	EVENT	VENUE
<b>MAY</b>		
13	<a href="#">Birmingham Open</a>	Moseley All Services Club, Birmingham
15	<a href="#">Hippodrome monthly</a>	Hippodrome Casino, Leicester Square, London
26-28	<a href="#">London Open</a>	Henrietta Barnett School, Hampstead
<b>JUNE</b>		
9-11	<a href="#">Blackpool Imperial Cup</a>	Imperial Hotel Blackpool
12	<a href="#">Hippodrome monthly</a>	Hippodrome Casino, Leicester Square, London
24-25	<a href="#">BMAB Ranking Tournament</a>	Best Western Hotel, Long Eaton
<b>JULY</b>		
7-9	<a href="#">BIBA English Open</a>	Wokefield Park, Reading
10	<a href="#">Hippodrome monthly</a>	Hippodrome Casino, Leicester Square, London
15-16	<a href="#">22nd Liverpool Open</a>	Leo Casino, Liverpool
<b>AUGUST</b>		
12	<a href="#">UKBGF Clubs Championship</a>	The Priory Centre, St Neots, Cambs.
14	<a href="#">Hippodrome monthly</a>	Hippodrome Casino, Leicester Square, London
20-28	<a href="#">Mind Sports Olympiad</a>	JW3, Finchley Road, London NW3
<b>SEPTEMBER</b>		
1-3	<a href="#">4th UK Open</a>	Coombe Abbey Hotel, Warwickshire CV3 2AB

For weekly or monthly club events see:

[UKBGF Clubs page](#)

[London Players' League calendar](#)



# The 4<sup>th</sup> UK Open

## 1-3 September 2017



Four years ago a group of backgammon organisers from different parts of the UK got together at the Blackpool tournament to discuss two separate but related projects:

1. Organising a new national backgammon tournament worthy of the title “UK Open”, and
2. The formation of a new democratic body to help organise and grow the game of backgammon in the UK. This would become the [UK Backgammon Federation](#) or UKBGF.

Later the same year, in October of 2013, the UKBGF website was launched, although as yet there were no members; just an interim committee of volunteers. Then in September 2014 the first UK Open was held at the Ricoh Arena, Coventry. This attracted about 140 players, including the top two players in the world (Mochy and Michy from Japan) and the World Champion that year – Akiko Yazawa (also Japanese). A similar number of players attended the second and third UK Opens in 2015 and 2016 respectively, also at the Ricoh Arena.

For the [4th UK Open](#) this September we are moving to a magnificent new venue near Binley, also just outside Coventry. Coombe Abbey Hotel was originally a 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian Abbey and is set in 500 acres of parkland – see the aerial view. Guests can even book a [Medieval Banquet](#) and hire costume for the occasion! For the tournament we will have exclusive use of ‘The Courthouse’ for the entire weekend. This is an elegantly restored tennis clubhouse dating back to 1817.

Backgammon action will begin on the Friday afternoon, with satellites and jackpots, followed in the evening by the Warm Up and Super Jackpot. There will be three competitions or ‘flights’ in the main event spread over Saturday and Sunday: Masters, Advanced (or Intermediate) and Social Swiss (or Beginner). The Masters and Advanced will be double-elimination with a Last Chance, called the ‘Abbey Cup’, on Sunday for all players who have lost both lives. The total prize money last year exceeded £25,000, not to mention added prizes from sponsors, but you can play just for fun in the Social Swiss or the Advanced if you wish.



There will be plenty more backgammon action apart from the main events, including Doubles, Speedgammon and 1-pointers as well as seminars, the British Backgammon Awards and more.

If you like the sound of this tournament you should act NOW and book your accommodation. Our allocation of double and twin rooms at Coombe Abbey is limited, and when they are gone there may be no further availability. The special room rate (for single or double occupancy) is £120 per night, and penalty-free cancellation is possible up to 24 hours before arrival. There is also a special 'early bird' draw for UKBGF members which could cover your accommodation costs. What have you got to lose? For details of how to book, and to register for the tournament, visit

<http://ukbgf.com/uk-open/>

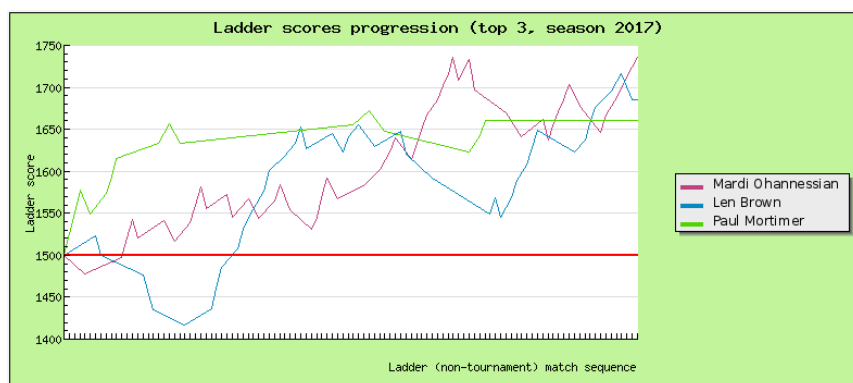


# Ealing Ladder Review

## by Len Brown

### Movers and Shakers

**Mardi Ohannessian** is on a roll as we watch the ladder progress into the middle stages of the year. The pack has been elbows out, shuffling and reshuffling itself, trying to find some order – and they are going to need all they can get to reign in the break away leader.



The top 10:

Ladder	Player	Rating	Rank Change
1	<b>Mardi Ohannessian</b>	1735.60	0
2	Len Brown	1684.89	5
3	Paul Mortimer	1660.37	0
4	Eric Maillebiau	1634.29	2
5	Ray Mills	1633.52	-1
6	Chris Hamilton	1621.92	-4
7	Jon Barnes	1617.44	2
8	Mike Michaels	1614.41	-3
9	Darren Woodcock	1610.71	2
10	Graham Read	1603.78	5

Mr G. Read and D. Dazzler Woodcock have not waited for others to alight from the front carriage before pushing their way into the top 10. Already on board, Len 'Switcheroo' Brown has swapped Chris 'The Hammer' Hamilton out of second place while Eric 'Half Bee' Maillebiau continues to sting his way towards the number one spot.

Less than half way through the year the game is most definitely on for Ealing and only time will tell the future. Everyone will roll some dice, some of us will climb ladders, some of us will be bitten by snakes and you would think would try to get away, but instead slide down the snake's tail – and then roll more dice and try to get past the snake again, maybe get bit again - then maybe roll some more dice.

# BGIE RESULTS

## Ealing Tournament Winners

### **Bowls Club**

6 April	T1: Darren Woodcock T2: Darius Firouzi T3: Alan Beckerson & Mike Michaels
13 April	T1: Anna Price & Barbaros Torun T2: Petar Vidovic T3: Darius Firouzi
20 April	T1: Len Brown T2: Eric Maillebiau T3: Mardi Ohannessian
27 April	T1: Michael Hewson T2: Len Brown T3: Tariq Siddiqi

### **The Grange**

3 April	T1: Darren Woodcock T2: Mike Ireland T3: Steve Carder T4: Paul Mortimer T5: Chris Hamilton
1 May	T1: Mardi Ohannessian T2: Jon Barnes T3: Bill Pope T4: Elias Hallak T5: Michael Hewson

## And lastly.....

One foot in the Gammon really does need your help!

Your contributions to our letters page, players profile, poetry corner (Mike Murton must know a few good ones!), Position of the Month, Caption of the month, or if you just want to amuse or bore us all with a hard luck story, or even a story of your BG travels, all would be very much appreciated.

Please email me at: **[dwoodcock@tallyhoeevents.co.uk](mailto:dwoodcock@tallyhoeevents.co.uk)**

or telephone: **07834 549700**

Speak soon, thanks all!

Darren