

Joe was a joy to watch in a week full of despair

FROM TOKYO came Margaret Thatcher's dangerously simply minded harangue. There also, the cowboy/actor leader of the free world fresh from his Libyan triumph, seeking to undermine terrorism... whilst simultaneously seeking from Congress money with which to undermine by violent means the democratically elected government of Nicaragua. From rural Ireland allegations of the rape of an eight-year-old child by a seventy-year-old man. From Wapping, the story of how iron bars and bricks were employed by those seeking justice in an industrial dispute.

And in Irish cities where heroin and alcohol abuse spread menacingly through the community a bitter resentment is felt by those who will have to foot the bill if Joe Rea and Kieran Mulvey have their self-interested way.

That was the week that was. Whenever you turned on your television set news of greed, evil, stupidity flooded the room. And above us, reflecting the spirit of the age, a malevolent cloud of cancer inducing radiation.

It was from this that those of us simple enough to care about sport turned to watch the world snooker championship. Snooker has had a bad press lately but it remains marvellous sport, and more, splendid theatre the story being about men at work and how they cope with fear, ambition, success and failure. It has been said that snooker is sporting soap opera, but it's not. Snooker is real. Joe Johnson proved that.

If you are too sophisticated for snooker or living in single-channel land you will only know that Joe Johnson is

the new world snooker champion. You won't have seen and heard him. You have missed a treat. Joe is a magic man.

Before the championship he was unconsidered, a journeyman pro ranked 16th in the world. He scratched a living at Holiday Camps, singing part-time in a 'pop group'. He'd made the quarter-finals of a couple of tournaments but that was about his mark. At 33 he was going nowhere. And he had six kids to feed.

The only thing Joe had going for him was talent. He was a brilliant cueman... in bursts. What he lacked was concentration, the ability to grind through the bad days when the balls didn't drop. He was, in the idiom of the snooker circuit, "loose". Cliff Thorburn is tight. Steve Davis is merciless. But to be like that you've got to want to win so bad it hurts.

Joe, chubby and clubbable, wasn't that hungry. So, he was due to get his in the early rounds. It never happened.

When he came from 12-9 down to beat former world champion Terry



the
**Eamon
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column

Griffiths 13-12 people started to take notice. Joe was in the semi-final now against Tony Knowles. Anyone in the semis against Knowles has a chance. Joe took his.

Now they interviewed him on BBC2. The other semi-final between Davis and Thorburn had still to be decided when David Vine asked Joe which of the two he fancied meeting in the final. "Neither" Joe replied smiling. He went on to talk about his six kids. Would they be coming to the final. Vine asked, No, said Joe, "I can't get them all in the car at once".

Having declared that he was enjoying himself and intended to continue doing so in the Final (against Davis) Joe played brilliantly over two days to win 18-12. The match was a touch unreal. You kept waiting for Joe to crack up. Or for Davis to slip into one of his invincible moods where he takes frame after frame. At such times the world number one is unplayable... and impossible to like.

For he takes an almost obscene pleasure in winning, a tight little grin of satisfaction playing on his tight little mouth as, not content with winning the frame, he lingers over the final shots of his century break.

The finish was anti-climactic but glorious. As each Johnson shot rattled home the crowd in the Crucible roared. Sitting at home I kept thinking of Joe's six kids feasting themselves on this miracle in their front-room. "Go on Dad". It must have been bloody marvellous.

What was to come was even better. Although kids would be too young and too innocent to know it. To appreciate Joe in victory you had to know the world, the weasel world of public life where nobody says what they mean and nobody means what they say.

When Joe had received his cheque for £70,000 and the world championship trophy David Vine appeared on the Crucible floor.

"How does it feel Joe," Vine enquired. "I would just like to say a word about Steve," Joe replied. "He's a great player. People have a go at him but he's a perfect gentleman on and off the table. I learnt a lot playing Steve today."

Now at a great moment in his life Joe was wonderfully gracious. The words were from the heart, the humility and generosity, real and moving. Joe was inspiring. Not because he won, but because of how he won... graciously, beautifully.



JOE JOHNSON... brilliant play at the Crucible.

If so much of what we see and hear from public men, in sport as in everything else, causes one to question human nature, arouses deep foreboding about the days ahead, is simply indecent... well here was Joe, journeyman snooker playing proving otherwise.

"Did you ever think you'd win the world championship Joe?" someone

asked him afterwards. "Oh aye, when I practise by myself, I'm always playing for the world championship. I've been world champion nearly every day... I've dreamt of being world champion nearly every day... I've dreamt of being world champion." He smiled a little as he said this.

"When did you think you could win the championship, Joe?" "I knew I could win when I beat Terry Griffiths. I'd never beaten him before. It were then I knew I were a good player."

Joe's been a pro seven years. Most of them lean. He travelled to tournaments by bus and train, sometimes he couldn't afford to stay overnight. Until recently he mixed snooker with working as a fitter for the Gas Board in Bradford.

Now something wonderful has happened to him, his wife and his six children. He was going to buy a mini-van so they could all travel to tournaments together. No, he wouldn't be doing all that many cash-in exhibitions. That would take him away from home too much.

After seeing him you went to bed feeling better. In a world of Brighton bombers where this week up the road a woman was murdered because she had married a Catholic, where danger lurks in every breath you take, where every public utterance seems to be a lie... in this disenchanting year of '86... a good guy, a decent guy, had won. Thank God for sport.