

HEARN-ING POWER!

Barry's boys still top of the Snooker big league

BARRY HEARN is the acceptable face of snooker. Suave, sophisticated, cool under pressure; all the adjectives fit the Londoner as he bestrides the snooker world with eight of its best exponents in his care.

The 41-year-old, a true East Ender, used to dominate professional snooker to the point of embarrassment. But the arrival of John Parrott and Stephen Hendry, No. 2 and 3 in the world last year, put an end to that.

Now only three of his octet are in the top eight in the world and, lo and behold, Hearn and his boys have a fight on their hands.

"We've got to begin winning again," he said at the lunch yesterday to announce the field for this year's Benson & Hedges Irish Masters at Goffs Auditorium, Co. Kildare, from March 27 to April 1. "And we've got to start promoting our sport properly."

To that end, Hearn rejoined the Board of the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association, professional snooker's controlling body, last week, but denies that it was as a result of a well planned coup to give him control of the sport.

"Yes, I wanted to get back on the Board, but the votes of my boys would not have been enough to swing it. It was the members who decided that there should be a change. For the first time in years at a W.P.B.S.A. A.G.M. there were more members than board members present."

Hearn was blunt about the

influence of TV on snooker: "Snooker depends on TV; it gives the sponsor the exposure he wants and in the long run, that's what it's all about. We value the print media, but at the end of the day, it is TV coverage which will decide the future of snooker."

"People want to see the best players in action, and that's why I am sure the viewing figures for last week's Mercantile Classic in Britain will be down. Only two of the top 16 made it into the last 16

By John Brennan

and it was like watching Dallas without J.R. and Bobby.

"Because live soccer is so popular, I see the game appearing more and more on satellite rather than terrestrial stations and I also see invitation events such as the Benson & Hedges Irish Masters as the way to promoting the game beyond from its heartland in Britain."

Although his stable of stars still dominates, one man he was never tempted to take on was Alex Higgins, the winner of the Irish Masters last year, and snooker's stormy petrel. "In return for what I provide

to my players, they are entitled to rely on me for everything, including ringing at 3 a.m. if needs be. I don't think I could handle that with Alex.

"His feat of winning last year's Benson & Hedges Irish Masters when he seemed so out of touch and was still obviously hurt after his fall, was one of the finest I've seen in snooker, but honestly, it's not for me."

Despite the fact that he has eight of the world's finest players at his disposal, Hearn's No. 1 is still unashamedly Steve Davis. The manager will be the player's best man at his

wedding later this year, and he calls him his best friend.

"Steve is my best friend and the other players know it, and it does not cause them any problems. He's been a credit to the sport and he's my pal, and that's the end of it."

Hearn is enough of a businessman to realise that his safe, secure, bunch of Davis, Willie Thorne, Terry Griffiths et al needed a bit of livening up, if not quite the presence of Higgins.

"I took Jimmy White on board and although he has given me more trouble than the rest put together, he was worth it," and there speaks a true businessman.

Higgins takes on the best

THE TOP eleven players in the world plus defending champion Alex Higgins comprise a distinguished cast for the 1990 Benson and Hedges Irish Masters Snooker Tournament at Goffs Auditorium, Co. Kildare, from Tuesday March 27 to April 1, writes **JOHN BRENNAN**.

Higgins, Steve Davis, John Parrott and Stephen Hendry receive byes into the quarter-finals where they will meet the survivors of the first round matches. Details of the event were released at a lunch in Dublin yesterday where the guest of honour was Barry Hearn, manager of half the field in the tournament.

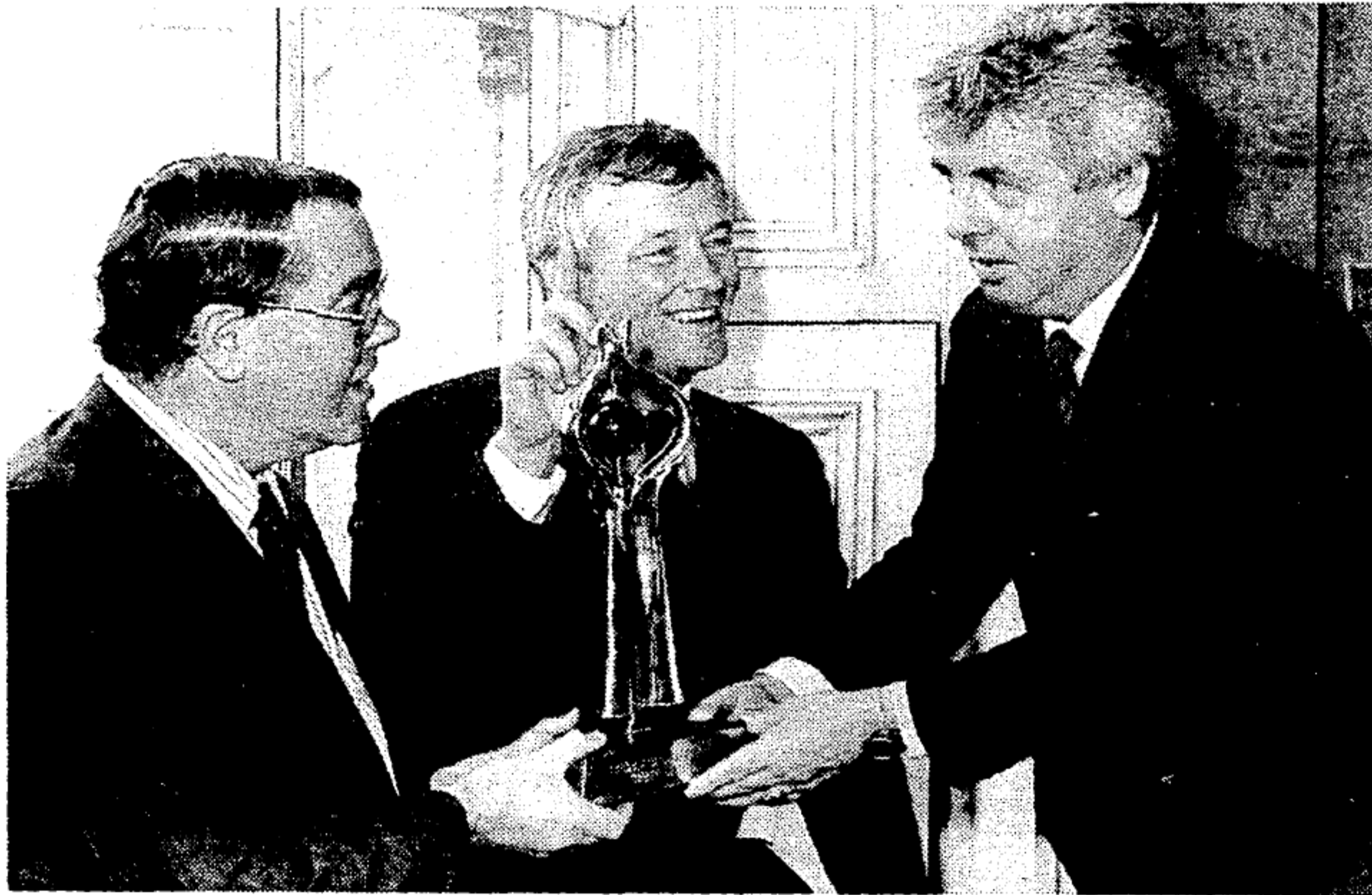
Last year's victory by Higgins will be a hard act to follow but the £150,000 prize fund should ensure a great tussle for the winner's share of £37,000. Higgins opens his defence with a match against the winner of the Cliff Thorburn-Dennis Taylor first round match, which means that only an Irishman can reach the semi-finals.

If there's such a thing as a weakness in Steve Davis's play, it is his vulnerability to a fearless potter. In his first match at Goffs, the world champion plays either Willie Thorne or Mike Hallett, two men not known for their reluctance to tackle a long one.

There's a special prize of £4,000 for the best break in the tournament with £20,000 on offer if the magical 147 can be recorded in the arena. Stephen Hendry likened to a "bull ring" last year.

TOP HALF: A — T. Griffiths (Wal.) v D. Mountjoy (Wal.). B — M. Hallett (Eng.) v W. Thorne (Eng). **BOTTOM HALF** — C — C. Thorburn (Can) D. Taylor (Irl.). D — J. White (Eng) v J. Johnson (Eng).

QUARTER-FINALS — Winner of A v J. Parrott (Eng); Winner of B v S. Davis (Eng); Winner of C v A. Higgins (Irl); Winner of D v S. Hendry (Sco).



● PICTURED at yesterday's reception to announce details of the Benson and Hedges Irish Masters, from left, Bert Koorn, managing director Benson and Hedges, Barry Hearn, chief executive Matchroom, and Kevin Norton, tournament director.