

Aubrey Malone reports on snooker's young gladiators who are ready to do battle at Goffs

Kings of the green baize

The Kildare venue is one of the most cherished among snooker's top players on the professional circuit

THE Benson & Hedges Irish Masters Snooker Tournament, which has been running all this week at Goffs Sales Ring in Kildare, is one of the most cherished venues on the professional circuit. Despite the fact that it's not a ranking event, it holds a place of high esteem for the green baize giants.

"You don't get the hospitality of Goffs anywhere else in the world", Steve Davis said to me once at the Keadeen Hotel in Newbridge.

The same day Jimmy White told me it was his second favourite event in the whole year. I didn't need to ask him what the first was ...

Davis and White, of course have had nightmare seasons by their standards, plummeting to ninth and eighteenth on the provisional world ranking list after a run of lacklustre performances. "Steve is being beaten by players who shouldn't even be at the same table as him", world number one Stephen Hendry said recently. The same statement holds true for White - but then it always has.

Davis takes centre stage at Goffs today, whereas Hendry, whose polished snooker has dominated this decade, just as Davis did in the eighties, makes his grand entrance tonight. Davis has won six world titles to Hendry's five, so nobody needs to be told

that if the pair of them meet in tomorrow's second semi-final, each will be sweating blood to come out on top.

"I want to be remembered as the best man that ever held a cue", Davis once said. This comment was echoed recently by his Scottish heir-apparent, when he said his ambition was to do everything Davis did, and then some. Hendry can equal Davis' record at Sheffield next month, when he steps out to defend his world crown. He hasn't been beaten there since Steve James upset the bookie's odds in the 1991 semi-final. But there's the minor hurdle of a Goffs' glamour tie to be negotiated.

The Irish Masters is the curtain-raiser for Sheffield, and to that extent it enables the top players to sharpen their swords, as it were, before the big one. This year the British Open comes between the two tournaments, but Goffs is still a huge boon for any player, and of course it's the only chance most Irish people have to see the world's top players in the flesh.

Alex Higgins was supposed to have received a 'will card' (no pun intended) entry to Goffs this year, but that plan was scuppered, to the chagrin of those of us who lament not only the passing of his legendary genius, but also the death of any real 'character' in the game today.

His namesake John -



Stephen Hendry ... probably the greatest snooker player ever to hold a cue.

provisionally world number 2 - is robotoid in his style, like the lion's share of the young Turks taking over the game today. You could say the same for his compatriot Alan McManus, and for the equally colourless green baize gladiators like Nigel Bond, Darren Morgan and John Parrott.

The 'flair' player, like Peter Ebdon and Tony Drago, don't seem to win as much as they should, probably because they let enthusiasm rule when discretion would seem to be the better part of valour. Impetuosity is also the cardinal sin of Ronnie O'Sullivan, who

The Irish Masters is the ideal preparation for the world championships in Sheffield next month

seems to have unseated Jimmy White as the new 'people's champion.' White called him 'a breath of fresh air' to snooker recently, but when things aren't going his way he tends to throw the head completely. He lacks the discipline of Davis or Hendry and to that extent it's hard to see him as a world champion for a few years yet.

Goffs, has a special place in the heart of our own Ken Doherty, who used to be an usher there. Doherty has had a wretched season so far. Despite his poor form he's full of confidence, and up to a provisional five on the world rankings, so he might be worth a flutter at Sheffield next month.

So who will win at Goffs? Your head would

have to say Hendry, no matter what your heart says, even though he has a poor record at this venue by his prestigious standards. He mixes the potting genius of White, with the technical expertise of Davis and looks set to continue his domination of the game until the new millennium, even though John Higgins is hot on his tail.

Whatever way you look at it, this is a tournament that's a very under-rated form guide for the world championships. The standard of snooker has taken a quantum leap in the past few years, as is evidenced by the huge crop



Doherty ... sure to be a hot favourite with the home supporters.

It's a chance for Irish fans to see the world's top players in the flesh



Jimmy White ... his second favourite event after the world championships.



Ronnie O'Sullivan ... a prodigious talent that lacks discipline.

of young players that are frightening the life out of the elite top 16. Welsh wizard Mark Williams won a major ranking event a few months back, and ice-cool talents like Andy Hicks, who dumped Davis out of Sheffield in the first round last year, are capable of doing the same, as is our own Joe Swail.

On their day, they are all capable of beating each other and the old stagers like Davis, Taylor and White are running scared from the precocious talents of the young lions. What I love about Ebdon is that he shows his emotions, whereas O'Sullivan is a

much-needed antidote to the cool, clean-cut, breed that have taken a lot of the flesh and blood out of the game.

Maybe the spirit of the game can all be encapsulated in one word: Higgins. The Alex Higgins that was, a rouge, but a loveable one. Nobody ever knew what he was going to do either on or off the table, least of all himself. John Higgins is probably a better all-round player than his namesake, but boy is he dull. It's hard not to pine for the days when snooker was a game of drama and high tension. A game almost invented for television, rather

than the highly efficient, but ultimately bland, concoction it has become today.

"No matter how fast you pot the balls", Ray Reardon said once, "the red still only counts for one point, and the black for seven." True, but I would pay more money to see Jimmy White or Ronnie O'Sullivan knock in an adrenalised 50 break than I would to see the charismatically-challenged Hendry make a maximum, and I think I speak for all true-blue snooker lovers the world over.

Come back, Alex, all your old hurricanes are forgiven!