



LAST Sunday Steve Davis, World snooker champion in 1988, was voted BBC Television's Sports Personality of the Year. There are so many sports awards these days, most of them linked to public relations and advertising promotions, that the concept of rewarding excellence has almost lost its meaning. But the BBC award, backed by tradition and significantly the result of a viewers' poll, is for real.

Steve Davis is the first snooker player to win this truly prestigious award. That he did so in an Olympic year — double silver medalist Linford Christie was runner-up — and after a triumphant season for British golfers — Sandy Lyle, U.S. Masters and World Matchplay champion finished in third place — proves that in the public mind at least, snooker, the cinderella sport that Davis graces with such distinction, has at last achieved respectability.

The honour bestowed on this 31-year-old Londoner last week is nothing less than a triumph of the public's good taste and sporting sensibility over one of the most enduring and prejudicial conspiracies ever mounted against a sport, which has ensured that despite its immense popularity with the people, snooker has never been given the coverage it deserves by sportswriters in these islands.

Prisoners of newspaper tradition, resentful of the power and immediacy of television which in contemporary times often challenges and undermines their status of sole providers of facts and comment, print journalists have tried to pretend (a) that snooker didn't exist and (b) that even if it did it wasn't in any case real sport.

Well it does exist, and snooker is real, and what's more the game popularised by television, and none the worse for that, possesses in Steve Davis its great champion, the finest sportsman — amateur or professional — currently playing in these islands.

Last Sunday, BBC viewers acknowledged this by preferring Davis to champions from what have hitherto been regarded as more real or acceptable sports like athletics and golf. Linford Christie is the fastest European sprinter of all time, Sandy Lyle had enjoyed the most successful season of any British golfer in history.

Yet it was Steve Davis, who won his fifth World Snooker Championship last May, that the people chose. Unlike the sportswriters, those enthralled by televised snooker appreciate just how real this sport is. And perhaps more profoundly the

Davis — the real People's Champion

people sense that in snooker, as embodied by Steve Davis, the values of graciousness and self-discipline are preserved and honoured. This in a sporting world increasingly threatened by greed, commercialism, cheating and, in many field sports like cricket, soccer and rugby, violence, that borders on and is frequently a definition of blackguardism.

The coarsening of British society — not yet, thank God, apparent here — is reflected in much of the sport that's played across the water. Golf remains splendidly immune from prevailing values. Snooker likewise. These two sports have much in common. Both are for the individual. Both demand precision. In snooker as in golf the person you've got to beat is yourself. Both are mind games. No team surrounds you to offer protection in moments of weakness, to camouflage your weaknesses, exaggerate your strengths.

In snooker as in golf cheating is virtually impossible, indeed in an age when ruthless bending of the rules is encouraged and often admired in other sports — Viv Anderson's recent proselytising in favour of the "professional foul" in soccer being a case in point — golf and snooker pros regularly observe the ethics of their sports by calling foul on themselves.

Sport should be, and if we are to remain civilised must be, well mannered, decent, free of the vices of commerce and politics. Sport must appeal to what is best in mankind — and reward it — rather than what's worse and reward that. Sadly, what ought to be is rarely reflected in the modern sporting world.

Look at the evil of professional boxing, its exploitation of young men like Mike Tyson, and now it seems Barry McGuigan, who stand only one good beating — and



Eamon Dunphy

one more big pay day — away from permanent damage to his health.

Reflect on the Olympic Games and Ben Johnson — and the medal winners who also took drugs but were smarter — better "advised" — than this pathetic victim of the modern Glory Game.

And while we're in the mood for reflection, consider the meanness of spirit that coloured September's All-Ireland Football Final, the naked blackguardism of every Rugby Union International Championship and the viciousness prevalent in Test Cricket where jaws are smashed by bowling aimed at heads rather than stumps.

Snooker, a working-class sport badly served or ignored by the press, is the antidote to the poisonous "norm" of contemporary sporting life. Television has taken the game directly to the people and by honouring Steve Davis as they did last week, the people have proved that their instinct for what is real and proper is more finely tuned than the instincts of those in newspaper offices who would arbitrate on such matters.

When they have deigned to profile Davis, print journalists have invariably referred to him as a "machine" rather than tell the truth . . . which is that he is a great sportsman possessing the qualities of skill, nerve, discipline and courage that separates champions from their rivals. Sport rewards these virtues, the real world does not necessarily do the same. The extent to which the real world has corrupted modern sport reflects precisely the degree by which sport in our time is diminished.

Snooker, retaining its traditional ethos and in the person of Davis rewarding the quintessential values which are being eroded in other games, survives . . . and like golf continues to flourish and thus offer us hope.

Hope to those of us who despair when other sports and their heroes are tarnished. Hope to the young and innocent who believe in real heroism as opposed to drug-induced glory or honours won by "professional fouls".

The triumphant existence of Steve Davis, drug-free, well mannered, engaged by the simple tools of cue and coloured balls in a battle of mind and spirit is for this observer, as for the millions who watch on television, a source of real inspiration.

How extraordinary therefore that not a single major sportswriter in Britain will write about this game, acknowledge its real glory, or promote its real heroes. In choosing Steve Davis, British Sports Personality of the Year, BBC viewers signalled a major advance for snooker in this marvellous game's Long March from the dingy obscurity of the back streets. Sportswriters, Governments and those in the sports community who share their disregard for snooker should heed this mark of the public's respect and affection for the heroes of the green baize.