

12 SNOOKER

Crucible touching distance away for Irish hopefuls but the bar gets higher

TEN minutes in a car, down streets flanked most of the way by the River Don on one side and the Sheffield and Tinsley Canal on the other, is all it takes to get from the World Snooker Academy at the English Institute of Sport in the city's traditional east end to the iconic Crucible Theatre.

This is the distance 128 players, including 16 invited amateurs, are looking to cover in the World Championship qualifiers, which got underway at the EIS yesterday. The Home of Snooker is a lot closer for these hopefuls than in the days when the qualifiers were held in Prestatyn in north Wales but it can still feel like light years away.

"You feel the butterflies a few days before the Crucible," says Fergal O'Brien. "These are different nerves, not so good nerves. There's almost a dead man walking feel to it. It is so important to qualify it feels like you've won a tournament. Being beaten [in the qualifiers] is the biggest disappointment you can have."

Nobody knows these twin truths better.

O'Brien has made the Crucible 10 times. He reached the quarter-final in 2000, a feat sandwiched by his win at the 1999 British Open and his loss in the decider of the Masters in the last frame to Paul Hunter in 2001. This next stab at making the Worlds will be the last chapter in his 32-year career having given notice of retirement earlier this season.

The Dubliner has come up short in the last qualifying round at least half a dozen times. He has lost 10-9 on the pink, 10-9 on the black and 10-9 on a resotted black. In 2017, he beat England's David Gilbert 10-9 after a deciding frame that, at two hours, three

The World Snooker Championship qualifiers began in Sheffield yesterday. Fergal O'Brien and Aaron Hill are at different ends of their careers, but getting to the Crucible still means everything, writes

Brendan O'Brien



minutes and 41 seconds, was the longest in snooker history.

They agonised for half an hour on the yellow alone.

Mark Selby hammered him 10-2 in the opening round of the tournament proper just days later but that was very much the lesser of two evils for a man who knows what it is to stumble back to the hotel after defeat in the qualifiers and wake up the next morning unable to remember anything after the last crushing frame.

"If someone offered you the option of qualifying and losing in the first round, you would still take it. At least you're there. Part of Christmas Day is the build-up to Christmas Day, so even if you don't get the presents you want you've had the weeks and months of excitement and the night before."

The men's Open golf championship has 156 slots, the two Wimbledon singles events stretch to 128 places apiece, and the last PDC World Championships had 96 different players standing at the oche. Only 32 people get to play in the World Snooker Championships and 16 of them come through a ridiculously treacherous qualifying route.

This year's qualifying field boasts four ex-world cham-

pions in Ken Doherty, Graeme Dott, Neil Robertson and Stuart Bingham. Stephen Maguire and Matthew Stevens, two former runners-up, will join them. So will guys like Jimmy White and Marco Fu. Jack Lisowski, Ryan Day, Si Jiahui and Hossein Vafaei are among the younger names of note.

Snooker is more of a global game now than before. The reigning men's world champion, Luca Brecel, is Belgian, his female counterpart is China's Bai Yulu. Hong Kong's Ka Wei Cheung and Qatar's Ali Alotaibi hold different amateur crowns. Hungary's Bulcsu Revesz, who will be in Sheffield next week, is the World Amateur U21 holder.

"A Hungarian lad in the



Cork's Aaron Hill will enter the qualifiers in round two.

World Snooker Championship? Ten years ago, you'd be laughed at."

That's PJ Nolan, national coach for Snooker & Billiards Ireland who spent 10 years in the same role in Qatar and has tutored the likes of Ireland's Aaron Hill, Alobaidli, Revesz and any number of others.

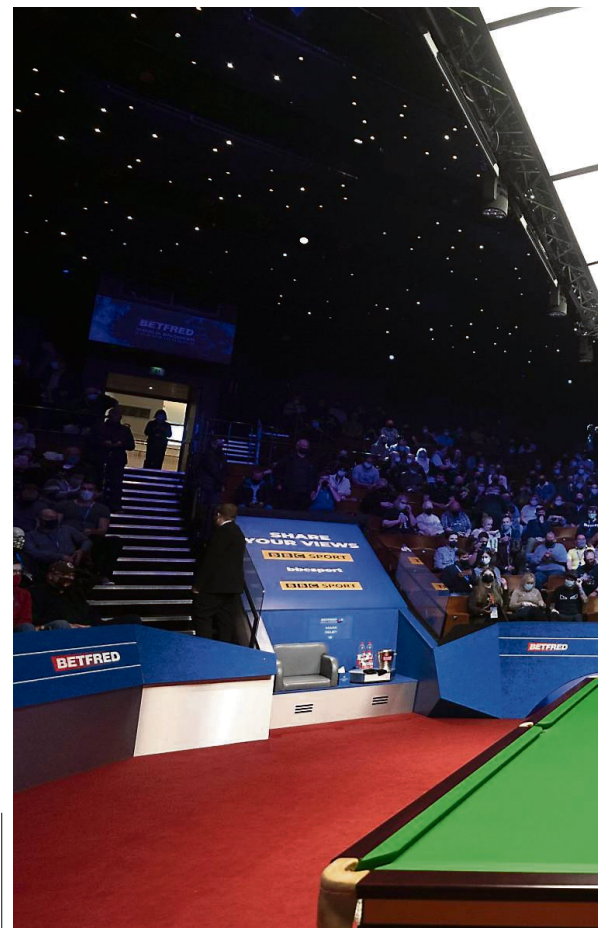
There were 23 countries represented at the Institute 12 months ago. Apart from Ireland and the UK there were players from China, Jamaica, Pakistan, India, Austria, Hungary, Estonia, Cyprus, Belgium, Brazil, Switzerland, Germany and Iran. The Republic of Ireland had four in the pot, a presence that has been diluted to three this time.

O'Brien is the first of that trio in action today, Doherty enters the mix in round two and so does Hill whose performances and results this season have excused him duties from the first of the four rounds. The Corkman reached the third hurdle in 2023 but has gone one-and-done in the past as well.

His take on this week, and its import, is succinct.

"It's a different atmosphere than the Welsh Open qualifier."

The World Championships aren't some outlier in the con-



text of the sport at large. The snooker landscape at the elite end is a shallow pool. Everyone's dream is to make the top 16, or the top eight, but the first priority is a spot on one of the first 64 rungs of the ladder. Fall below that and you slip down the snake to square one.

Points accrued, and tour cards only last for two years. Performances prior to that are basically meaningless with everyone from the number 65 in the world on down has to apply again. It's very much a case of 'what have you done for me lately'. The same applies to that inner circle of 16 and places for the top tournaments.

This is why the likes of Neil Robertson, who won three ranking tournaments in the 2021/22 season, is having to sweat it out at the institute this time. It's why Michael Holt, a player with 25 years' experience as a pro and with a first ranking title not long in the bag, found himself relegated to the status of amateur and competing on the Q Tour.

Alan McManus, a one-time

world number six, has labelled the game at the lower end of the rankings as a "brutal fight for survival".

There are only a handful of tour places available through Q School, Q Tour and amateur championships and the fact that so many old sharks are swimming in the waters make it incredibly difficult for the next wave to break through.

Ronnie O'Sullivan has slaughtered the standard of that younger generation more than once. He made his latest dig at the Masters in January when claiming that they were too slow for him even though he was 'going blind, has a dodgy arm and bad knees'.

Nolan says that was just the Rocket's way of lighting some fires.

"There's 200 players who have made a 147. Ronnie O'Sullivan has 15 of them. If you had told me 15 years ago that there would be 200 I would have said 'no way, it's too hard'. Aaron Hill has made back-to-back 147s [in practice], Mark Allen's best is three in a row. David Morris

Rory has 10 more years to win green jacket at

Phil Casey

Nick Faldo believes Rory McIlroy has at least another decade of opportunities to win the Masters, despite the scar tissue from his previous attempts.

McIlroy famously squandered a four-shot lead in the final round in 2011 and has recorded six top 10s at Augus-

ta National since victory in the 2014 Open left him needing a green jacket to complete a career grand slam.

The world number two finished second behind Scottie Scheffler in 2022 thanks to a thrilling final round of 64 and is second favourite behind the same player this week after finishing third in the Texas Open on Sunday. Asked if

McIlroy, who will turn 35 next month, was running out of chances to win the Masters, Faldo said: "I disagree."

"The game has changed. We have brought the physical element in and we understand the physical side. It was always 30-35 when you were in your prime and he is still in his prime. They are so fit and trained now so he has got at

least another 10 years I would say of being supersonically fit."

"I still think the problem is times gone by. We are nearly 10 years now since his last major. That is the problem."

"Unfortunately it's just going on, time after time. It's not just this season. There's four or five or six years of scar tissue now, of Rory coming in as favourite, playing great.

"He has tried his best at times. 'Can I re-set, can I literally forget the past, who I am? Look how talented I am and go and play golf again'. It is not that easy. Can you turn back the clock? Can you delete all the negativity that you have seen and felt?"

"I think there is a way where he could find his stride because, as we know, when he

finds that stride and gets that trust, then he is phenomenal. I bet that is all he wants to do — just set me free."

To achieve that goal Faldo believes McIlroy has done the right thing by stepping down from his role on the PGA Tour's policy board after almost two years of being the most prominent figure in the Tour's fight with LIV Golf.



BAIZE OF GLORY: 'It's certainly harder to get to the Crucible now than it was,' says Fergal O'Brien. The days of good draws are gone or very rare. There's plenty of good young players and everything comes down to hunger: what do you want and what are you prepared to do?
Picture: Zac Goodwin

from Kilkenny had back-to-back 147s.”

O'Brien echoes this. He looks back now at Stephen Hendry's peak and he doesn't see much, if any, snooker being played now that is better. The difference is the improvement further down the depth chart where the critical mass of talent is so much greater. The player ranked 40 now is basically streets ahead of the guy who held that spot 20 years ago.

It makes for a mad scramble upwards.

Q School costs €930, Q Tour is an eight-leg affair around various countries while qualifying events for regular tournaments involve long days in nondescript venues filled with cubicles. It's expensive, a grind and a world where an up-and-comer can beat a player dozens of places above him one minute and lose to someone dozens of places below the next.

“Before maybe you could ‘old man’ guys in the opening rounds, use your experience. Now if you're not on them from the first shot you could lose a qualifier 4-0 in less than an hour. You mightn't have known anything about the guy other than his name, and he might not go on and do anything in his career, but he's well capable of beating you in round one.”

“It's certainly harder to get to the Crucible now than it was,” says O'Brien. “The days of good draws are gone or very rare. There's plenty of good young players and everything comes down to hunger: what do you want and what are you prepared to do? You need the attitude that you will get a spot regardless of the system.”

O'Brien left nothing to chance. He would arrange to meet up with friends for cos as a teenager then make

sure to arrive a half-hour too late so that he could miss the night out and be fresh for another seven or eight hours practice the next morning. That tunnel vision left him with an average Leaving Cert and a burning desire to make it pro.

He moved over to London as soon as he could where Ilford was a magnet for Irish snooker exiles. Eugene Hughes and Ken Doherty both gravitated there. So did Stephen O'Connor, the 1990 world amateur champion, and Eamon Dunphy's son, Tim. O'Brien shared a house up the road in Chadwell Heath for some of it and lived on his own too.

He left a family and a girlfriend behind and could hardly make toast. There were nights when he went to bed fearful in that big, strange, foreign city but it exposed him to the environment he needed on the table, and it gave him

“Aaron is the face of Irish snooker. Fergal is retiring, Ken doesn't have so many years left

the space to play the same shot 100 times in a row if he had to. It never felt like a sacrifice.

“If you had offered me a job at 19 with a hundred grand a year, I would have turned it down because snooker was what I wanted.”

So much has changed since. The old snooker halls have faded from view and this country's imprint on the world game isn't what it once was. O'Brien is 54 and turning to coaching and commenting, Doherty is three years younger. Northern Ireland's Mark Allen, at 38, is the leading light on the island, but Hill has what it takes to carry the torch on.

The 22-year reached his first ranking quarter-final at the Wuhan Open earlier this year and he looks well set to finish inside that top 64 and renew his card having lost it at the first time of asking a few years back. The talent is there. So is a work ethic that involves long days spent practising in Co Antrim with Allen, Jordan Brown and Robbie McGuigan.

“Aaron has big shoulders but he has a lot of stuff on them,” says Nolan.

“He is the face of Irish snooker. Fergal is retiring, Ken doesn't have so many years left and he's going into the media, but he is still the biggest thing we have. I don't think anyone is ever going to be bigger than Ken Doherty but if Aaron broke through, it would be huge.”

O'Brien's last appearance at the Crucible was that first round exit to Selby seven years ago. No other player from Ireland has graced its tables this past 10 years. Take away Allen's annual visits going back to 2007 and the roll-call of players from this island at the game's showpiece looks increasingly bare.

The bar in Sheffield in April is arguably higher than it ever was.

Turner's Cross to close 'indefinitely'

Andrew Horgan

The Munster Football Association have announced that Turner's Cross will be closed for an indefinite period of time.

The playing surface at the home of Cork City FC suffered severe damage during their 3-0 victory over local rivals Cobh Ramblers last Friday night due to the wet conditions.

City's women's team were due to play at the Cross next Saturday afternoon against DLR Waves, while the men's team were scheduled to host Longford Town on Friday, April 19, and then Finn Harps the following week. City had not commented last night on the following statement that was released by the Munster Football Association: “Following a meeting of the Munster Football Association executive, it has been decided that Turner's Cross will be

Around the world of sport



Soccer

closed indefinitely.

“Unfortunately we have had to make this decision in conjunction with and on the advice of our pitch contractors following the League of Ireland fixture that took place on Friday night last where extensive areas of the pitch have been severely damaged.

“We wish to ensure all affected parties that while there is a period of extensive works needed we endeavour to have the Turner's Cross pitch restored and playable as soon as possible.”

Sainz vows to battle on

Mark Mann-Bryans

Carlos Sainz is refusing to throw in the towel at such an early stage of the Formula One season — insisting he has “nothing to lose” in his last year at Ferrari.

After Max Verstappen led home a dominant Red Bull one-two in Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix, Mercedes boss Toto Wolff said the Dutchman was uncatchable this year. He has won three of the opening four races, with a brake failure causing him to retire early on at the Australian GP last month — where Sainz went on to take the chequered flag.

Having finished third at Suzuka, Sainz is hopeful Ferrari can improve across the course of the year, al-

Formula One

though he also doubted if that would be enough to haul in Verstappen.

“I think they are definitely going to have an advantage in the first third of the season until we bring one or two upgrades that makes us fight them more consistently. By that time, maybe it's a bit too late with the advantage that they might have on the championship. In the meantime, we need more Australias! Which I don't see Red Bull, as a team, making these mistakes very often, no.

“It's my last year in Ferrari also, so yeah, nothing to lose and we will try everything to make it back.”

'Hats off' to Korda

Nelly Korda won her fourth consecutive tournament as she overpowered Ireland's Leona Maguire in the final of the T-Mobile Match Play.

The world No.1 won four of the first seven holes on the Leopard Creek course in Las Vegas en route to a 4&3 victory.

Maguire, who topped the strokeplay section of the tournament before the top eight fought out the title in matchplay, finally won the ninth before falling five down on the 12th.

Two birdies from Maguire cut the deficit before the American closed out the match on the 15th.

“I can't even wrap my head around it,” Korda told lpga.com. “Such a whirlwind of the last three weeks. I just feel like I was just in go-mode constantly.”

This was the first head-to-head matchplay singles event between the pair, but

Golf

they have experience against each other in similar settings at the Solheim Cup. Maguire is 3-1 while representing Europe in team match-play events against Korda.

“It's always nice to get a lead, kind of like a cushion,” Korda said. “But it's Leona. She's such a fiery competitor. I knew when I lost those two holes in a row, 13 and 14, that I really needed to put my foot down to finish the match off.”

“You know you're going to have to make birdies if you want to beat her,” Maguire said. “Unfortunately, I didn't make enough today. Hats off to her. She is an incredible player and she is playing some great golf right now. All I could do is play my own game, and that wasn't good enough today.”

Augusta, declares Faldo

But Faldo remains incredulous that McIlroy agreed to conduct a live “walk and talk” interview during the first round of last year's Masters. An event in which he went on to miss the cut.

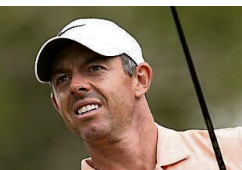
“I didn't like it,” Faldo added. “I thought, ‘You're kidding me! The Masters?’ Sure, do that any other week but why the Masters?”

“I mean, that is one of the most beautiful things about the Masters. It's you and your caddie, just the two of you and the other players. That's all that's inside the ropes. And to suddenly bring other people in? Because that's got to be organised, hasn't it? And this sort of thing, your manager is going to say to you before, ‘Will you do this?’ Gosh, no,

you need 100% concentration.”

“I think he's trying to put priorities into golf. You've got to look out. You have a window as an athlete, don't you? You've got tons of time once you've stopped playing your sport to go and do all your other stuff.

“But while you're an athlete, give it 100%.”



Rory McIlroy is aiming for the career grand slam at Augusta.

■ The Masters will be available on Sky Sports Golf and via a NOW subscription from Thursday-Sunday