

Sport

Snooker starlet looks to pot an England call up

DAD LEE ANTICIPATING BIG YEAR FOR DYLAN

By MARK WYATT

mark.wyatt@reachplc.com
@KentLiveSport

SNOOKER prodigy Dylan Smith has set his sights on representing England in 2020 as his promising career continues to go from strength to strength.

The 12-year-old from Paddock Wood has enjoyed a whirlwind 2019 with a cue in his hand, most recently qualifying for the last-16 of the England U14 National Cup on Sunday.

Whittled down from an initial group of 119 players, Smith progressed to the penultimate round of the competition by topping his group, and he will now head to Leeds in May for the next round.

Playing well there should set him on course for an England call-up, where he could qualify to play for any of the teams, the youngest being the U16s.

"I'll get on the England radar by performing well at these competitions," said Smith.

"If you keep winning in big competitions like this then eventually you'll get noticed.

"I don't think I'm far off reaching an England team next year, I've got a good chance if I stay on track and it would be a great achievement for me at my age."

Getting the attention of national scouts won't be an easy task, but Smith has been turning heads in the snooker world since he first picked up a cue just two years ago.

Back then, on the cusp of 2018, Smith's father and now coach Lee watched in bewilderment as his then ten-year-old son cleared a table of balls on holiday like a professional.

Lee has since been carting Dylan to tournaments and exhibition matches around the south east while showing off his son's skills online (their most popular video has chalked up 50,000 views on Instagram).

In the past two years Lee has

watched Dylan win Kent titles at U21 and U16 level, while also taking on professional players and earning their praises in exhibition matches.

Smith has taken on six-time World champion Steve Davis, three-time World champion Mark Williams and even beaten the 1980 World champion Cliff Thorburn.

"Playing against professionals is good for me as I can analyse their game and learn from them," said Dylan.

"Beating Cliff was amazing because he's always been my dad's favourite player.

"It's like meeting a mate, they're all just normal, nice people. I want to get to the stage they're at one day."

To get to the level of his professional peers, Dylan has an important year ahead of him.

At 12 Davis was touring the country being paid to play pros, while Ronnie O'Sullivan had already made a competitive century break and was winning junior titles around the UK.



In October, Dylan Smith beat 1980 World snooker champion Cliff Thorburn in an exhibition frame



This year, Dylan Smith won the Kent County Billiard and Snooker Association U21 title

"Dylan's dynamic has changed," said Lee.

"He's gone from being a cute ten-year-old having a go with a nice cue action to us thinking about if he can get onto the international scene.

"If you're going to make an impact on the world stage, although it sounds strange, 12 is a really important year."

Now with qualification for the last-16 of the U14 England Championships in the bag, Dylan's next big event is the U17 World Snooker Federation Cup in Malta in January.

It's a chance to once again impress the national team selectors, and also a chance to test himself against international opposition.

"There's no point in my going out to Malta if I don't think I can win," said Dylan.

"I have to go out there and perform and hope I can get past a lot of good players in the draw.

"Some of the players I'll be facing will have entire teams out there to coach them through, but for us it's just me and my dad."

Dylan will be taking on opposition from across the world, including players from China for whom snooker is on their national curriculum at school.

Those players will likely be fully funded for their trip to Malta, but Lee is all too aware of the growing costs to take Dylan across the UK and Europe.

Malta will cost an estimated

£2000, of which only half has so far been secured in sponsorship so far by Lee.

A week's training for Dylan in Ukraine with legendary coach Alan Trigg cost a further £2000 this year, while the cost of playing a professional like Ronnie O'Sullivan in an exhibition frame will set you back £250.

"Nobody invested in me when I was a teenager playing snooker, I travelled to tournaments on the bus most of the time," said Lee.

"Unfortunately, a lot of people see snooker as an individual sport where you make loads of money, so they think why 'would I make a little kid a millionaire'.

"It's not like that though. I'm sure more sponsorship money will come when Dylan gets older, but for now we're investing a lot of money into him and it's difficult.

"For Dylan though I'll throw the kitchen sink at it as much as I can and for as long as I can."

"He's had chances to give it up, junior snooker can put a lot of pressure on kid, but he doesn't want to.

"He wants to become a professional snooker player and I'll do everything I can to help make that happen."

■ If you would like to get involved in sponsoring Dylan, please contact his page on Facebook or Instagram. Alternatively, call Lee on 07796 958312.

"If you're going to make an impact on the world stage, 12 is a really important year"

Lee Smith