

REES, LEIGHTON THOMAS (1940-2003), world champion darts player

Name: Leighton Thomas Rees
Date of birth: 1940
Date of death: 2003
Spouse: Debra Ryle (née Pearl)
Parent: Olwen Rees (née Holt)
Parent: Ivor Thomas Rees
Gender: Male
Occupation: world champion darts player
Area of activity: Sports and Leisure Pursuits
Author: D. Ben Rees

Leighton Rees was born 17 January 1940 in Mountain Ash hospital, Glamorganshire, the only son of Thomas Rees, a lorry driver and his wife Olwen Rees (née Holt). He was educated at Trerobert Primary School in Ynys-y-b I where his parents lived and where he spent most of his life. From this primary school he entered Mill Street Secondary Modern school and he began to play darts as a schoolboy. His apprenticeship was spent at the United Services Club in Ynys-y-b I. Leighton Rees left school at 15 and was employed in a local factory, Simmond Air Accessories, a company that provided accessories for the motor industry. He was employed with this company for the next 21 years. Every dinner hour he had an opportunity of pursuing his hobby as a darts player. A team was formed at the factory to play in the Pontypridd and District Darts League and they practised in the Collier's Arms in Porth. After two years he received an invitation to join his friends in the club at Ynys-y-b I, and he could not refuse as it was there that he began to perfect his unique skills.

His ambition was to win the Darts Championship that was arranged by the *News of the World*. He was able to play in the final on three separate occasions, in 1970, 1974 and 1976, but he never won the top prize. By 1970 he was good enough to be chosen to play for Wales (he won 77 caps), and also in the British Darts team. Invitations poured in to appear in exhibitions all over Britain. By 1972 Sid Waddell, a television producer with Yorkshire Television company, heard of the talent available in South Wales, namely Tony Ridler, Newport, Alan Evans, Rhondda and Leighton Rees, Pontypridd, and he arranged for them to become known on the television channel.

This was an exciting time for Leighton Rees. The amateur game under the administration of the British Darts Organisation (BDO) was becoming the domain of professionals. In addition, television provided an entirely new situation with a large audience who were getting hooked on the excitement of a darts competition. Rees was persuaded by his Welsh-team friend, David Alan Evans (1949-1999) to turn professional and he found an expert to look after his interests in Eddie Norman who became his agent. This took place in 1976, and Leighton Rees became one of the best known darts players on British television.

Immense success came to him within a year at the Wembley Centre in London (December 1977) in the company of his fellow Welsh Internationals. They won the World Cup and he gained the accolade as the Best Player of the competition. But there was no doubt that the greatest feat of his whole career was his success on 10 February 1978 when he became the first darts player to win the title of Champion of the World in the competition arranged by BDO and held in Nottingham. This was the first time that the World Championship Darts Competition had been arranged. He was presented with a cheque for £3000 and he was honoured in his home village when a street in Ynys-y-b I was called Leighton Rees Close. By now he was an attraction, and he travelled extensively all over the world. He would spend three months every year competing in the United States, concentrating on the states of Florida, Arizona, California and in particular the cities of New York and Las Vegas, where the USA Darts Competition was held annually.

Leighton Rees is regarded in the history of the game, together with Eric Bristow, Jocky Wilson, John Lowe and Cliff Lazarenko, as one of the darts players who popularised the sport; he was a particular favourite with TV viewers. His main interest outside his family and his sport was Pontypridd Rugby Club at Ynys Angharad Park.

On 16 August 1980 in Las Vegas he married Debbie Ryle, a female darts player from Anaheim, California, whom he had met on the '*Queen Mary*' in Long Beach, she had a son, Ryan, whom Leighton Rees nurtured as his own son. By the 1990s Leighton Rees's health had declined through heart troubles. He had a heart operation in 2001 and died in Glamorgan Royal Hospital, Llantrisant on 8 June 2003. His wife died in 2007.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

Patrick Chaplin, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the sources given there

D. Lanning, *Leighton Rees on darts* (1979)

Paul Lewis, 'Leighton Rees', *The New York Times*, 16 June 2003

The Daily Telegraph, 10 June 2003

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Leighton Rees](#)

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