

It began in the back bedroom

MEMORIES OF IBF'S FIRST PROFESSIONAL

by Ronnie Rowan



Ronnie Rowan, IBF General Secretary, helped badminton to take flight.

I was not an army brat, but I am very definitely a sports brat! Both my parents played several sports to a good standard, including hockey and tennis, and my mother played at Wimbledon several times. But it was another great racket sport favourite of theirs which affected my life most of all.

Both played at the All-England badminton championships on many occasions, and had contacts amongst the players of their time, during the 40's and 50's. The man then called Mr Badminton, Herbert Scheele, had known me since I was born, and when he retired in 1976 it changed everything for me.

It happened because of a chance encounter between my parents and Stellan Mohlin of Sweden, the imminent President of the IBF. Consequently I was lucky enough to be interviewed and became the first General Secretary of the IBF, with Herman Valken of the Netherlands replacing Herbert as Honorary Secretary.

I had known many players of the 40's, 50's and 60's and had started to play reasonably well myself, and so had made contacts in Denmark, Netherlands, Germany as well as England. Having lived in Canada from 1966-72 I had more contacts there too. By then my father was coach to Club Duinwijk in Haarlem and to the Dutch national team. As he had also coached in South Africa and Jamaica, I had more contacts in those places too.

So there I was, employed on a part-time basis, working from the back bedroom of my house in Cheltenham! And with completely empty files. There was no telex, fax or e-mail in those days, and the telephone was an absolute must. Many were the calls which came – during the entire 24 hours of each day. Fortunately my two children could sleep through an earthquake.

The work gradually increased as the game grew around the world, and by 1980 I was instructed to rent premises in the centre of Cheltenham and a second member of staff, Wendy Bennett, was hired two years later. After several years larger premises were purchased on the outskirts of the town. From then until I left the Federation, the number of staff other than myself increased to seven.

My time as General Secretary covered some very exciting developments – once the split in the badminton world of 1977 had been followed by the reunification of 1981. There was a dramatic growth in every area, in membership, in the number of tournaments, and in participation in all events.

Membership of the IBF more than doubled during my time. Partly this was due to badminton's acceptance into the Olympics, which ensured that national associations received more money from their governments. It also meant that money for courses and other things was available through the Olympic Solidarity Fund, where badminton had, and still has, a very good friend in Pamela Vipond.



Neptune's Fountain, Cheltenham.



Torsten Berg.



Tom Bacher in 1990.

A tremendous amount of well-channelled work was done by Torsten Berg, currently a BWF Vice President, during his time as Chair of the Development Committee. It included the running of training courses for officials from member associations in certain parts of the world, such as Pan-America and Eastern Europe.

As more countries became IBF members, entries for the Uber Cup increased greatly, particularly after it was played in the same place and time as the Thomas Cup. By 1977 the first World Championships were held, at Malmo, and this event has grown in stature ever since.

The introduction of the Sudirman Cup, in 1989 in Indonesia, was particularly special because it was a mixed team competition. I loved these events and very much enjoyed seeing the improving standard of smaller and newer members, and their enthusiasm at taking part.

The introduction of open badminton was undertaken during the 1980s, and was quite quickly accepted thanks to the indefatigable work of Tom Bacher, currently President of Badminton Europe, as the Open Badminton Committee's Chair. Players became members of an IBF committee for the first time, with Derek Talbot of England the first involved.

The Grand Prix circuit was also set up. I helped train member associations to make a tournament draw and seed it correctly, which was so important once prize money had become part of the sport.



Ronnie Rowan and Emile ter Metz in Hong Kong in 1983.



Ronnie Rowan presents the IBF Meritorious Service Award to Shah of Kenya, 1990.



Neil Cameron – who did much of the initial work in setting up a world ranking system in the late eighties.

Badminton's inclusion in the Olympics brought the first attempts to set up a ranking system. The initial and vital work was carried out by Ian McDowell, one of the first IBF certificated umpires, and also by Neil Cameron, later Chief Executive of the IBF. After several unsuccessful attempts, one which was acceptable to all was settled on after the Barcelona Olympics in 1992.

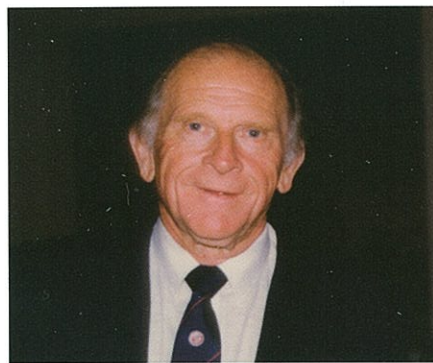
Another success story was the introduction of IBF certificated and accredited umpires, for whom the late Roy Ward of Australia worked long and hard. Now they have moved on and become known as technical officials, together with referees of tournaments and events.

As it became more and more professional, the image of the sport became more important too. This had greater and greater commercial consequences, and partly with this in mind World Badminton magazine was brought in-house. It meant yet more work, but enhanced the already growing feeling that the sport was becoming much bigger.

It all caused further increase in the many, many additional hours which I was working every week, and by not taking many holidays during nearly 17 years' employment. I was also bringing up two girls by myself, and inevitably they were left on their own much of the time, so I count myself extremely lucky still to have a fantastic relationship with both.

During each of my last few years there was a session of meetings during the major IBF event – the AGM, the council twice, and committees – which meant sitting through and minuting 14 meetings, starting on a Saturday and working through to the following Friday. Each had to be copied and distributed in time for the final council meeting on the second Saturday.

If life was becoming tougher, it was also becoming more exciting. One great experience was visiting China to view the



Roy Ward in 1996, success story with umpires.

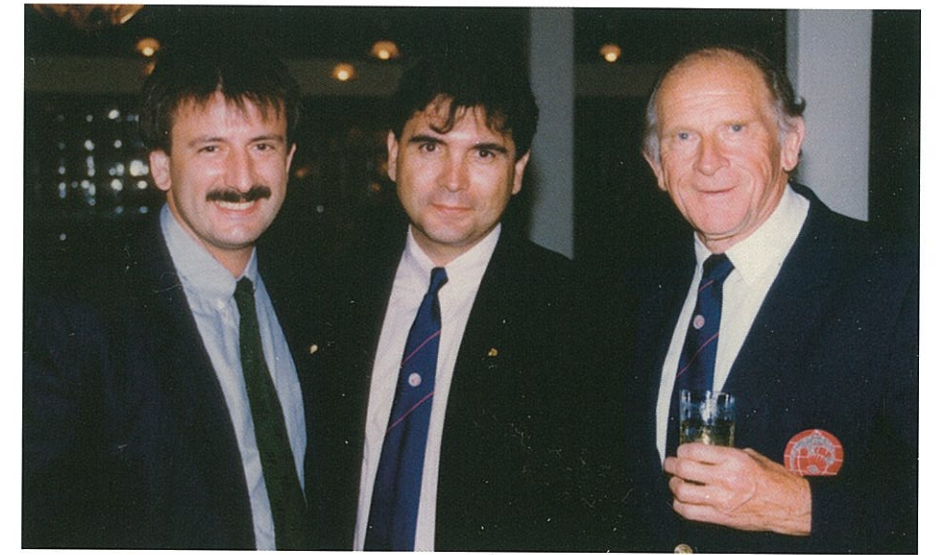


Aussie umpire Ian McDowell with Remy Mainaky and Ricky Subagja of Indonesia at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996.



The Olympic Games were a catalyst for the development of a world ranking system – and no-one has spent as much time at the top of the men's singles rankings than Lin Dan, here seen at the moment when he won the men's singles gold medal at Beijing in 2008.

“ If life was becoming tougher, it was also becoming more exciting. ”




Roy Ward (right) in Hong Kong in 1996 with Pedro Blach (left) and José Luis Vila Piñero, an IBF Vice President for Olympic relations, both from Spain.

Olympic sites for its 2009 Games bid, and others came with visits to what were then called “iron curtain” countries. I visited them all except Romania and Albania, and although it could be quite intimidating at times, it was notable how much weight a number two in an international sports federation (i.e. the Secretary General) carried with national Olympic committees. The first visit to the Soviet Union was the most scary. It was hard to get used to being stared at for as long as five minutes by customs officers and then having to declare your jewellery.

Visits to the smaller federation members were often the most enjoyable. Most impressive were the ways in which some of them were kept alive, often involving the faith and hard work of just one person. These were called “Ronnie's Babies” by the late Arthur Jones, a past IBF President.

Among the most memorable was the first Presidential tour of East Africa, made with Ian Palmer, another past IBF President, in which we saw the problems of those trying to keep the game going in those countries. At that time the only one with the full support of its government was Mauritius.

This has made it all the sadder to hear of the recent troubles, which appear to have resulted from one or two people placing their own ambitions before those of the sport itself. It is encouraging to hear that an attempt has been made to draw a line under it. 



Ronnie Rowan with Ian Palmer, the IBF President in 1990, discussing awards to be given to East Africa.