



Ellie van Coller- Gold Senior Women



Ezile Fourie – Gold Junior Women

Great Masters – Haley, Breitenbach stand out

By Alan Peter Simmonds, Media Officer, Bowls SA

Most men playing in the junior section who descended on bustling Johannesburg for the annual 47th Warwick Wealth/Bowls South Africa Masters Singles Championships looked as though they had not yet had to shave! Aged between 15 and 80 in open, senior and junior categories, every contestant, male and female in South Africa's premier event, however showed maturity and skill.

To indicate how popular bowls is again becoming can be measured in spectator throng– perhaps 600 a day; more on finals day.

Without doubt, publicity through social and print media is working its magic – visitors from throughout the nation armed with smart phones and tablets googled and goggled greenside – desperate to escape the 33 Deg/C fierce heat; anxious to support their favourites.

The iconic Wanderers Club was again venue – for a fifth straight year – its facilities, four-green excellence and an abundance of amenities, proved more than satisfactory for players, efficient officials, spectators and browsers among bright, bustling bowls brands and clothing stalls.

On the Friday 24 000 pink-clad fans (for breast cancer awareness day) plied their way amid noise and merriment along the road beside the greens towards the equally famous Wanderers Cricket Stadium – scene of the successful world mark 438-run chase against Australia by the SA cricket side in 2006.

There was a buzz in the air – thanks to the sponsor. Live streaming via YouTube by crack producers StreamIT 360TV meant one final (eventually the men's was selected) went live with expert commentary and regular updates on all other finals.

It was tremendous innovation from Bowls SA; reports indicate it was well received and watched worldwide.

Top story was the retention of her title by Esmé Haley (Steyn), providing the outstanding Johannesburg-based singles expert a third Masters title (2007) and only the fifth woman in the event's history to make it back-to-back victories.

The others were Thelma Ault (1972-3); Jill Cuff (1977-8); Lorna Trigwell (now Smith, 200-1) and Tracy Lee Botha (2010-11).

Haley, newly married, has retired from international bowls (see article this newsletter); how the national selectors might hope she reconsiders that decision?

She defeated a rather exhausted –looking SA No 1 Colleen Webb Piketh (Johannesburg) by 21-8 in a déjà vu of last year's final – but was full value for her victory. Haley demonstrated amazing control of the bowl throughout her performances – truly a natural, elegant singles maestro. Last year Haley won 21-15

Each top Protea lost only one preliminary game, indeed Piketh lost only a last round match when already assured of a finals' spot to a bubbling Maggie van Zyl (bronze medallist, Durbanville BC, near Cape Town, Western Province); Haley lost only to the excellent Protea skip Susan Nel (Sables) and was also assured of a finals place with a game to go.

Runners-up in each section win bronze medals – no play-offs required.

Piketh now heads for New Zealand for the Six Nations Tests, as does another bronze medallist in Elma Davies (Eden) – overcoming debilitating laryngitis to finish strongly.

Not playing in the Masters was WP's diminutive Sylvia Burns, the pro lead with the golden touch, but she is in the six for NZ as is Nel, three-time Masters champion Tracy Lee Botha (Johannesburg), not at her sparkling best this year and young Boland whizz kid Anneke Snyman (bronze last year) who also battled this time around.

The men's final was between SA No 1 Gerry Baker, 55 and his heir apparent Pierre Breitenbach, 28.

Baker boasted five gold medals, five silver and a host of bronzes in a double decade of superb singles consistency. Brilliance at international level was "lefty's trademark. He needed victory to break the record he shared with the late great Doug Watson.

His youthful opponent won the Junior Masters in 2009 then made amazing progress, reaching a world fourth best Under-25 position, winning umpteen domestic and Africa titles, plus the big prize - a gold medal at the 2014 Commonwealth Games.

But Baker, with a preliminary game to go was all but out of contention. Breitenbach, with six victories was assured of his place on shot difference - (bronze went to last year's runner-up George Lotter (Vanderbijlpark, Sedibeng) who also lost only one game; the first, when sick; Baker needed a mathematical miracle – he got it!

To make the final Baker had to beat his teammate NZ-bound holder Protea Rudi Jacobs (Parys BC, NW), again playing well and in contention for medal spot, by at least 20-10, while another in that team, Thinus Oelofse (Brackpan Mine, Ekurhuleni), leading with superior shot difference, needed to lose badly.

To everyone's amazement that all happened.

Baker provided his part of the equation and Oelofse collapsed to 21-9 defeat at the hands of a serious Protea Morgan Muvhango (Sables) and although all three had five points apiece, Baker's +20 shots saw him in ahead of Oelofse (Bronze) and Jacobs.

Completing the men's team for NZ are Jason Evans (Belgravia, Johannesburg) and lefty Nic Rusling (Edgemead, WP) – each had a patchy Masters.

Baker began in earnest. Both men preferred longish ends on a 14-seconds green, but Baker clearly enjoyed the early edge, moving 10-3 ahead on the 8th end.

Breitenbach was hesitant, seemingly unwilling to be aggressive when action was needed. The thronged spectators fidgeted; it appeared as if Baker was strolling to victory.

A great front runner, the man from fashionable Johannesburg club Belgravia was surely going to give an opponent from unfashionable Potchefstroom Town in the rural north-west of South Africa a lesson.

It did not pan out that way.

From heads nine to 17 Breitenbach took 11 shots to 3, including a full house on the 16th when Baker inexplicably sent down three short bowls and failed to save with his last as his opponent, lying three nailed a fourth.

Mysteriously Baker also had not employed his "crocodile death roll" - the mat taken right up to the top mark.

At 14-13 Breitenbach erred, losing the jack and Baker then did pull the mat. He won a shot and the pair peeled at 14-14 on the 17th end.

But Baker's form was erratic; too many wide and short bowls allowed his opponent to run into an 18-14 lead by the 20th. Baker as expected rallied with superb drawing to make it 18-16 and the pair peeled again at 18-18 on the 23rd end with the younger man playing two agonisingly narrow bowls when attempting a trail for three or four shots; Baker survived, just!

On the 24th end Baker eased 19-18 up and with the bank now cheering every shot, drew two great counters to lie game. But with his last bowl on that end, Breitenbach bravely chopped for second shot – it was Baker 20-18 up.

Surely it was over?

The 26th end saw Baker lose length and direction with his first three bowls. Breitenbach drew two shots and had a measure for three; Baker muscled his last bowl in for third shot.

With everyone holding their breaths the young pretender, a man with a great future in an already dazzling career, found the BMT to clean draw a third shot for game, set and Masters' gold.

Baker it could be argued snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, but Breitenbach played some telling blows; not the least his last bowl to secure victory.

Piketh and Jacobs will represent SA at Warwilla, NSW, for the World Cup Singles after playing at Christchurch in March.

In e the Junior Masters the standard was high. First-timer Corrie Tagg (Discovery BC, Sables) met another Sable in the promising Wilson Malobolo (Witpoortjie Park). Tagg went though unbeaten in a bravura display, but Malobolo extended him and showed progress in another fine debut performance.

Malobolo lost his opening joust 21-16 against SA's Junior Commonwealth Games representative, Roman Watkins (Goedemoed BC, SFS), but the flaxen-haired youngster could not maintain his impetus – still, promising.

Eliza Fourie, yet another Bredasdorp star, took the Junior Women's gold with an altogether satisfactory performance. She beat Brakpan Mine Under-25 star Shimanda Nepgen, but only after being made to fight hard.

In a round robin match, Fourie, well down to SA's Junior Commonwealth Games representative in Fiji last year, Aimée Schnetler (Ncandu BC, KZN, showed determination and excellent shot choice to triumph 21-20 and make her way to the final

The Senior Masters was "business as usual" for Eddie Fann and Ellie van Coller – each scoring a fourth victory within six years. Kingfisher's Fann was too wily for debutante Willie Killian (Walmer BC, EP), although he was made to be at his best; Van Coller appeared to be cruising against in-form Arlene Bosse (Knysna BC, Eden), but the runner-up rallied and almost changed the result.

Excellent marking and umpiring (no one noticed those officials, who were mentored each morning) made it all run smoothly; scores were accurate and out on time; catering was terrific.

At a colourful closing ceremony, Bowls SA president Kallie Haupt thanked Warwick Wealth CEO and chairman Ian Kilbride for making it all possible and promised more of the same at the same venue next year.

The throng remained to clap and cheer, then the flags came down and suddenly the green was empty – but they will be back. The Masters had proved another calendar crowd pleaser and a Kremlin-like march-past of an array of significant emerging young talent and Protea power.

Finals scores: Open Men: Pierre Breitenbach 21, Gerry Baker 20; Open Women: Esmé Haley 21, Colleen Piketh 8, Junior Men: Corrie Tagg 21, Wilson Malobolo 19; Junior Women: Ezile Fourie 21, Shimanda Nepgen 15, Senior Women: Ellie van Coller 21, Arlene Bosse 17; Senior Men: Eddie Fann 21, Willie Killian 15

Round robin details: www.bowlssa.co.za