

History of Short Mat Bowling

As some of you know, I am researching for a lawn bowling book, likely to be called: *A Long Green Road – The Evolution of Bowls*. This history of short mat bowling has been gleaned from various sources, and will become a small part of this tome. – Dave Burrows, CSMBA

According to the Irish Indoor Bowls Association, the story goes that around 1926, when a group of bowlers from the outdoor club of Victoria in Belfast were rained off their green, they retired to their Church Hall, Strand Presbyterian. To pass the time, they rolled bowls up and down the bare floor and someone suggested that a piece of carpeting might help matters.

What happened next is not clear, but Ballymacarret Presbyterian Church claims to have formed the first club in 1929, and have a photograph showing the Minister delivering a bowl on what seems to be a three-foot wide piece of carpet and through a hoop.

Clubs were formed during this period up to the early 1950's but little historical information is available until the first league was formed in 1952. Several other leagues were formed in 1954, 1959(2), 1960, and 1961 prior to the formation of the Irish Indoor Bowls Association in 1961, and rules approved in 1962. It is unique in that the Association does not have the words Short Mat in the title, as its formation came prior to the Irish Long Mat Indoor Bowling Association. At the time, they felt they did not need the words Short Mat.

Most early clubs were in the Belfast area, but small pockets appeared around Dublin and Cork. Mats were between 6 feet wide and up to 12 feet wide with the length depending upon the hall size. There were great variations in rules, with fenders and touchers often not existing and some clubs using a flat multi-sided jack.



The early history from the Wales Association tells about the game being first played by two South Africans who came to work in South Wales. According to this version of the story, they began to play a simulation of the outdoor game when the weather was bad on a strip of carpet in a church hall. Sometime later they moved to Northern Ireland and took the new game with them.

The English Short Mat Bowling Association formed officially in 1984, followed by the Welsh Short Mat Bowls Association in 1987. Scotland initially started by entering the British Isles Championships as an unofficial entry in 1990 and by 1994, the Scottish Short Mat Bowling Federation was accepted as the official body representing Short Mat Bowls in Scotland.

Both Irish and English Short Mat has grown exponentially over the years with Ireland now boasting over 30,000 members in 1100 clubs and England near 25,000 members in 900 clubs. The Irish explosion of growth can be seen with the following statistics: 1961 – 62 – 58 clubs. 1963 – 84 clubs. 1970 – 530 clubs. As early as 1962, the Irish National Championships had 1612 entries in open singles, pairs and fours. The total entry in eight events has now increased to 8000, with the National Singles alone standing at nearly 3000!

Isle of Man (Manx Short Mat) and Belgium (Curve Bowls) Associations were also formed in 1987 and 1988, and all the associations began to play World Championships in 1989 with Scotland joining them in 1990 as a guest nation until they formed their own association in 1994.



Ireland, England and Wales have dominated these Championships winning all but one of the titles up to 2016. (Scotland won the fours in 1991) Totals to date are: Ireland ~ 33 titles, England ~ 17 titles, Wales ~ 13 titles. The 2016 Short Mat World Championships had 14 countries represented including both Indian and Italian ex pats living in England participating on behalf of their nations.

Since 2000, quite a number of countries have begun short mat bowling and formed clubs with some also forming Associations. These include:

The Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Cyprus, Philippines, France, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Singapore and others. Some of these countries play indoors, and some outdoors, but all enjoy the friendships and challenge of the sport.





CSMBA

Canadian Short Mat Bowls Association

Short mat is played in halls, schools, social clubs, hotels, sports clubs and churches. It is even played on North Sea oil rigs. Canada joined the World Short Mat Council in 2016.



Cebu Club Championships



Short Mat Cyprus

Pathos Club, Cyprus



Short Mat Bowls in Spain

Canada will be hosting their First Short Mat National Championships this November in Etobicoke, Ontario, and all Short Mat Clubs in Canada belonging to the CSMBA will qualify to enter interested members to participate on a first come first served basis beginning July 1st. With a starting membership of 5 clubs and 250 players, Canada has already moved up to 6th position worldwide. Our goal is to grow to 3rd position within the next few years to 3000+.



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