

This article appeared in the Baltimore Sun weekly column "Neighbors."

Most people don't expect to see champion athletes in their local sports bars, but walk into the Ebb Tide or Sean Donlon's in Annapolis, or the Bullseye in Millersville and you just might catch a little top notch dart throwing. Keep your eyes open for two over-forty women throwing a few **steel tips**.>

**Julie Nicoll** (44) of Shadyside and **Sandi Lawless** (55) of Davidsonville are among the top dart throwers in the country. Nicoll, who won the North American Open, (the largest tournament held in US) at 17, has ranked among the top 3 off and on for nearly 30 years. Lawless ranked 50th in the nation last year.>

"We probably have the best female shooters in the region," said Lawless." Lawless is the treasurer of the Central Maryland Dart League, which is preparing to host the Grant a Wish/ Maryland State Championship Tournament next month.>

According to Lawless, the tournament will draw between 150 and 200 dart throwers from around the country. "People come from Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina, and Virginia," she said. "We're an American Dart Organization sanctioned league, so winning this tournament earns points toward the nationals. We even had someone from California one year.">

Nicoll, who doesn't throw in the local league, will be returning to the national scene this fall after a hiatus for hand surgery in the spring. Last year, she was scheduled to go to Malaysia to compete for the United States in the World Cup, but the trip was canceled after September 11. In 1997, she captained the team that won the World Cup, and said she hopes to make it to the next one in 2003.>

But she'll have to stage a comeback. Because of difficulties with Carpal Tunnel syndrome and a trigger thumb that led to hand surgery, she said she hasn't been practicing as much as she should and her ranking has dropped to 10th. But that doesn't seem to bother Nicoll who is somewhat of a legend in the dart world. "I've had so many comebacks," she said with a laugh. "I took off seven or eight years while raising my children, and there were rumors that I'd been out too long, but I came back and got back to the top.">

Nicoll said she started playing darts when she was about 13. "Back in the 70s my father was invited to play in a local league in Dayton Ohio," she said, "and my parents always did everything with their children. My father came home and said 'We're going to play darts.' So we moved the dart board from the garage into the house and started." There must be something to a family that plays together. While she took the North American Open at 17, her father won the Ohio State Championship, and her 15-year-old brother finished 3rd in a World Championship doubles tournament.>

Nicoll has carried on the tradition. Her husband **Gary Jennings** shoots darts and occasionally competes, and although her two daughters are both in College now, she said they also throw competitively when they're not busy with school.>

"It's a part of my life," she said, "It's something that's always been there." Nicoll was practically raised on the dart tournament circuit, and many of the players watched her grow up. But at local sports bars she sometimes enjoys a taste of anonymity. "It's actually a lot of fun, especially as a woman, because this sport is mainly a man's sport," she said. "If you walk into a place that you've not been to before you can get a lot of jaw-drops and whispers.">

She said she sometimes has to convince men to let her play. "They say, 'well you have to have you're own darts,' and 'well, you have to know how to play.' Then I'm better than them and nobody wants to play.">

Lawless said she also enjoys surprising a crowd, "What is really funny is when you go into a place and nobody knows who you are." she said. "You throw a few and of course the men always think that they're going to beat you, and when you win, it's like 'OK, the girl knows how to play.">

But, to really see them play, you have to go to the tournaments. "I play totally different when I go to tournaments," lawless said, "there's more at stake." Lawless said the league is getting ready to start a new season and will hold their general membership meeting August 14th to sign up new team members. For information contact Lawless at 410-721-2358.>

The Grant a Wish/ Maryland State Championship will be at the Nights of Pythias off of Route 2 in Edgewater August 23rd, 24th, 25th. Contact Tournament Director Jean Martin 301-218-7379.>