Under 21 GC Worlds Preview

This event is one of my favourite events in the croquet calendar. The combination of youthful enthusiasm, emerging talent and building of new friendships make this a real croquet highlight.

The 2017 renewal creates a first in golf croquet history – the first time a GC World Championship is being held without Egypt being favourite to win gold. The NZ youngsters have come on in leaps and bounds since Duncan Dixon won the inaugural U21 Worlds in Cairo in 2009. The Kiwis field 17 of the 28 entries, which should give the rest of the world an idea of what can be accomplished in a short period of time with youth croquet.

I will try and go through the main contenders country by country, starting with our hosts, Australia.

Australia field six players. Charlie Sharpe, son of Alison, is Australia’s top-ranked U21 player and has had improving form over the past year. He was runner-up in the Australian U21 Champs and then performed very creditably in the NZ U21 Champs. Jack Williams overcame a shaky start in the Australian U21’s to finish strongly and beat Charlie in the final. Perhaps the most interesting competitor is Edward Wilson who has focussed on AC since he debuted in the 2015 U21 Worlds at United. He is arguably the most improved player in the world, having completed 31 triple peels and a sextuple in the past 2 years. He plays with an unusual interlocking Solomon grip which I like and I believe he could be a dark horse in this event. The Australian contingent is completed by Anthony Dask, Jamie Gumbrell and Lana Sexton.

Egypt send four players, all of whom qualified through internal competition for their places. Top ranked is Mohamed Rashad who beat Over 50’s World Champion Salah Hassan and Stephen Mulliner at the Egyptian Open. Nadine El Menoufi has a strong set of results with wins over quality players like Abeer Moustafa, Pauline Salib and Tarek Mamdouh, to name just a few. Ahmed El Nahas managed to take a game off Ahmed Nasr at the Egyptian Open as well as a match against Hisham Abousbaa. Omar El Said gained valuable experience at the Egyptian Open where he beat Karim Ghamry in his opening match. The Egyptian players really struggled with playing conditions at United in 2015. Once again, they will face Atkins hoops, but this time they will be much easier to run in the softer subsoil that Cairnlea provides. If the Egyptians get to grips with the hoops early on, they will be formidable opponents, particularly Rashad.

England send no players – a sad reflection on GC in that country.

New Zealand send a powerhouse this year. Since winning in 2015, Josh Freeth has gone from strength to strength and is now ranked world number 14. Not only has he been runner-up in both the NZ GC Open and top GC Invitation this season, he has also reached the semi-final in the AC Nationals – pretty impressive since he had never played AC two years ago. He is one of the toughest match opponents in the world.

Felix Webby comes here fresh off winning NZ’s top GC invitation event. An excellent shot, Felix is another Kiwi who plays AC to a high standard.

Edmund Fordyce is current NZ Open GC Champion, having beaten Duncan Dixon in the semis and come from 2-0 down to beat Josh Freeth in the final. He followed up this performance by winning the NZ Open AC Doubles and then completed 4 consecutive triple peels in the singles.

Next in the Kiwi line-up are George Coulter and Hemi McLaren. These two players have been evenly matched for a couple of years now. Last season Hemi won the top invitation, but this season George has crept ahead in the rankings. Angus Coulter is George’s younger brother who has just won NZ’s second invitation event, winning all his matches.

The NZ contingent are completed by a host of improving players. Grace Mohi, Caitlin Smith and Jamie Fowler show that the girls are capable of holding their own at this level and they are joined by Jeff Gatchell, Jason Hodgett, the experienced Lachlan Hughes, playing in his third U21 Worlds, Connell Leahy and his younger brother Declan, Kaleb Small, Jakob Smith and Chris Spittall.

The USA send one representative, Ali Kamal who is a bit of an unknown quantity with no games in the ranking system.

The U21 Championship will be held entirely at the 12 lawn Victorian Croquet Centre at Cairnlea. Recent reports indicate that the lawn speed has improved and is likely to be around 10.5 - 11 seconds. The weather tends to be a major factor at Cairnlea with the potential for all four seasons in one day and very high winds. Play will commence with 4 blocks of 7 best of three matchplay with the top 2 players from each block qualifying for the knockout. This gives less than two matches per player per day on average which for this age group is somewhat disappointing. It will also deny some strong players the experience and excitement of knockout play. You can follow the matches on croquetscores.com. I wish all players an enjoyable event, full of good croquet and hope they all make new friendships with players from different nations.

Chris