

Higgins out to make history

John Higgins faces a tough match against Matthew Stevens when he begins the defence of his 888.com World Snooker Championship title on April 19.

The world number one, who beat Mark Selby 18-13 in last year's final, was present to see his name come out of the bag against Stevens.

The Welshman has never lost a first round match at the Crucible Theatre and has been a semi-finalist five times.

He was also runner-up to Mark Williams in 2000 and Shaun Murphy in 2005.

"There are no easy draws but Matthew is one of the toughest I could have got," agreed the two-time champ Higgins.

"We've had some cracking matches over the years.

"I beat him 17-15 in the semi-finals in 2001 but in 2002 he thrashed me 13-7 in the quarters."

Higgins is one of four Scots through to the last 32. And there are also a record four Chinese players, including three from the main land.

Sheffield newcomer Liu Chuang shocked Dominic Dale 10-9 in the qualifiers to become only the fourth 17-year-old to reach the Crucible.

He was rewarded with a dream tie against Ronnie O'Sullivan.

"I'm very excited because Ronnie was my idol when I first started playing snooker at the age of 10," says Chuang, who lost 5-1 to O'Sullivan at last season's Honghe Industrial China Open.

"I like the way he plays but I will be nervous when I go into the arena with him."

Chuang's compatriot Ding Junhui also received a testing tie as he will face Hong Kong rival Marco Fu.

And Liang Wenbo will tackle 1997 champion Ken Doherty.

Stephen Hendry, the seven-times Crucible king, will take on rising star Mark Allen.

On his debut last year, Allen knocked out Doherty, and he also beat Hendry 9-4 in the Maplin UK Championship earlier this season.

Selby plays Mark King, who knocked Jimmy White out of the qualifiers, while 2002 champ Peter Ebdon faces gifted young potter Jamie Cope.

Cliff-hanger

'Grinder' returns to relive 147 history

Canadian legend Cliff Thorburn will help celebrate one of the landmark events in 888.com World Championship history (writes John Dee).

This year's tournament marks the 25th anniversary of the Canadian's maximum break - the first ever in the sport's most prestigious competition.

Thorburn's 147 - against Terry Griffiths - took place on April 23, 1983.

And the 'Grinder' is expected back at the Crucible to mark the silver jubilee.

Corporate hospitality work in Florida almost prevented him from being in the UK on the 25th anniversary.

But it seems he and World Snooker have found a way out of the predicament.

"I want to be at the Crucible to commemorate the break which means so much to me," Thorburn told CueSport in an exclusive interview.

"It will be great to talk over old times with those who were there when I recorded it, such as Terry Griffiths and referee John Williams," added Thorburn who these days coaches, sells cues and undertakes corporate hospitality engagements.

"I don't play much snooker. But I still practice and there are the odd tournaments to play in, though I haven't taken part in one for over a year."

The 60-year-old, who defeated Alex Higgins when he won the World Championship in 1980, added: "The problem for me over here now is that for the first time folk don't talk about the 147 anymore.

"It's winning the title that counts while it seems to be just the opposite in the UK," added the 1977 runner-up.

"My 147 still evokes great memories like when BBC producer Nick Hunter presented me with silver goblets and the camera crew clubbed together and handed me a set of silver cuff links.

"Remember the BBC had missed out on the first televised 147 when that guy Davis (Steve) knocked the very first one in during the ITV televised 1982 Lada Classic.

"I know mine meant so much to the BEEB when I was able to put the record straight at the Crucible.

"I last played there in 1994 when I was beaten 10-9 by Nigel Bond despite leading 9-2 though I did return for a fleeting visit last year.

"That defeat though was the time to go,

"I wanted to be and was one of the top players in the world. I'm so proud to have actually got there.

"It's no big deal but when I came into the game I was in awe at meeting players like Fred Davis and Ray Reardon,

"Or even to be in their company. But the past doesn't seem to have any value whatsoever to those playing the game today."

Of his maximum, Thorburn recalled: "When I played that perfect frame, I was so sick the night before that I hardly slept.

"But I did have this dream that the pack of reds opened up just like they did in the break.

"I know the 147 started with a fluke but I felt pretty calm afterwards even when I got down to pot the final black.

"I sensed Bill Werbenuik was watching as he poked his head from behind the curtain, he was playing on the other table, and thought to myself 'not now Kato, I'm nearing a maximum and I'm on the yellow.'

"He knew that of course and in the end no harm was done.

"I hugged everyone in sight when the break was over. But the match had reached the interval at 2-2 and I went from being calm to feeling a nervous wreck as I left the arena.

"A young lad asked me for my autograph but I couldn't sign it as my left hand was shaking so much. Since the 147 I must have met 2,000 people who were there and witnessed it yet the Crucible only seats 900.

"Actually the yellow was the shot of the championship. It made such a nice noise as the ball entered a pocket yet when I watch a video of the break I always turn up the volume up to hear the sound of the green going down. That's



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the sweetest noise I've ever heard or likely to hear, in a game of snooker."

Thorburn, the first overseas player to hold the world title, was also the first player to compile two competitive 147's when he knocked in a maximum playing Jimmy White in the 1989 Matchroom League.

His Crucible 147 took 15 minutes 20 seconds to complete and when ran alongside Ronnie O'Sullivan's epic 5mins.20 secs maximum 14 years later, the 'Rocket's' ended as Thorburn's reached 56.

The Canadian jokes: "I was definitely the fastest among the slower players."

And he reminds us that his younger son Andrew will be 22 years of age on April 24.

"As you can see, I wasn't at many of his birthday parties when he was growing up as a small boy. I was always playing in the World Championship.

"My other son Jamie is 26 and is getting married later this year," added Thorburn who reached number one on the world rankings during his career, recorded 73 centuries and played his last game on the UK circuit in 1996.