

Judges Di (left) and Sheila (right) with presenter Tom (centre), showcasing their passion for fibre crafts in gorgeous handcrafted garments



PHOTOS: Channel 4

Ready, steady... hook!

Crafting has seen a surge in popularity in recent years, and now it's coming to our TV screens! We chat to the crew behind upcoming show *Game of Wool*



Judging decisions and the 'casting off' of contestants takes place in the Stitchuation Room, shown left

For many of us, crochet is a relaxing hobby. Forgetting turning chains and losing hooks may be frustrating, but the stakes are never that high. Unless, that is, you're a contestant on *Game of Wool*, the new competitive knit and crochet reality show airing on Channel 4. Amid the pressure of 10-hour challenges, dropped stitches and nail-biting tension, knitters and crocheters unite to prove what they're capable of with yarn, needles and hooks.

Knitter and crocheter Tom Daley presents the show, saying, "For these 10 contestants, it's not the relaxing journey they're used to. It's a very intense competition."

"There's lots of drama in this," adds knitwear designer and *Game of Wool* judge Sheila Greenwell. "That might not be a word you associate with knitting!" Read on to find out why this first-of-its-kind show will have you hooked from episode one.

CRAFTING FOR ALL

Competitive crafting isn't new to TV, as anyone who's tuned in to *The Great British Bake Off* or *The Great Pottery Throw Down* will know. With sewing, glassblowing and even Lego having its onscreen moment, it's no surprise that a fibre arts reality show is finally on the cards. Di recalls the production company filming her and Sheila chatting

about their knitting projects. "They came back to us and said 'Can we repurpose this and do a knitting show?' So we started chatting about possible kind of challenges."

Di, who has over 40 years' experience making hand knitwear, was taught to knit by a family friend. After starting a job as a teacher, she went travelling in the early 1980s and arrived on the Isle of Skye where she would spend the next 18 years perfecting her

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knitting skills. In Fife, Scotland, she teamed up with Sheila Greenwell, her co-judge on *Game of Wool*, with whom she wrote *The Gansey Knitting Sourcebook*.

Sheila also picked up her knitting needles at a young age. "It's a very clear memory. I was taught when I was three. I could knit before I went to primary school!"

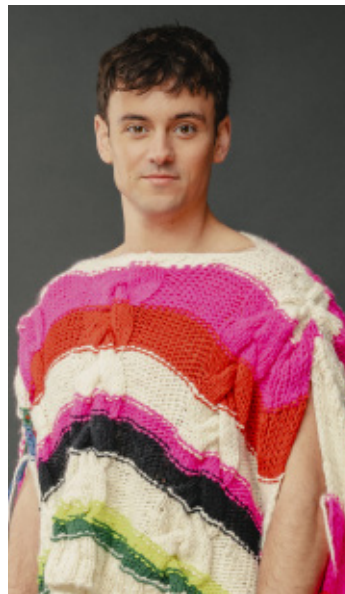
By comparison, professional diver turned TV presenter Tom is fairly new to crafting,

teaching himself to knit just before the Covid-19 lockdown. "I started because my coach told me I was running around too much on the weekends. I needed to sit still, rest and recover so I could train better the next week." He's since made a name for himself on Instagram and has published books on both knitting and crochet.

The trio clearly brings a passion for fibre arts to the show, and in doing so, they hope to break down the clichés and barriers that surround crafting. "Throughout my entire life, when I've said I'm a handknitter people have said, 'Oh, my granny knits,'" Sheila says. "But so does Tom!"

"We've got people from all backgrounds," Tom adds. "We've got people that are older, some that are younger, men, women. One person is a proper lads' lad that loves to knit on a building site. Knitting is for everyone, and it's such an important skill."

For Di, who learnt to knit as a child, getting kids on the crafting bandwagon comes with a wealth of benefits. "It teaches them so many different skills: maths, reading patterns, formula, using their hands, small motor skills," she explains. "We really hope people are going to be so tuned in to knitting and crochet that it's going to start a whole generational thing. Grannies, mums, children, dads – everybody having a go."



Left to right: Sheila learnt to knit before starting primary school; Di dedicated many years to handknitting on the Isle of Skye; Tom learnt to knit and crochet to relax during his diving career

RISING TENSION

You'd be forgiven for thinking that knitting and crochet don't lend themselves to a competitive reality show. But the ethos of *Game of Wool* is all about pushing boundaries, challenging perceptions and changing the narrative around fibre arts.

"Quite a few knitters have said to me, 'How is anybody going to make something in 10 hours?'" Di remarks. The solution? Group challenges. "We break them down, three to four people working on one piece."

"That doesn't happen in other shows," Sheila adds, "but we really wanted that element of it, because they work together. They help each other."

All contestants must be able to knit and crochet, and the techniques they use depend on the task at hand. The challenges are judged blind by Di and Sheila before they reconvene in the Stitchuation Room. It's here they discuss who should be 'cast off' the show. "When we're judging, we have very clear marking systems," Di explains. "Everybody is marked for their group challenges and receives an individual mark for that."

The marking covers everything from technical accuracy, which is Sheila's domain, to the design and construction, observed by Di. "We ask them lots of questions about how they're making it, what they're doing," Di says. "Finally, we come back in and look at the finished pieces, and we go through all of those criteria between us. We then put all those marks together." It's a carefully considered process that reminds Tom of his athletic career: "They're very clear at the top of the challenge, what they're looking for."

Each contestant is clearly talented, but the more people are cast off, the more difficult it is to judge those remaining. "As we go through the series and we get to know people, it just gets harder and harder," Sheila says.

It stands to reason that *Game of Wool*, like other shows of its ilk, brings drama and, at times, catastrophe for its contestants. "There were tantrums," Tom recalls. "There was one occasion where I saw someone making a

"WE LOVE TO SEE WHAT PEOPLE CAN CREATE AND THE JOURNEYS THEY GO ON"

huge mistake, and I had to not say anything because I'm not meant to get involved!"

It's these high stakes that make the show such a compelling watch. By building tension – in every sense of the word – *Game of Wool* conveys the effort, talent and dedication that goes into handcrafting.

BIGGER AND BETTER

This all begs the question... what will the contestants be making? As you might expect, it goes well beyond scarves and bobble hats.

"Anything you can imagine we pretty much knit on this show," Tom explains. "The whole premise of it is to try and reimagine what knitting is. If you put your mind to something, you can knit it."

The group challenges allow for this larger-than-life construction, with each crafter working on a smaller part of the whole. Their creativity and problem-solving is pushed to the limit as they confront the engineering challenges of large-scale crafting. "The technical and design hoops that people are jumping through to impress us, it's amazing," Sheila says.

The finished projects are not simply aesthetically pleasing – they must also be functional. "One thing that people will be surprised about is being able to construct things that have to hold people's weight," Tom says. "Some of the challenges are 12 hours. It is a very small amount of time to knit a sofa. The engineering around the shaping and being able to figure out structure – it's really quite fascinating."

"We love knit, we love crochet, we love wool," Di enthuses. "We love to see what people can create and the journeys they go on. The people in this series have grown in quite extraordinary ways."

For those who have never picked up a crochet hook, this could be the show that inspires them to try. And for those who are already in love with crafting, it's vindicating to see it in the limelight, portrayed not just as a hobby but a skill with endless possibilities and unique results. As Tom puts it, "Every stitch is made with love. Every stitch is imperfectly perfect in its own way. That's what people are embracing on this show."

Written by Tricia Fairburn

Game of Wool: Britain's Best Knitter starts this November on Channel 4.