

TELEGRAPH

SUNDAY MAGAZINE

Number 95 July 16 1978

SAILING ON THE WIND

Will Britain's world champions bring back
the title again?



COMPETING ON AIR

The British gliding team is defending the world title at the current World Championships in France. Can they win again? CHRIS DUNKLEY reports. Photographs by JERRY YOUNG





Wing Commander Delafield - bicycling in London, glider-pilot for Britain

In the biennial World Gliding Championships (which opened yesterday at Chateauroux in central France) Britain's gliding team finds itself in a rôle that is not too familiar to the British in this age of production-line sportsmen from the communist states and the American university hothouses: they are defending the world title.

At the last championships in Finland, in which 85 pilots from 26 nations, competed, Britain's George Lee flew to victory in the Open Class to become World Champion. Moreover the British team won six of the 12 daily tasks and thus took the team honours as well.

The team is chosen from among the 10,000 glider pilots who belong to the 90-odd clubs spread across Britain. Although gliders themselves are expensive—a new glass-fibre model from one of the top German manufacturers costs around £20,000, and even second-hand sailplanes rarely fetch less than £2,500—gliding is not necessarily a wildly expensive pastime. Most gliders are owned corporately by the gliding clubs, or by syndicates within them, and club membership costs about £30 a year. An "aero-tow", in which the glider is hauled up to about 2,000 feet by a small prop-driven plane and then released, costs £3 to £4; winch launches to 1,000 feet or so rarely cost more than £1; and hourly hire fees for a

glider are usually between £4 and £6.

For competition purposes gliders have traditionally been divided into two categories. The Standard Class allows a maximum wingspan of 15 metres, but no flaps or other lift devices; and the Open Class which is literally open to anything, although 22 metres has been the greatest wing span that anyone has managed. This year's World Championships introduce a third class called the 15 Metre which is for Standard Class gliders using flaps.

With 100 pilots from 30 countries expected to compete, Britain has entered the maximum permitted team of four: three are professional pilots of powered aircraft and the fourth is an accountant. Talking to them about themselves and about one another it emerges that the characteristics needed to beat the rest of the world at gliding are: concentration (races can last hours and you are entirely alone but for radio contact); quick decision making ("shall I take lift from this thermal to ensure more distance now, or risk going on to find a better one, losing height all the time?"); sheer determination and that indefinable flair which counts for so much in any sport involving fine judgment and tactics.

First in the team is Squadron Leader George Lee, MBE. He sits in the Quick Readiness Alert Building (or "Q-Shed" as it is known in RAF



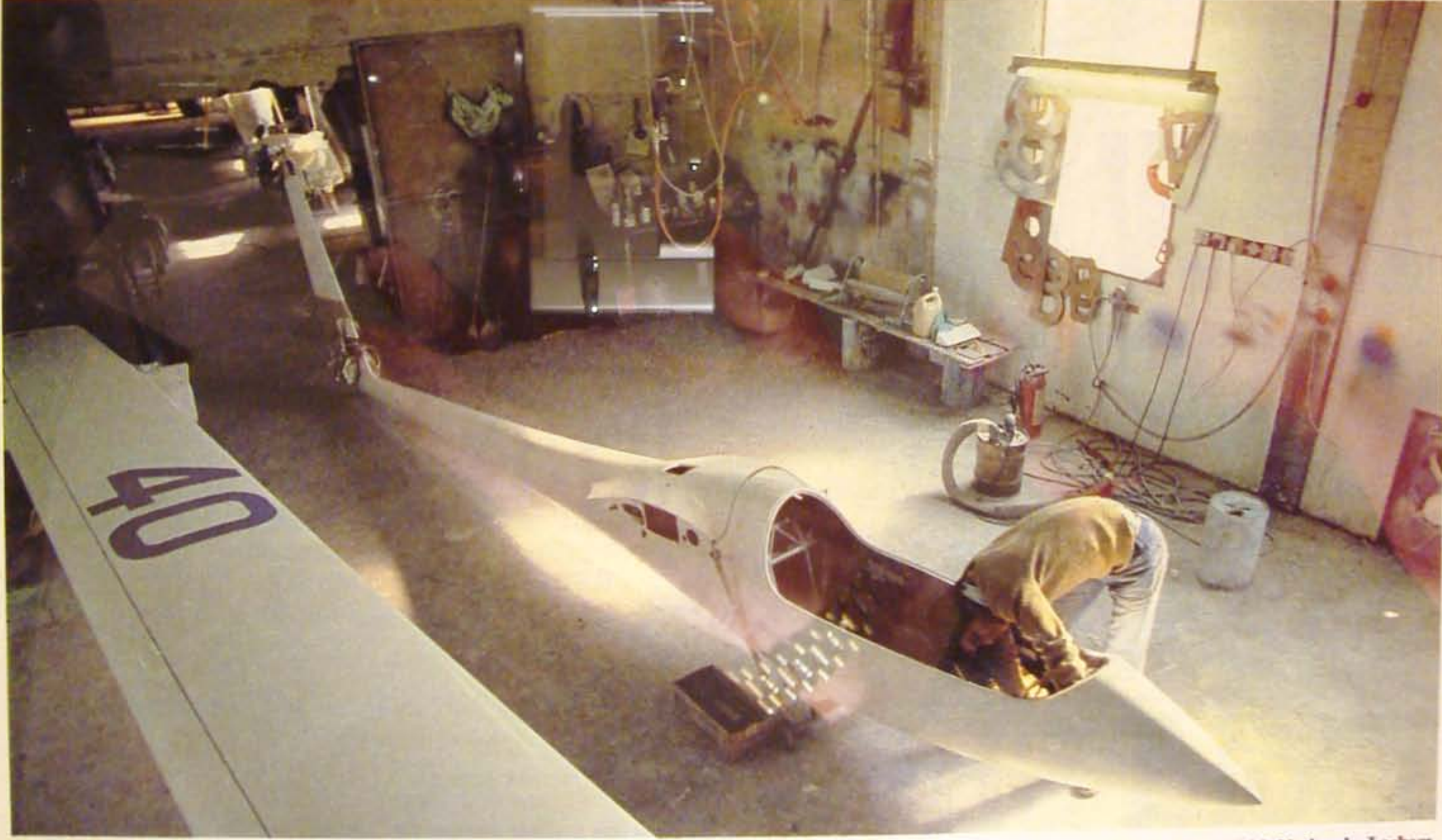
A rare moment away from flying -Tridents as well as gliders - for Captain White



Bernard Fitchett discusses the family business with his father in the boardroom



Squadron Leader George Lee, World Champion Glider pilot in 1977 and captain of this year's British team, at the controls of his Phantom jet at RAF Leuchars, Fife



Bernard Fitchett "fettling" (adjusting) his ship. With very little flying over the past six months, he recently won the Open Class event at the British Nationals, Lasham



A twin-seater Bocian glider with its air brakes fully open prepares to land at Portmoak airfield in Scotland, possibly the most beautiful gliding site in Britain

slang) at Leuchars on the east coast of Scotland, dressed in the one-piece overall of the modern fighter pilot, waiting for the call which will send him howling out over the North Sea in his Phantom to intercept any suspicious foreign aircraft that may turn up - as they do regularly in that part of the world.

If the truth be told, he is doing more than waiting for the call, he is *hoping* for it; not because he fancies any sort of confrontation (though if it did come to that he is considered the RAF's top air-to-air gunner, having scored an "impossible" 92.5 per cent. hits on exercises in Malta, a fact that he modestly omits to mention throughout a three-hour interview), but because he is a man in love with flight and any excuse that will get him airborne is a good excuse. It was this passionate desire to fly that led him to gliding 15 years ago.

He was then 17 years old and had already been in the RAF for a year. Born in Dublin and schooled in Ireland, he had joined up because a friend was doing so. George read the friend's advertising literature about aircrew training and (he does not actually say so, but the implication is clear) became possessed by the whole idea of flying.

"I started out in the RAF training as an electrical fitter but I also worked for the five O-levels I needed

before I could get pilot training; and I started gliding during my training at Halton because I thought it would help towards pilot selection. But the gliding bug bit, and it's stayed with me. My first experience of gliding was three minutes in the rain and I loved the sensation from the very beginning."

Although the services have a reputation for indulging their more successful sportsmen, and the world gliding champion might presumably expect particular sympathy from the RAF, it seems (he is not disloyal enough to say so) that there is hardly a posting in Britain which could have been worse for George Lee's gliding training than Leuchars, since the base does not even have a branch of the RAF's gliding association.

George does his gliding with the Scottish Gliding Union at Portmoak, where there is very little of his sort of high-performance cross country gliding. He spends most of the one day that he manages to devote each week to his sport either in the "tug" aircraft towing the gliders up for launching, or in the instructor's seat of a two-man glider. He was hoping to get three weeks' practice in France before the Championships started.

Different people ascribe his world beating abilities to different characteristics. One of his team mates says, "He simply has tremendous flair." His Norwegian wife, Maren, also a

glider pilot, says he has an almost mystical ability to "read" the weather. But she adds, and it is surely the most telling point: "He is dedicated. Ever since he started gliding his aim has been to become world champion."

Bernard Fitchett, who will fly with George Lee in the Open Class, is 31 and the youngest member of the team. He is also the only one who has never been married, the only one to be flying his own glider, and the only one who is not a professional pilot - though he would have been but for health reasons, he says.

He has an Oxford degree in physics, but recently started work as an accountant with F. L. Fitchett (Contractors) Limited in Groby - something he describes as: "The archetypal family business - Dad started it just after the war, made good in building and plant hire, and is his own boss."

The fact that Bernard is not short of a crust or two is treated by the rest of the team as a cause for humour rather than envy: "Bernard's father bought him the complete gliding set," one of them said with a grin.

This is not quite true, since Bernard's father, having caught his son's fever, bought it for them both to fly. It is true, however, that he has since given up and left the gliding entirely to his son. It is also true

that Bernard's ASW17 is considered to be among the best of Open Class sailplanes, and true, too, that he owns it outright instead of merely being a member of a syndicate as are most glider pilots (his team mates Delafield and White have shares in their own "ships", but not craft suitable for the classes in which they are competing; so theirs will be hired for the Championships). With its road trailer, instruments, oxygen gear, parachutes and so on, Bernard's "set" is insured for £26,000 - not unusual for a top class outfit.

His place in the team rests not on his convenient ownership of the requisite outfit but entirely on merit. He flew solo at the minimum age of 16, became British Open Class Champion in 1971, and is the only member of the team to have flown for Britain three times in the previous World Championships, coming fourth in the Standard Class when they were held in Australia in 1974. Many top pilots who fly against him claim that he has greater potential than any other British glider pilot.

At the last World Championships, Bernard won his class on one of the seven days by flying 407 km. - 100 km. farther than his nearest competitor - in conditions described as "diabolical", and was presented with a trophy for the most outstanding flight of the entire championships.

It is typical of the mucking-in

spirit of the whole team that in the weekends prior to leaving for France Bernard spent hour after hour laboriously rubbing down the 20-metre wingspan of his glider with "wet-and-dry" abrasive paper and then polishing the invisible undulations on the gleaming wings to within a tolerance of four thousandths of an inch: he had a little machine to make sure of the thousandths. "You've got to have a strong streak of perfectionism," he remarked mildly.

John Delafield, who will compete for Britain in the Standard Class, is an RAF Wing Commander, married, with two children. He is now on the staff of the Royal College of Defence Studies in London and, though he tries half-heartedly, he fails to hide the fact that this job does not bring him the sort of fulfilment that he used to get from piloting Hunters.

But then, as he remarks with a mixture of satisfaction and ruefulness, "At least nobody suggests that you're too old to fly a glider at 40".

Like George Lee he joined the RAF as a teenager. He trained at Cranwell and has now served for 22 years. Like Lee again he began gliding at 17, starting at Lasham with £25 donated by his godfather. And like the other professional pilots in the team he claims that although the navigational skills acquired in gliding are useful when it comes to flying powered aircraft, the reverse is not true. Referring sardonically to the

modern fighter/bomber as a "very fast lead sled" he pointed out: "When you're flying one of those, what the air happens to be doing is virtually irrelevant. But when you're in a glider it's of paramount importance." He has been National Champion five times in recent years, and has represented Britain twice before in the World event.

In competitive gliding, he says, you need a bit of panache which some might think out of place within the discipline of the modern armed services. But what he calls panache others might see as a quality of boyishness common to all four members of the team. It is evident not in juvenile behaviour but in a happy ability to give their enthusiasm free rein.

Like all glider pilots he has a "crew" who use radio to follow him by car across the landscape to help him de-rig the glider and tow it home when he "lands out". But he still expects (as does every member of the team) to do his own "fettling". This is an obsessive and ceaseless pastime peculiar to gliding, combining the fine-tuning adjustments of the dinghy sailor with the DIY-accessory-building of the vintage car enthusiast. In Delafield's case it ranges from polishing the squashed insects off all the leading edges of the plane and meticulously taping over the cracks between collapsible wings and fuselage, all in the name of streamlining,

to designing and building his own 30ft road trailers—an art at which others say he is expert.

Stephen White—invariably known as Steve—is 34 and lives in Marlow between the two airfields which occupy so much of his life: Heathrow from which he flies Tridents as a Captain in the British Airways shorthaul division, and Booker where he is the chairman of the Airways Gliding Club.

He was younger than any other member of the team when he started gliding—13—but this is the first time he has been selected for the World Championships. He explained how: "The top 20 pilots on a 'National Rating List' vote for the British team, and you get on to that list by performing well in the National Championships." Last year Steve became National Champion for the first time by winning the Open Class in a Jantar sailplane.

"After that there's a seeding system to decide who competes in which class in the World Championships, and since George Lee and Bernard Fitchett with first and second choices opted naturally enough for the Open Class, John Delafield and I had to compete in the Standard and the 15 Metre classes although we normally fly Open Class, too. If it had been left to the four pilots, I think we might have decided to enter the entire British team in the Open Class." The decision lay elsewhere.

It was the British Gliding Association, which controls the sport in this country quite independently of the government, that concluded Britain should contest the Standard and 15 Metre classes, fearing that, if the top gliding nations withheld support at the international level, Standard Class gliding might atrophy and the sport be left with only the more expensive Open Class.

Not that Steve really minds flying in the new 15 Metre Class. He says it is proving to be very popular. He also observes that marking, for the triangular courses or "goal and return" races set as daily tasks, is out of 1,000 and you have to achieve a consistent 900-plus to win. "Land-out [fail to fly back to base] just once and you're out of the whole competition."

Yet like the other three members of the team he is startlingly confident of Britain's chances. "We're certainly in the forefront of international gliding; even without George Lee's achievement at the '76 World Championships, Britain would still have done well as a team. I'd say we have a very good chance this year."

Bernard Fitchett goes even further, not in a spirit of bravado but more like a man formulating a carefully judged probability. "I reckon we'll come away with the world title again," he says thoughtfully, rubbing another couple of "thou" off an invisible bump. □

Get to grips with a Kaniade racket.

With a Kaniade tennis racket you've got the winning combination in your hand—professional strength and quality, plus unbeatable mail order value. Put more power into your game this season—choose a Kaniade racket.

The Five Star Tennis Racket

Made from sturdy 7-ply ash with fibre insert and bamboo overlay and all weather sheepskin stringing for velocity and sensitivity. Cowhide grip with a choice of grip sizes: L(4½") or M(4¾"). Ref. no. TR1. Only £11.25. Inc. P & P.

The Four Star Tennis Racket

With a durable frame, made from 8-ply maple lamination and fibre insert. Top quality all weather Hy-Sheep stringing and a cowhide grip. Choice of grip sizes: L(4½") or M(4¾"). Ref. no. TR2. Only £9.80. Inc. P & P.

Pewter Tankard

—made by Englefields—the oldest pewter making firm—deep etched with a super sporting motif featuring 'The Good Sportsman'. Perfect for a lifetime of cool drinking! Ref. no. TK. £25.00.

KANIADE QUALITY



Special from Kaniade

90% Tungsten/nickel darts—complete with leatherette wallie. £10.50 per set inc. P & P.

SPECIAL OFFER—with these darts only—FREE PTFE Tape to fix shafts securely—plus free set of aluminium shafts. Approx. weights: 20g, 22g, 23g, 25g, 26g, 28g, 31g, 32g, 34g.

80% Tungsten/Copper Darts. Approx weights: 18g. £6.50; 22g. £7.00; 25 or 30g. £7.50; 32g. £8.00. All per set inc. VAT & P & P.

Flights. 6 sets for £1.00 asstd. cols.

Squash and Badminton Rackets.

The heaviest smash and the most delicately placed shot—both come easy with Kaniade squash and badminton rackets. These rackets feature all that's best in Kaniade products—quality, strength and real value.



Bronze Star Squash Racket.

With 6-ply ash and bamboo laminated frame with fibre insert. Ref. no. SR3. £9.60.

Silver Star Squash Racket

4-ply bamboo laminated frame, with fibre insert and tempered steel shaft. Ref. no. SR2. £11.50.

Gold Star Squash Racket.

With 6-ply ash and bamboo laminated frame. Ash shaft overlaid with glass fibre. Ref. no. SR1. £15.70.

Four Star Badminton Racket.

Chrome plated shaft with flat configuration. Ref. no. BR2. £4.90.

Five Star Badminton Racket.

All metal frame with special 'Y' joint and tempered steel shaft. Ref. no. BR1. £5.75. All with Hy-Sheep stringing and cowhide grip.



Please send cash, postal order or cheque for full amount made out to KANIADE LTD. STM1, PO Box 2, 7 Woodfield Terrace, Stansted Essex, CM24 8AW. For convenience we also accept payment by Access or Barclaycard. Please quote your card number, with sample signature and Card Holder's Address (if different from delivery address). Free Catalogues available on request.

SEND TO-DAY!