Illegal throws, psyching out opponents – it must be Pooh Sticks

Annual competition inspired by AA Milne can be a cruel game – as **ADAM LUSHER** finds out when he loses to a baby

A glorious summer's day, a small bridge over a slow-moving river: this was my place, my time, my shot at sporting glory. This was Langel Common Bridge on the River Windrush in Witney, Oxfordshire, yesterday, at the World Pooh Sticks Championships.

Sure, there were 799 other competitors. But if I'm to become world champion at anything, why not racing sticks beneath a bridge?

I hoped fate would smile upon me, having already intervened to save the event itself. In January the organisers, the Rotary Club of Oxford Spires, announced that a change in land use meant they could no longer stage the tournament at Little Wittenham on the Thames, where it has been held since 1984.

"We would have hated to let a good tradition go," said Karen Eveleigh, Rotary Club president-elect and chief Pooh Sticks organiser. "But we thought it would be difficult to find somewhere else."

But Cogges Manor Farm heritage centre, neighbouring Langel Common, came to the rescue by suggesting the new venue, and the games were back on.

I came armed with statistics. As chronicled by AA

Milne, when Winnie-the-Pooh accidentally invented Pooh Sticks by tripping over and dropping a fir cone into a river, he tested his theory that big pine cones beat little ones, big pine cones beat little ones, and: "When he went home for tea, he had won thirty-six and lost twenty-eight."

Being a bear of very little brain, Pooh struggled with the maths, but I had calculated that choosing a big stick over a little one gave you a 0.5625 (ie better than 50-50) chance of winning.

And I had a coach – Steven Blantz, who with his wife, Helen, 44, and children Sam, 14, Eve, nine, and Jessica, five, had triumphed in the family category last year.

Coach Blantz, 44, an IT procurement manager, described the feeling. "You wake up an ordinary Joe Bloggs. You go to bed a world champion. We were in the *Oxford Times*, the *Witney Gazette*."

Even better, he imparted his family's five tips for Pooh Sticks glory – but seemed anxious when I suggested the tactics of Eeyore, who had "wanted to tell Tigger how to win at Pooh Sticks, by letting your stick drop in a twitchy sort of way".

"Isn't that f***ing your Pooh stick?" he said. "Possi-

bly against the no-throwing rule."

I prepared to psych out my first-heat opponents but discovered I was up against internationals.

Deb Hoffmann, 50, of Waukesha in Wisconsin was the Guinness World Record holder for the largest Winnie-the-Pooh and friends memorabilia collection. She had flown in specially for this.

The Germans, Stefanie and Christian Ernst, with their eight-month-old son Julian, had recently moved from the Black Forest to Witney. (Doubtless for the Pooh Sticks training.)

I dropped my big Pooh stick vertically, and, yes, in a twitchy sort of way. And fate betrayed me. My stick was behind Julian's and Mrs Hoffmann's.

I had lost. To an eight-month-old baby and a woman who owns 12,840 items of Winnie-the-Pooh memorabilia.

Then I had to watch as James Smith, 36, a quantity surveyor, from Long Hanborough near Witney, with no statistics, no training and no tactics, no came here for a nice day out with the family," he said.

Pooh Sticks: it's the cruellest game.

SECRETS OF SUCCESS
POOH STICKS TIPS

Five Tips for Glory devised by world family champions Steven Blantz and son Sam:

Big stick beats little stick, but not if it's so big that "it sinks before bobbing to the surface and you lose precious seconds". Go for something a little bit heavier than a pencil.

Choose a straight stick to reduce drag through the water.

Drop the stick vertically to reduce wind resistance as it falls from the bridge – "Those split seconds will make the difference."

Choose well your spot on the bridge – study the current, observe where it's fastest.

When you drop your stick, lean as low as possible over the bridge. But it's a good idea not to fall into the river.

Jessica Blantz (left) at the World Pooh Sticks Championships on the river Windrush in Witney yesterday; Adam Lusher (above) before his defeat at the hands of an infant TOM PILSTON