

Honesty

Paraphrasing Allison Fisher from a recent article in another magazine, she said that, when she first arrived in the U.S., she was stunned by how brazenly some American players will cheat. She talks of opponents intentionally distracting, or sharking, her and then bragging about it to spectators, behavior unheard of in her snooker background where her peers always displayed keen sportsmanship. She tells about once seeing snooker player, Jimmy White, call a foul on himself that the referee missed even though it cost him \$100,000 and first place. That warm welcome to the U.S. might have shocked her, but comes as no surprise to me. And I can foresee our embarrassment worsening as we become less competitive on the world stage. I can remember a time when, if someone said that foreigners would be winning major pool tournaments, or that the Japanese would be selling cars here, the most gracious response to either assertion would have been a polite chuckle. A glance at the recent World Championship in Cardiff, where we had one American player left among the final sixteen, shows that we are starting to give international pool about as much competition as Chevy mounts in the global, automotive market.

This piece is not headed for *Barron's*, so I'll stay focused on pool, despite my convictions that the two problems are related and result from the same integrity deficit. We as Americans have grown very accustomed, if not addicted, to dominating the world, both economically and athletically. So accustomed, we still call the winners of various domestic competitions "world champions." In football, that's a mere discourtesy; but in other games, it makes as much sense as calling the winner of an earthling-only beauty pageant Miss Universe.

Looking at golf, in the 34 Ryder Cup matches played since 1927, Europe has won only nine times. But six of those European wins came in the last nine meetings from 1985 to 2002. How can we suddenly be the underdog in a match-up that we virtually owned throughout most of the twentieth century? Perhaps it's related to the fact that one has to move down to 73rd place on the 2003 PGA money list to find the first guy with less than a million dollars for the year, pulling up just shy with \$989,168 as of November 9. With scores of millionaires out playing a game together every weekend in the sunshine, it must be easy to look at the others who also won't win and think, "Why work hard now, especially with that Tiger guy around? I worked hard to get here and that's good enough." Maybe some of them entertain the thought of pushing to 50th place for another mansion next year, but no need to go overboard with the work talk. Now, there's nothing necessarily bad about that kind of thinking. Most of us, me included, would probably lean the same way. However, when athletes give up their desire to be the best and trade average achievement for fabulous money, it weakens their integrity and keeps them out of the winner's circle.

At least golfers usually turn pro before money corrupts their values. When we consider pool, the integrity problems go to the core. Because pool has never enjoyed big money, it has always suffered the stigma of a sleazy pursuit for degenerates. It's a harsh image but we earn it, and worse, perpetuate it. Most poolrooms are still dominated by

seasoned pool players, guys who know all the angles and all the scams. If a youngster shows up with the desire to learn pool, eventually that kid is likely to come under the influence of such players. With no big money looming in the future, honest practice becomes an illogical pursuit. So, many young players learn early to scuffle for the small money that's available now, sometimes within a few months after first picking up a cue. Soon they learn when to miss, when to look bad and even when to lose. That's phase one of the education. I've seen more than a few talented, teenage shooters learn quickly how to set up a mark, arrange tournament money, and dump a backer. Sadly it seems that once a kid moves in that direction, we don't hear much about him winning many tournaments afterwards. With only so many hours in a day, spending most of them learning how to lie leaves little time to work on pool. But it's an American tradition, one we film for each generation.

Around the world, I think kids see something other than pool's hustler appeal. They're watching the world's best players, competing on live TV, and it inspires them. Maybe the prize money that we laughingly compare to golf or tennis doesn't seem so paltry to them. Maybe the money, along with worldwide fame, looks like something to work for, or maybe not. But when I see the hot, young shooters from Europe and Asia, emerging from disciplined programs with trainers, it's hard for me to imagine someone coming out of a typical, American pool hall to compete against them.

Our pool scene is very flexible and offers a lot of options other than becoming a champion, something most of us do not really want anyway. That's cool; I'm a big fan of pool's recreational appeal. Nights spent socializing around a table, or days spent with a shortstop named "Fingers" learning how to disguise a safety, can be fun. I suppose that going out once a week to whine about handicaps between shots on league night brings pleasure too. But none of that is pool; it's entertainment.

Pool is a sport, like boxing, and the price of achievement is work. Work takes discipline, honesty and courage. How many of us can shoot the same, boring shot for an hour? Last year, when I trained Jackie Broadhurst for the 2003 BCA tournament, I once made her shoot the same shot for a week. Rather, I asked her to and she made herself shoot it. She also had the honesty to face her filmed practice sessions and watch herself miss repeatedly to solve her mechanical problems. In the BCA Women's Open, she walked through 497 players without a close match. When we met a year before that, she did not display much of what people call raw talent.

As in business we've lost the global superiority that once seemed so naturally ours. But competitive pool has no junk-bond buy-outs, no golden parachutes, no escape clauses. When we can't perform we don't win. The game is too pure and honest to come with loopholes. As much as it may sting, Allison Fisher's commentary comes as a valuable wake-up call while there's still time to address our dishonesty. And it's important that we hear the news from someone who is almost unbeatable to erase the slightest possibility of someone's inferring it as an excuse. She can inspire us to build a direct relationship with the game of pool where we play our hardest and expect the same from our opponents. Maybe someone will read her words and start working to beat her—honestly.

