

Sharing

Along with some of the eighties' more ephemeral offerings like leather neckties and movie sequels that challenged our ability to convert Roman numerals ("IL" after a certain title would make that movie "Rambo 49"), the decade also left a few permanent linguistic contributions—snappy phrases like "drive-by shooting," "crack baby" and "homeless person." Of course people without homes had always been around, but before then, it seemed more from choice than necessity; and we called guys on the streets drifters. By the decade's end, with the minimum wage frozen for the longest period since it became Federal law, and not a single, documented, trickle-down sighting, the tip jar became a fixture on every checkout counter as those of us who lacked defense contracts quietly agreed to help one another. It was a gesture of widespread sharing unseen since the great depression.

Just prior, on a smaller scale, three billiard visionaries, who didn't need an S&L scandal to force their generosity, opened the floodgates of pool knowledge with breakthrough books that changed the way information would travel throughout the pool world. In the last few years of the seventies, Ray Martin, Robert Byrne and George Fels published *The 99 Critical Shots*, *The Standard Book of Pool and Billiards*, and *Mastering Pool* respectively. Before then a pool book was little more than a guide to forming a bridge with a famous player's face on the cover. But from then on, aspiring players could learn the game's secrets alone, away from the older guys who wanted to empty their pockets. Those three books eventually led to a couple dozen more excellent books, countless videos and legitimate status for pool instructors. Players with writing or teaching skills turned up everywhere to help newcomers as sharing became the word of the day.

From the stories we hear about the old timers' reticence, it's easy to imagine them with cyanide pills in their pockets for when a gang of B-players might capture and interrogate them. Perhaps the information well was not bone dry, but I have few memories of receiving honest help from anyone other than my father. And when I first started teaching and helping beginners improve more rapidly, a few players asked me, "Do you really think it's smart to reveal this stuff?" I do.

It's not only a good idea to share our knowledge, but we have an obligation to do so. We now belong to a worldwide community of players and we must do what we can to keep it alive and promote its growth. Pool is a beautiful game that attracts new people every day. But the techniques we employ to play well do not reveal themselves; and the game is not so beautiful that it must maintain a hold on players who never improve. Eventually, most of the millions of recreational players are bound to tire of pushing colored balls around and will move on to new diversions unless they learn something. The raging popularity that we currently enjoy does not necessarily have to continue. Remember that before World War II, America had more poolrooms than ever, when, almost overnight, the game slid into virtual oblivion.

We read stories from the road players of the fifties complaining about how difficult it was to find a game and make some money during those lean years. But one can argue that they had themselves to blame. Had they spent some time helping, instead of hustling, sailors in the forties, maybe the game's popularity could have held on through the changes of the post-war years. 3-cushion billiards is almost dead in the U.S. now, played mostly by a dwindling group of "old men." Whenever I ask one of those guys how he began, almost invariably, the answer is "Charlie Peterson," the man who devoted himself to touring college campuses and introducing young students to billiards. Because no one has done so since, much of the American 3-cushion community is the remainder of those students that he enrolled some fifty years ago.

Sharing knowledge contributes to the game on a large scale but also generates rewards on a personal level. Everyone I know who has dabbled in teaching reports that his or her own game improved immediately after helping others. When we articulate and pass along something we know, the process of casting our knowledge into language sharpens our awareness of our skills and alerts us to each precise step we take when we play. Maybe the old legends remained so mum, not from stinginess, but because, without a formal pool education, they had no language to convey their knowledge. Most humans have a propensity to share and help others but sometimes believe that they do not know how. I can name a number of talented players who would love to help others if they could describe what they do and how they do it. A good source for them would be Byrne. How does he say it?

Many of us are not teachers but we all have the ability to help someone and can begin very easily. Most poolrooms have a group of regulars who know the game—that's us—and a lot of customers whom we rarely notice because they're not "players." Strangely though, they still come around almost every night and some of them carry their own cues. Instead of eyeing them as potential suckers, we should acknowledge them as players like us, except less mature. From that viewpoint we can invite them into the game of pool. That may sound like, "Would you like to see something?" Or, when we spy someone struggling, we can walk over and ask, "May I offer you a tip?" Merely teaching someone the proper stroke for a stop shot with an easy, four-ball run will open that person's eyes to position play and control. Ten minutes of sharing might show someone how it feels to be a player and cement a lifetime relationship to the game.

Pool has some great ambassadors who travel the world each year to inspire thousands of novices and help them improve. On the home front you can emulate them as a personal ambassador to someone, occasionally helping an individual when you see the opportunity. Spending a few minutes to enhance someone's knowledge can be a positive, productive experience for both of you. But if you're one of those guys that lurk for a chance to interrupt women while they're playing or practicing, none of the preceding is for you. You're not sharing; you're scaring, and possibly rerouting a future Allison Fisher into tennis with your greasy paws and slobber. At the very least you're chasing women out of the poolroom so shame on you. You have a disease and there's a one-step program for you. When you see a woman shooting pool, sit on your hands. That is, unless you need them to fish the cyanide pill out of *your* pocket.

