

Purity

In an old TV ad, two 30-something women sip coffee on a patio and reminisce about college days in Paris. “Remember this, remember that” until one mentions a certain waiter and they end the spot swooning in unison (swoonison?) the man’s name in perfect, saccharine, TV voices. The ad hawked a Kool-Aid type, vanilla-flavored instant coffee beverage powder mix and ran for several years. And while I figured it was pretty innocuous, way less offensive than the “Ancient Chinese Secret” lady for example, I worried about the way it suggested that one can find vanilla coffee in France and thus feared its impact on international relations. I imagined legions of Americans marching into cafes, in that way that only Americans can, asking for the vanilla stuff, then demanding it, louder of course the second time around, until finally yelling at some poor chap for not knowing how to make coffee. For the new century, Starbuck’s sends a new generation over to trample Italy, surely demanding to know what kind of moron would leave the caramel out of a macchiato. And some of us wonder why the rest of the world hates us.

For whatever reason we Americans tend to prefer less substantial versions of most items, especially foodstuffs, and now appear to carry our passion for the candy coating into pool. When I read about the recent International Pool Tour World 8-Ball Championship, as contested by a total of two retired players, and hyped by some as the future of pool, I have to wonder how such an event can generate a positive impact for the game. On one hand, nothing could be more fabulous than seeing two of history’s greatest players receiving the acknowledgement and then the money that they and the rest of the game’s stars have been denied for so long. But on the other hand, how wise is it to grant someone, the infomercial king no less, complete control over the game and playing conditions down to the type of cloth used. Is it for TV? Is it for money? If he told us to jump off a bridge...? How many other sports would hand over the keys to an irrefutably sketchy stranger appearing so abruptly from out of nowhere? Well, besides boxing of course.

Time will tell with the IPT and, despite my fearful cynicism, I honestly hope that everything comes up roses and then some with genuine paydays and broad, mainstream recognition for pool players. However, we must also examine our hunger for exposure on the almighty tube in the context of our weakening presence on the world stage. While we’ve been taping shortened matches for TV or playing 7-ball with one safety, other countries have routinely televised races to 17 live. Meanwhile, one American has won the WPA Men’s World 9-Ball Championship in the last six years and only three different Americans have won the tournament throughout its history since 1990. Before 1990, one must go back to 1912 and the Cuban, Alfredo De Oro, to find a foreign-born men’s world champion.

Looking at the WPA women’s event, the U.S. fares slightly worse, with only two different American-born women ever winning the title, the last one in 1993. As for the WPA World Junior Title, one American, Michael Coltrain, managed a runner-up finish in 1992 for the best American performance in that tournament’s history. Call me crazy but I might look at juniors as the future of pool. Three years ago, during a trip to Vancouver, I met a Taiwanese college student and enjoyed long conversations with him over my few

days there. No sooner had I told him my occupation than he proceeded to tell me about Allison, Karen, Jeanette, Johnny, Cory and Earl among many others. When I asked if he's a pool player he said, "No, just a sports fan," which he took as an opening to offer his picks for that year's Cy Young Awards. When I asked him about Taiwan's dominant presence in the World Junior Tournament, he said, "Well, Americans don't play 14.1 anymore." Too stunned at the time to ask, I still wonder how he knew that.

Can forsaking 14.1 really be the problem and the cause of our downward slide on the world stage? A few months before that encounter in Canada, I met a 12-year-old Croatian boy in Germany, a fine shooter who told me that *both* his trainers insisted that he play straight pool every day. Thorsten Hohman, the 2003 world 9-ball champion from Germany, confesses a passion for straight pool while admitting at the same time that it's not a good game for TV. But we don't have to take one man's word for it. In his brilliant account of straight pool's death in the August issue of *Billiards Digest*, R. A. Dyer reports, "Everyone seems to agree that straight pool makes for bad TV." He goes on to talk about the last network taping of a straight-pool match, the 1973 U.S. Open final, where 18 minutes of safety play caused ABC to abandon the game for good. Must every moment of our virtual lives mimic a day in a fighter jet or an evening at the Playboy mansion? Whew—when I think about how close our children came to seeing a safety on television, the terrorist threat looms a little less ominously. But other countries televise pool matches, *live*, with no worries about safeties burning up precious air time. In his story from the 2004 world championship, Mason King offers this observance of savvy fans attending the event in Taipei. "Pulling for their countrymen but always ready to reward excellence, the Taiwanese fans saved some of their biggest bursts of applause for safety play—no matter who the shooter." So while fans around the world watch live matches and cheer safeties, we tune into "Ballbreakers," where a bookkeeper competes against a psychology major to see who can knock more balls off the left side of the table while standing on one foot.

Maybe a return to straight pool would not restore American dominance but at least it would provide a step in the right direction of playing pool again for the sake of pool instead of kowtowing to someone's best guess at a gimmick for higher TV ratings. In consideration of the game's value, we should note that when straight pool was the championship game, the U.S. held an exclusive grip on the world title for men and allowed one anomalous foreign victory among the women, a 1974 Meiko Harada win over Jean Balukas in that year's finals. When the tournament returns to New York—its rightful home in my opinion—in April, 2006 it will be interesting to see how things shake out on a stage that has changed so much since its last installment in 1990. With players coming from every corner of the world to challenge us at our own game, there will be more pressure than ever on U.S. players to win a tournament that we have never lost. But, win or lose, we should know that glitz and hype, however cute, cannot replace pure performance. However, if it is pure glitz we seek over pure pool, then let's spend a moment to get familiar with that. When Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie show up at a pool event, get the photos. But Paulie Shore? Maybe he's best kept under wraps lest further embarrassment for our sport. On the other hand it might be nice to run into him just to find out exactly what he did 20 years ago for his 15 minutes.

