

Vision

Though I don't understand them very well, sometimes I envy football fans. It must be heavenly to live in a world that sets aside one full day (two if we include college fans) each week for them to watch, from morning to night, spread over ten channels, every game that is being played. Then after a dinner break they get to watch all of the same games again as they are replayed, analyzed, and adored by a group of wannabe jocks who earn the big dough for sharing their powerful insights.

"Gosh darn it Phil that linebacker really backs the line, whatta you think?"

"You said it Dan. He knows the game and he came to play."

The rest of the week goes to broadcasting every game that has ever *been* played; and they say that the '74 Miami-Oakland game is a real humdinger. I still lose money every time I bet on it.

To me, the greatest oddity of the football phenomenon is that, among the dozens of people I know who watch the game religiously, nobody gets off of his couch to play it. Pool on the other hand, which has nearly 40 million Americans playing with some regularity, receives coverage that pales in comparison to that of other games. But that may be a good thing. I might go crazy if I looked in the TV guide and saw that Bustamante and Chao were playing nine ball on channel seven, while a little further down the dial, Daulton and Joyner were squaring off in the One-Pocket Game Of The Week, with Sigel vs. Martin on the Straight-Pool Channel and a two-hour documentary entitled "The Mosconi of '39" on the History Channel, inter-cut with footage of tanks rolling through Europe. And who would miss "The Grady Mathews Show" every night after the local news?

It's a pretty safe bet that pool will never dominate television but we do have quite a lot to watch now and, although some youngsters may not believe it, it was not so long ago when we had zilch, no cable, no video tapes and certainly no live telecasts on something called pay-per-view. Perhaps the aggregate audience will never consider a pool game as entertaining as a boxing match or even as engaging as the TV "sport" that mystifies me more than all the others—fat guys throwing beer kegs over motorboats. But for those of us who play pool and dedicate ourselves to improvement, intent watching can serve as well as focused practice. And the menu is large right now, so varied in fact that we have a great deal more available to watch and learn from than just pool.

Virtual Snooker, the computer game, comes with a video of Steve Davis running a perfect 147 and, while it may not enthrall some folks so thoroughly as a heated round of bass fishing, his last two shots put me on the edge of my seat every time I view it. And I knew he would make them before I saw it the first time since it says "147" right there on the box. Most of us have never seen a game of 18.2 balkline but there is an Accu-Stats tape of Peter DeBacker running 133 and out against Frederic Caudron in a famous balkline match. Any pool player would be hard pressed to watch that performance and then deny that it may well be the finest display of skill and control conceivable with a cue and some balls. For sheer amazement we have Semih Sayginer at our disposal with his

taped, artistic-billiards exhibitions. It's unlikely that we would ever use what we see there in a game of pool, or even think that we might execute one of his shots, but since his reality dwells so far beyond most of our imaginations, we have to watch him.

So we watch as often as we can to gain inspiration and to feed our imaginations. Pool has more possibilities than any other game and nobody, not even someone who has played for sixty years, has seen all of them. Some say that chess has more possibilities but I assert that a great chess player typically goes into a game knowing the first twenty-or-so moves in advance since every game begins with each piece on its designated square. Every time a pool player opens a rack however, that person must contend with a unique layout of balls. As we play and practice, what was once strange becomes familiar while we learn to manage increasingly difficult layouts. But we do not have time to experience enough possibilities firsthand and, because it is extremely difficult to perform what we have not yet seen, we add to our experience from watching those players who have seen more and thus know more than we do.

You can make it a habit to watch the professionals, pay attention and work to remember what you see. Examine the problems that arise and predict their solutions. If you are watching a video and you see a problem with no immediately obvious solution, pause the tape to analyze the balls until you can offer one or perhaps several. Try turning off the sound while watching a televised match to give yourself an opportunity to make predictions instead of merely listening to the commentators, who are usually pros themselves, making theirs. Often while watching professionals you will see solutions that you could not imagine. If you involve yourself and experience what you are watching you will recall what you saw when you find yourself in a similar situation during a match. Sometimes you will come to the table facing challenges that you have never seen but will arrive simply knowing that more is possible. That is a very powerful viewpoint from which to play as it invites your imagination to get you out of jams that may appear initially as hopeless traps. Many players can turn around dire circumstances with miraculous shots by replacing a fear of failure with a willingness to amaze, only because they have seen others perform with such courage.

An enlightened student can learn from watching anyone play. A few years ago Efren Reyes reported that he loves to watch pool and sometimes adds to his knowledge while watching inexperienced players. He explained that because great players tend to manage the table rather predictably, most of them keeping house in much the same way, he has learned a lot from watching games between bad players, where he gets to see balls moving as they never do when the best players shoot. His ability to observe what the rest of us might consider "wrong" and convert it to a skill works for him to augment his vast bag of tricks.

Sometimes we complain that television virtually ignores our game and I think we should continue doing so. If we make enough noise someone who can change things will hear us eventually and respond. Some countries give pool a huge television presence and as a result more great players than ever, male and female, are turning up from all over the

world. Meanwhile here in the U.S., even though it requires a little effort and money to get all of it, we have many opportunities to watch great pool along with the best from other cue games. As we practice to improve our skills we must also watch to enhance our vision. And maybe some day, when we walk into a sports bar and hear the crowd chanting “DEE-FENSE,” we will not be surprised to look up and see a pool star on TV analyzing the choice between a tough bank shot and a safety.

