

Environment

Throughout the second half of last year, a huge, ongoing story focused on a fellow named Ken Jennings and his extraordinary run of victories on *Jeopardy!*. From June 2nd till November 30th, Jennings won 74 straight games and over 2.5 million dollars, both all-time, game-show records. Going into Final Jeopardy an incredible 65 times with the game locked, he was an intellectual monster. But so is everyone who makes it to the show, where it turns out that appearing on TV can pose a greater challenge than answering the questions, forcing many contestants to crumble under the lights. I felt sorry for those people who qualified, waited over a year for their invitations, and then flew out to LA for one shot against the genius who had become as comfortable on the set as Alex Trebek. When we find ourselves trying to perform in a strange environment, the things we think we know can move strangely out of reach. My favorite example is a guy who orbits the Denver pool scene, a registered child molester who struggles painfully with communication in the adult world but probably shows up at the playground with sparkling wit.

In sports, surroundings can influence the outcome of a contest as strongly as talent and skill, hence the phenomenon known as home-field advantage. Regarding pool, an often discussed example of environment's importance lies in the domination that Karen Corr and Allison Fisher have exerted on the WPBA Classic Tour. Naturally, we must first salute their tremendous talent, composure and near mechanical perfection, all displayed so consistently. Beyond those qualities however, we must also consider their experience and comfort with playing and winning in the Sunday tournament environment where the atmosphere changes dramatically. Throughout the week the field competes in a darkened room with each table lighted individually. The crowds will sprinkle the room with applause, but never lose control. And with eight matches going on at once, the setting can resemble an intimate poolroom filled with serious players, similar perhaps to the rooms where the girls might play most of their pool. Those players still competing on Sunday arrive to find one table—typically a different model from the ones used for earlier matches—unbearably hot television lights illuminating the arena beyond comfort, cameras moving around the table and bleachers packed with passionate, raucous fans. It's hard to imagine playing under those conditions, but for Karen and Allison, it's another day at the office.

In contrast to professionals, who must learn to break through and perform comfortably in one uniquely bizarre setting, there exists a group of first-class shooters known as road players, guys who travel the country playing for high stakes in ever-changing environments. One has to admire somebody who can walk into a strange room, challenge its best player and then bet big money on a table he has never seen, often shooting with a house cue. Those who lack the ability to adjust immediately to whatever conditions confronting them will find themselves at Western Union the next morning waiting for bus fare or gas money to arrive from home. In another area of that same camp are the best artistic shooters such as Mike Massey or Tom "Dr. Cue" Rossman, two

men who travel the world to perform their wizardry in a new place every day, sometimes on horrendous, broken-down equipment. They face the added difficulty of no option to bow out because the table looks impossible. But those players who are constantly on the move never spend enough time in one place to develop standards for equipment or surroundings. The environment they like best is wherever they find themselves today.

Most of us will never have to worry about playing on TV, nor will we quit our jobs to tackle the rigors of the road. However, we will face changing conditions and various environments in our competitive careers, and should acknowledge the influence that our surroundings can have on our playing. We experience pool with all of our senses just as we experience the rest of the world. Any changes in the normal sensory process can cause a profound effect on performance, something I've observed with myself. These days I play almost exclusively in the room where I work, which makes me very comfortable there and, at the same time, more sensitive to foreign surroundings when I do go somewhere else. But even on my home court, certain changes occurring around me can knock me off my game. The toughest challenge for me is live music, which is louder and more penetrating than any noise I've learned to manage. It turns out that I have to hear the game while I play it and have not found a way to compensate for the removal of that necessary, sensory element.

Once we tune into the importance of our surroundings we can find ways to sink comfortably into new places more quickly. Everyone who travels to another room for a tournament wants to practice there and adjust to the tables. But how many of us go in with the intention of adjusting to the room itself? Commonly, when traveling to a Saturday tournament, we arrive in town the night before and go to the site to practice amid the bustle and noise of a busy poolroom on a Friday night. Then we walk in on Saturday morning, to the quiet, somber tournament atmosphere and find ourselves in a seemingly different place. More astute players get there at least one full day ahead of time to practice in both the daytime and nighttime settings. And beyond practice, they will spend some time away from the pool table, sitting quietly to observe and absorb the subtleties of lighting, sounds, and smells, as they acclimate to the totality of a strange environment. Even a confident road player will hang around a room for a couple of days, studying the scene and adapting before picking up a cue.

In light of the demands that pool places on our concentration, one school of thought advises us that we should ignore our surroundings and focus on the table. Since I strongly doubt that's possible, I think we should work to sharpen our awareness of everything around us to transform the strange into something familiar as quickly as possible and eliminate surprises. In any pursuit we always perform better in a well-known setting. While watching *Jeopardy!* last fall I had some good runs, chiming in before Ken and even answering a few he didn't know. And though I shudder at the thought of standing under those lights with a buzzer in my hand, I take some brief pleasure in the knowledge that I can be one hot player—in my living room.

