

## Passion

*“There is an indispensable kind of person who cuts a swath in the world not merely because of his own accomplishments, which may be considerable, but also because of what he has enabled others to accomplish. That kind of person brings energy and direction to a community, and helps define the experience of living in a particular place and time.”*

Cullen Murphy, managing editor for *The Atlantic*, speaking about poet and editor Peter Davison after his recent death

Last summer George Fels wrote about Willie Mosconi and his open lack of passion for the game of pool. According to Fels and sources he quotes, Mosconi not only failed to express any real love for the game, but went a considerable step further to convey a certain disdain for it. And that’s where my poor colleague throws up his hands. It’s one thing to spend so much time with an activity until the thrill eventually wanes, but quite another to express a vocal and pointed contempt for an art mastered. Fels quotes a story from longtime Mosconi friend, Charles Ursitti, who swears that Willie once quit on a run of 589 balls with a full rack open on the table because he was hungry. “Let’s go get dinner,” he said. And then, “See, it’s no big deal to run 600 balls.” So Fels asks whether other greats—Jordan, Ripken, Woods—would ever disrespect their crafts in such a way.

By now I’ve heard enough about Mosconi to get the message that he probably was not the most empowering person ever to chalk a cue. It’s too bad of course since I am old enough to have grown up with him as my legendary hero but not old enough to have had any personal contact with him. So everything I know about Willie is hearsay. But over the past 10-15 years all the anecdotes add up to expose him as a mere human, with the same pitfalls and shortcomings that plague everyone. When I think about the challenge of straight pool, I share the sting that George Fels describes from hearing a 600 ball runner regard our beautiful game, not only as a piece of cake, but as one not quite enticing enough for him to savor. And like Fels, I cannot reconcile such irksome flippancy toward the game that has alternately elevated and humbled me throughout my life. So, rather than agonizing over the Mosconi mystery, I’d like to turn my attention to the other side of the same coin and discuss a couple people who have inspired me with profound and honest love for our game.

Those who come immediately to mind do not stand among the most famous or greatest players I’ve known. My first powerful influence besides my father goes back about 30 years to a time when the “real” players around me had no reason to take notice of an inquisitive midget with a bit of potential. But one man, Jose “Joe” Diaz, did and he never left my memory. I met him at the first 3-cushion tournament I ever saw and recall planting myself next to him at the bar while he tried to eat his lunch in peace. Anyone who’s ever uttered the words, “There’s no such thing as a dumb question,” never encountered me as a teenager. Since I could not yet comprehend billiards he did not really answer my bonehead inquiries so much as he employed them to adduce his passion and take me into his world, one of beauty and possibility far beyond my imagination.

Over the next few years, whenever we saw each other, he made an effort to seek my company, delve sincerely into my own well being and then teach me something on the table. Most touching is that after not seeing him for some 25 years, we met up again at a tournament where, in spite of heartbreakingly failing health, he made his way over to me with a broad smile of recognition to say hello, ask how I was doing and make me feel at once 10 feet tall and 14 years old again. He remembered the young pest that still looks up to him as a hero.

Fast forward to a month ago when I had the delicious privilege of spending a day working and playing with Tom “Dr. Cue” Rossman. Thanks to televised, artistic tournaments, Tom is now well known among those who have never witnessed his magic in person. Because of the similarity in our names I was first alerted to his existence about 20 years ago when someone congratulated me for winning a World Trick Shot Tournament. Once past the initial confusion I became aware of his presence and utter devotion to our beautiful game, and have remained so ever since. Over the past ten years the two of us have forged a friendship cemented in our shared passion for teaching. While most of the world knows the good doctor as an artistic competitor, I know him best for his incomparable teaching skills and his commitment to make billiards rewarding for everyone he encounters. Two years ago, at a workshop we conducted for top-shelf players, I saw Tom cause the single greatest breakthrough I’ve ever witnessed. In a moment, which is exactly how long a breakthrough takes, Tom shifted the lone beginner in the group’s focus long enough to wake the skills sleeping within him, and transform someone struggling with elementary shots into a cool, confident shooter. It’s impossible to imagine anyone crossing Tom’s path without learning something or experiencing the joy he spreads around a pool table.

Both men remind me of a story I once heard about a great and famous teacher, someone with thousands of followers. On an occasion when one of his students was called up to join his mentor on stage to receive an award, he blushed in the great man’s presence and confessed that he felt daunted since he had always placed him on a pedestal. The mentor replied, “Please, stand here with me; there’s plenty of room on the pedestal.” So, here are two examples of the many greats I’ve met, bracketing my journey from its beginning to the present, both residing on the pedestals where I placed them, not so much for their skills, which are world class, but for their way of reaching out to convey their greatness onto me with open, honest invitations to join them. And although great talent and true love are often found together, they also live independently of each other and do not have to go hand in hand. It’s both simple and complex at the same time. Dr. Cue, who has as much fun missing his exhibition shots as making them, summed it up perfectly when I asked him where he finds his greatest reward. Instead of recounting his first world title or his most memorable victory he said, “When the eighty-year-old woman gave me a big smile and told me that she now knows she can enjoy pool without making every shot.” And so he goes spreading the joy of billiards around the world among players who may never run six balls. Who could hope for a greater legacy?

