

Megan's Journal

When I went into work at the poolroom a few days ago everything was in perfect order including the familiar sight of Megan Minerich practicing on one of the front tables. Megan plays on the WPBA tour and is positioned this year to make her move into the top ranks to join the stars that we know from TV. On this particular day, as I later found out, she had borrowed a writing pad and pen from the house man to take some notes on her practice. Since I would rather investigate a bee hive than interrupt a serious player's practice I had no idea what she was doing until she came to me after her session and said that she had found some insights, wrote them down and asked if I wanted to read them. As the words "why not?" came out I spied the pages of scribble that she was turning in front of her and felt a pang of terror at the prospect of having to decipher it. She said, "Great, I'll organize this at home and e-mail to you." Whew!

Pool is a solitary game that fights us at the deepest, personal level. While we compete inside the larger framework of a community, when it's time to perform we are out there alone with the table, the balls and our selves. Perhaps the only athlete lonelier than the pool player is the figure skater. As we struggle to forge a personal and selfish relationship with the game, we must reconcile that with the role we play among those who surround us—our fellow players and the spectators. Yes, more than anything, we perform for ourselves, but we do it alongside the impact that our achievements might have on others. And in the balance we shape our competitive personae in the context of the influence that others have on us. I have never fished with someone who failed to shout out something for attention after he hooked one nor have I ever seen a pool player make a great shot without looking around to see who might have witnessed the artistry. At some point though the champion must break through and take complete ownership of his or her performance to stand alone.

When I first read what follows I was a little moved that Megan would share something so personal with me. I also saw a natural fit with "In Focus" minus the usual, intellectual filters. When she agreed to allow me to pass it along, I knew that I had something pretty special in my hands. Here is a rare glimpse at a touring professional's introspections and a snapshot of one moment in the dynamic process of a champion's formation.

As my cue ball rolls into perfect shape on a break shot in 14:1 practice, I have a sort of epiphany. While all players get that little rush of excitement when they execute a shot beautifully, (that's what we play for!), I thought for a minute today that there might be something more behind that excitement at times. Not to take away from justified celebration and satisfaction in a job well done, but shouldn't success come to be more, well, mundane? Of course there's nothing wrong with savoring the satisfaction of stellar execution, but on some level I get the feeling that I enjoy those beautiful moments in another way--as if that mastery I experienced was something that just visits me. Here I ask myself, when will you get to the point where you accept that you ARE the master? I think it all comes down to how I see myself, my self concept.

This concept is obviously influenced by what our memory tells us, past experiences, past achievements, our failures, our successes, etc. Memory, while a great thing can also be a big pain in the rear because it wants to limit you to the realm of the known. To graduate in pool, or in anything in life, you really have to have an imaginary self concept and BELIEVE in it. (This does not apply to all the old windbags at the pool hall who can't run ten balls but insist that their advice on practice habits is something you cannot possibly survive without.) What I mean is having a picture of yourself where you want to be and really feeling like you're there.

This is something that I personally have made strides with, but it is nevertheless a continuing process. For a long time I believed in this idea, I am only now filling in the mold so to speak. I am starting to give myself more credit, affirming that I'm a great player; that I deserve to be at the top ranks of the competition, that I'm not just out with the WPBA on a day pass from the "School of Shortstops". These things sound like a "given" when you look where I am and how far I've come, but it's easy to get caught up in things that distract you from your inner feelings, namely all the judgmental, negative crap that surrounds a person from time to time. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm coming to terms with how the outside world affects one's self concept, and how we all need to take back the power we give to all the external stuff.

For example, I used to feel like I'd been stuck in a role that someone else wrote for me, but they never wrote any more scripts and I just kept on playing the same role. Maybe there's some variation from act to act, but in general it's the same character and the audience knows exactly what's going to happen. Just like we can say "Here comes the part when the Roadrunner goes MEEP, MEEP and leaves the Coyote in a cloud of dust", we also have said subconsciously "Here comes the part when she tightens up and misses the 8 to give the match away". Hey, maybe that role was fitting for me at a certain time, but that time has passed and by the way, I'M THE WRITER NOW. My life is MY show isn't it? So now I've been writing a role for myself that I want to play. Very simple.

You know, the big barrier to this freedom like I mentioned before is the power we give to others, and I feel this holds especially true for females. Women have been socialized to care so much about what people think of them, to be caring and sensitive to others, to not be "bigger than their britches". So it's especially tough in the pool world to stand tall and follow only your inner voice. Male or female though, all players can find it easy to fall into the trap of letting others' beliefs influence how they see themselves. When this happens people become mirrors, and they are actually only reflecting back at us whatever insecurities, doubts and fears we already have. If that reflection is all you ever see, then over time it will be your identity.....you will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Over time I've come to identify with this phenomenon of transference and I've vowed to reclaim any power I've ever given away. After all, why should I give any credence to other people's beliefs when pool is such an individual, private endeavor? People may love me, hate me, think I'm awesome, or think I'm stinking up the joint-- whatever. But

when it's crunch time, none of those people are going to help me make the long straight in shot down the rail to close out the match. I'm out there by myself when I'm playing. Disregarding all subjective input is absolutely essential, I've come to believe. The adulation and the derision. All of it.

I've digressed a bit, so let me get back to neutralizing those warped images we can have etched into our minds. This isn't easy, but it can be done by being honest with yourself. How you think you see yourself and how you actually see yourself can be two vastly different things. I identified this disparity in myself over the course of my development as a player. There were times when certain conditions were present that I just didn't feel like myself, like my game was being hindered by *something* but I wasn't really sure what it was. After some introspection, I realized the fly in the ointment was my own mind. Granted, there are a million aspects of the pool player's mind that can wreak havoc on the game, but the two I'm referring to here are my memory and what I perceived others were thinking. I was limiting myself based on my past experiences and by what I thought people expected of me. It sounds completely INSANE and yet makes sense at the same time. I guess during my formative years, I learned to do what people want you to and stick to what you know. (Yet another reason why I wished I had started playing pool when I was a kid---the whole *Tabula Rasa* thing.....) To reject a veritable lifetime of learning isn't easy, but that's the gift we're given as intellectual beings—to choose to start believing something different, something that finally works.

So, no longer will that bonehead who approaches me while I'm practicing and asks "So, do you play in a league or something?" bother me. The fact that he thinks he's looking at a girl who might be a 4 handicap in his Tuesday night league doesn't mean that's what/who I am, obviously. I don't have to get mad and offended because of his stupid question. Okay, so that's a pretty soft example, but you get the point—that no longer can anyone cast a negative reflection back on me if there is nothing negative within me to reflect. Because like I said before, I'm in the driver's seat, I write my own script, my beliefs are all that matter, and I AM A CHAMPION!!!!

