

Talking

A few years ago, I ran across a magazine article entitled, “The Soundtracking of America,” in which the writer complained stridently, yet eloquently, about the fact that it’s almost impossible to avoid hearing loud music anywhere we go. To some that may sound like an odd complaint. But others treasure music and want to choose what they hear and when they hear it. And staying home no longer protects us from the tyranny of others’ tastes. All it takes is a phone call to virtually any company to experience a concert of hold music and the proof for a modern theory—the more painful the music, the longer you’ll wait to get your question answered. Occasionally I connect while the band’s on a break and someone has replaced the music with a tape loop of aggressive ads for the company I just called. Isn’t the purpose of advertising to reach the people who *aren’t* calling?

Back at a time before America turned up the volume, I was looking for a new apartment in Brooklyn. I found one I liked, offered the agent a deposit and headed for the subway to go home. At the end of the block I stumbled onto a poolroom, a discovery that transformed an apartment I had merely liked a few minutes prior into the world’s perfect residence. I opened the front door and saw that there were two straight-pool games going on with about eight or ten guys watching. And something else happened when I opened that door. It creaked. Not loudly, yet every guy in the place, including the two who were shooting, stopped and stared at me. Nobody said a word while I froze for a moment, then turned quietly and walked away. Someone else got that apartment, which was probably just as well, since it might have taken me years to ingratiate myself to the regulars in that room after such a raucous debut.

Who knows? Those guys might have welcomed me in to take a seat and enjoy the show. But I sensed the intrusion, as though I had disrupted something private and sacred. Considering that it was straight pool, in early-eighties New York, with spectators on a pleasant afternoon, chances are good that it *was* sacred. Or it’s possible that there was nothing special at all about those games, but I don’t like to imagine that. It’s too disheartening to think that even duffers used to treat the game so reverently.

My greatest playing memories come from a few years before the Brooklyn incident and a room just beyond Chicago’s western edge. It was an old room, built long before anyone thought of bundling other diversions into the billiards package. There were 35 tables, all built before 1920, and nothing else. On two separate occasions at closing time, I got into some straight-pool action, which must have appealed to the owner since he locked the front door and let us play. Most memorable was being in such a large room with no light beyond what came from the three lamps over the table we used. For a few hours, I moved through a world where nothing existed past the edge of the table. I could not see the half-dozen-or-so spectators and can’t remember being able to see my opponent while I was shooting. The music we heard came from the table; tip on ball, ball on ball and ball falling into pocket. Nobody talked.

Of course, today's poolrooms could not be more different from the churches of our past. And you won't hear any carping from me about that. In fact, I love most of the modern poolrooms. What could be better than dropping a beautiful game into a slick environment with good food and music thrown in? And if the giant-foam-finger crowd wants to come and make their sports-fan noises around a pool table, bring them in too. Everyone should play pool and enjoy a good time doing it. It's a natural, social activity played year-round, indoors and in close contact. Lately, I've been playing a little social pool myself and, to my initial disbelief, having great fun with friends around some bar tables. Recreational pool is a driving force of our industry and we all must appreciate its value.

We have a problem however when the line between social pool and competitive pool blurs to transform our quiet game into a gabfest. Competitive pool is about as social as a knife fight and regarded by many players as equally serious. The high levels of problem solving, focus and concentration that pool demands are not easy to reach in the presence of a chatterbox. In the entirety of a pool match, each player is required to say only four words, "Good luck" at the outset and, "Good match" when it's over. "Play well" can serve as another acceptable opener. Occasionally, during a match, the words "Good shot" can be appropriate, but not too often.

The choreography of a pool match could not be simpler. The player shooting does so quietly until he misses while the other player sits still and watches in silence. Throughout the match, the two players switch roles in smooth transitions. Most, but certainly not all, players have the sense to refrain from talking while their opponents are shooting. Lately though I've noticed a growing number of players who like to talk while they themselves are shooting, a mind boggler for sure. Apparently, they enjoy their own static; but what leads them to believe that anyone else might care the slightest for what they had intended to do, or where they wanted to leave the cue ball? On the bright side, since their favorite topic is what was supposed to happen, they usually don't get to talk for very long. As a rule, run-out players don't say too much. Great pool, it seems, speaks for itself.

The whole country grows louder every year and we should expect some of that noise to follow us into poolrooms. It won't do much good to complain about it, pretend that it doesn't exist or try to change anything. But it's hard to imagine someone running 200 balls amid the din of blaring TV's and boisterous crowds. For the industry's future, and therefore my own, I do appreciate the bustle of a loud, busy room. But I also savor the memories of those bygone sanctuaries where the creak of a door could send a shockwave through the building. We may be powerless to move the world onto a quieter course, but as players we do not have to contribute to the chaos. We can give our fellow players and the game itself the dignified respect they deserve. Try to remember that if you've been playing regularly with someone for less than ten years and that person knows your last name, you may be talking too much.

