

Association

“To those of you who received honors, awards and distinctions, I say, well done. And to the C students, I say you, too, can be president of the United States.”

George W. Bush at Yale’s commencement in 2001

I remember laughing when I read that in the news. Then I remember thinking about C students across America, their new role model and the ammo he gave them to fight their parents over grades. And I remember the sudden pang of terror I felt when it hit me that the world’s most powerful man had just boasted smugly about being average, right after tossing off a half-hearted “well done” to the students who worked hard enough to graduate with honors. Such gall is hard to comprehend. However, if you are a C student, your dad’s a president, your brother controls the election’s pivotal state, and you surround yourself with dad’s most powerful friends from the last 30 years, you *can* be president. It’s not *what* you know...

If pool were as easy as politics, achieving greatness would be a simple matter of hanging around great players. Just as every town has a group of business and political bigwigs, every town has a clique that forms around its billiards cream. Those who can wedge their ways into the former gang typically manage to get what they want without much sweat. Wouldn’t it be nice if all we had to do in preparation for a tournament is take the nearest pool star out for a three-martini lunch and let our desires for victory be known? Unfortunately, and in sharp contrast to politics, in pool, we must shoot the shots ourselves. We compete alone and, when facing a tough shot, it’s never *who* you know.

On the other hand, although we compete alone and earn every achievement personally, we do not learn alone. In reality, there’s tremendous value in hanging around good players. When I was very young I spent most of my pool time with my father, a reliable sixty-ball runner, a deadly money player and a great teacher. In the early days, he would get a lead on me in straight pool and then miss a break shot and watch me play. He missed as many times as necessary to keep me in the game with a chance to win, something that only a father might do. Before too long we were competitive and I shall never forget the moment when he knew for certain that he could no longer beat me with his best game. He had done his job and it made him happy.

Although he knew that he had done *his* job, he also knew that the overall job was not yet complete. So he found out where the best players in the city gathered and took me there to further my education. Not yet five feet tall, I initially began playing in the weekly, straight-pool tournament with some of the finest players in the country. It was a tournament handicapped so fairly that nobody dominated and everyone had to play his best to win. In those days, the U.S. Open Straight-Pool tournament limited the field to 32 players. For sure I remember six players from that elite field who showed up every week for the tournament, and suspect two more whose names escape me now. That teenage opportunity to play competitively—because of the handicap—against some of the nation’s top players, did more, without question, for my pool game than all of my other experiences combined. When I became old enough to drive I was able to go there any night to match up in orbits that shrank continually toward the nucleus of talent. When I

left that scene at 17 to go to school, I had not reached the top level. But the guys who resided there knew me by then as a tenacious, little bastard and none of them ever once offered me disrespectful weight for money.

Perhaps as valuable as the competition was the opportunity to associate with such great players. We weren't always playing, and most of those guys that I looked up to so unashamedly would let me sit around and talk about pool with them. The top-shelf pool scene is not so grimy as it often sounds as I learned that even pool players had gentlemen living inside them—gentlemen who let me pull on their coats, looked out for me and made me feel like one of them. On those occasions when I found myself slumming in second-tier rooms, the cockiness that came from feeling like one of them went a long way toward playing like one of them.

So many players tell me that they want to improve, want to be the best, and yet continue to move in circles far beneath those aspirations. I wonder how many players have looked at Johnny Archer on TV, thought, "I'm going to beat him some day," and then demanded that their league handicaps be lowered the following day. From time to time we must weigh our goals against our surroundings to see how they match up. When our desires dwell above our current environment, it's time for a change. In that sense we're very fortunate to be pool players since no other sport offers such easy accessibility to its best players. I can't count the times I've seen Jeannette Lee walk off in conversation with a fan, someone she just met. That same congeniality exists throughout the professional ranks and down through to the top ranks at every local level. For whatever reason, and despite how threatening they may look while competing, great pool players, as a rule, are pretty warm and friendly.

Okay, pool players are really teddy bears, so what? Well, in a game so complex and cerebral as pool, it's very common to learn something in a short conversation that might take years to uncover on the table alone, if it's ever uncovered alone. Often I see a young player with talent, but no more talent than a good league player. Then a year later I see that same kid winning tournaments and wonder how he got so good so fast. Invariably, I find that he's running with the best players and absorbing their knowledge. There's a phenomenon in pool that we may not see elsewhere. In other worlds, one typically has to show up with comparable abilities to associate with stars. In pool, anyone can talk to the elite and, once that begins, the necessary skills often emerge rapidly.

It may take some courage to look at those players on the highest tiers in hopes that they would stoop to associate with us. But pool players, for all their quirks, generally lack the necessary haughtiness it takes to look down on people. When I think about the crowd I'll need to start hanging around to become president, those guys do not look like a welcoming bunch to someone like me. And I was an above-average student.

