

July '98

## Play to Win

Last month I had the privilege to assist two of the game's finest and most respected instructors, The Monk (Tim Miller) and Dr. Cue (Tom Rossman), in an instructional workshop conducted at Shakespeare's over the course of three days. As I've said before what holds my interest in pool more than anything is the perpetual opportunity for learning. While I was there to work as an assistant to the teachers in charge, I am certain that I learned and profited as much as any of the students, making the three days one of my most memorable experiences in pool. To top things off I was rewarded, along with Jill Jodice, Master-Instructor certification from the Monk Academy which will lead to a series of mini-workshops that we are designing and will begin to offer in the near future, perhaps as soon as next month. It's all very exciting.

It would be impossible to convey here a small fraction of what we covered in the workshop although much of it is sure to pop up in the future; we won't in fact work with anything from the course this month. Because he is fresh in my mind though I want to share something I learned from the Monk when I read his first book a few years ago, something that caused a breakthrough in my own pool game. Since first reading the Monk's books I have recommended them to students and other players to help them take control of the inner game and now urge you to read *Point the Way* and *The Eight-Ball Book*. Often, usually before a tournament, I go back and skim through them to refresh myself with his knowledge and perspective.

My knowledge of pool exists as a dynamic amalgam of information that others have shared with me, from my father teaching me as a youngster to the players, teachers, and students that I currently encounter daily. Therefore it is not my intent merely to reprint for you something that is already available but rather to relay to you something I learned with some of my own spin on it.

With few exceptions most of us enter into a contest with one goal, that is to win. Since winning is the standard yardstick for success let's examine it for a moment to see if we can strengthen our hold on it and weaken its hold on us. First, what is winning? For many of us it exists in a very grand way as the definition of a contest as in answering the question, "How did you do last night?" "I won." or "I lost."

When we view winning in this way we tend to overlook or ignore what happens between the coin toss and the outcome, namely playing. The reality is that, regardless of the format of the contest, tournament, money game or casual game, the one thing we must do is play. So, since we cannot win without playing, let's see what might happen if we focused on playing instead of winning and further, found a new way to experience playing.

Let's think of playing as a series of connected moments, each one separate and independent in which we perform our best and make the right move. So, playing is not

the shot that just ended nor is it the one that comes next. It is very simply the one we have right now, the one in the present. If we can immerse ourselves in the experience of playing each shot we can free ourselves from the burden of winning, which really isn't something we do but only our name for the favorable result of playing. How many times have we missed the critical but simple shot because we were caught up in winning and forgot to play?

The best way to immerse yourself in playing is to honor your pool game by playing whenever you find yourself at a pool table. This may sound kind of ridiculous as in, "what else would I be doing?" Consider though the difference between the way you feel when you are just knocking balls around with a friend and the way you feel at the table in a tournament or league match. Wouldn't it be great if we could take that easy, fast and loose feeling from casual contests to the tournament table? I don't think so. My goal is to play in casual games with the same intent and focus that I have for a tournament match. When I can play in the realm of knowing that every shot I take matters, regardless of the competitive environment, I train myself to focus on the balls rather than the importance of what surrounds them, namely winning the big one.

Playing is our access to winning. If we can perceive every shot, regardless of the competitive environment, as important for what it is rather than for what its execution might cause, we will approach the point where we feel the same way and play with the same freedom in every situation. As this occurs, the pressure we create for ourselves in "important" situations will begin to dissipate and our best performance will emerge more frequently.

Two years ago I watched Allen Gilbert, one of the century's great billiards champions, come from far behind to win a tournament final against a younger and equally respected player. I observed him throughout the match and its various stages from trailing by 15 points to catching, passing, and ultimately defeating his opponent and saw that his behavior and attitude at the table and in the chair never changed. He embodied intense focus with a relaxed enthusiasm as he scored the points he needed one shot at a time. It dawned on me that his appearance was exactly as it was when he played with me in games where I couldn't hope to provide the slightest competition for him. In my watching and pulling for him I was certain that I felt more pressure than he did. During this match I learned that the great ones play completely inside of the game with no acknowledgement for any meaning surrounding it.

