

August, 2003

G-string, Football, Pool

On a typical deadline day I disconnect the phone, lock the door and hunker down. This month I must have forgotten the door as, just when I was putting the finishing touches on my usual string of billiards pearls, a wild-eyed maniac burst into my lair shouting obscenities. He didn't look too threatening but assured me that he knows someone who is and could get him over here in thirty minutes with no more than three phone calls. Fearing for my life—and lunch—I complied with his demands and surrendered the keyboard. After typing furiously, or as furiously as one can with two greasy fingers, he photographed me (with the lens cap on) holding a newspaper and, reminding me once more how nasty his friend is, forced me to send what follows to my loyal editor. See you next month.
T.R.

Score in the Red Zone. Don't turn the ball over. Play Special teams like a Rabid Dog.

By Mark Margaretten

She leaned slowly over the table to play the six-ball, and the teal g-string that peeked from her blue jeans reminded me that football season was only a few short weeks away. It's a beautiful teal, Miami Dolphins' teal, and isn't easily forgotten by a simple Miami boy like me.

When she dropped the six, I choked like the Dolphins in December and remembered what the Great Coach Don Shula said; "Score in the Red Zone; don't turn the ball over; and play special teams like a rabid dog." ... or maybe my ex-wife said that. Regardless, the tools of competition are all the same.

She sunk the six, was now on the seven-ball, and definitely in the Red Zone. If you get to the seven, you've got to go out. It's a pivotal ball, the seven. It's the beginning of the end. If you get to the seven, you need to get to the nine. There are no excuses. The flame in her eyes told me she was going out. Good players, like good quarterbacks, put points on the board when the game is on the line. Your opponent knows it; and you know it too.

The seven dropped quickly and she was on the verge. I sipped, and my fine single malt left jagged tooth marks in my throat.

The difference between the last three balls and the first three is marked with the Purity of Glory. Technically, I suppose, the last three balls should be easier. The table is clear, the goal is clear, and the shots are the same. But the Red Zone carries the kind of emotional baggage that requires a porter, and the weak and foolish crash like a rock star on speed. The Red Zone demands a Warrior Spirit. Be Dan Marino; stomp your opponent

and dance on his sad grave.

She was now on the eight, and sensing the tension, my waitress -who prefers to be described as "bomb-ass"- refilled my scotch. I smiled, and she knew I was happy. The g-string sunk the eight, and when the nine went down I faced a different purity, the Purity of Failure. "Win like a champion, lose like a gentleman," the wise man said, so I shook her hand and racked the balls.

The Red Zone, like the Two-Minute Offense, cannot be ignored, and creeps up on the weak with a relentless brutality. The Truly Strong know this, and rise up for the game. Some say that the crowd noise goes away. Others don't remember their last shot. This is the Glory Time, and when you get to the seven, you get to the nine.

The next game began with a fury. My break was huge, nasty, and I sunk the one, hit my scotch, and began my run. The two was gone quickly and the three wasn't far behind, but I got long on the four and that easy side pocket shot became the long rail shot that seems to find Whitey in the hole.

But the pace and groove bit me, and I found myself channeling T.S. Eliot... "we are the hollow men," he said, and Doom found me badly. Where was Shula? "Don't turn the ball over! Turnovers lose football games!!" Turnovers change a nine-ball game like a slap in the face. Everything stops, moods change, and everyone regroups. No one wants to gloat, but everyone knows the score: Someone blew it, and someone is going to pay. Giving your opponent hope, ball in hand, and a short table is like bringing the Grim Reaper home to momma. Nothing good can come from it. Table fouls, like pulled muscles and nasty women, are avoidable, you just have to see them coming. G-String saw it coming, and giggled as moved back to the table. Where are the poets? Speak to me Eliot, speak to me. Play the rail shot or play the safety? T.S. returned and now I am Prufrock. Dare I eat the peach? The shot is juicy, and my reason for playing. Low percentage for sure, but sweet and dripping with glory. The Poet and the Coach are fighting now, and my heart pounds. Can she hear it? I side with the poet; the long rail it will be, and Prufrock is in my ear. Shula is quiet and I eat the peach. I scratch, and Shula returns. My Inner Fool is still doing push-ups. Don't turn the ball over.

I've been hooked on special teams since Garo Yepremium beat the Chiefs with his foot at the end of a long night thirty years ago. Field goals, blocked punts, and onside kicks pull me from the couch like a someone yanking my hair. The TV buzzes crazily and the cameras watch the other bench like it was the Hindenburg. Safeties are like that, and in a pool room wild with booze and girls they can bring real pain and heartache. They twist faces, pinch asses, and spill drinks.

G-String broke and read the table, knowing the six-ball would be played

safe. She was cool and ran up to the four, before leaving the five hanging in the corner. The worm had turned, and now the Doom belonged to her. She sat softly down, lit a cigarette, and looked away, hiding her concern with a hair flip and sip of beer. I stroked the five and drew Whitey to the center of the table, where the six was easy to find and the cue ball easy to hide. Shula spoke to me, his voice smooth from the same sherry cask that aged my scotch. "Find Evil, my son. Become Evil... and play the Devil's own safety." I moved slowly, and the now the poet was there. "Put on the face to meet the faces that you'll meet." Concentrate, I thought, and the Evil began to leave. Eliot was wrong. Pool has no room for this duality. Shula found me pausing and hit me hard in the kidney. "Be Evil," he stressed, so I smirked, shaved the six, and went two rails to hide behind the eight, kissing it gently, good and evil flirting like lovers.

G-String felt the pleasure and the pain, and looking back at Evil's cruel smile, knew this kick would define the match with words like Doom, Failure, Glory, Release, and Football. It's safe to assume, fair readers, that she missed. Coach Shula was with me, and the ghosts of Red Grange and Bronko Nagurski were in my blood. When I returned to the table, Bronko sunk the six and took me to the seven, and into the Red Zone. I went out on her that night, and with her the next, and stomped through the pool hall like a champion.

Pool, like Football and Poetry, rewards the bold and the smart, and spanks the foolish with a harsh hand. Don Shula knew it when the No-Name Defense went undefeated and took the trophy. The Coach stood up straight, and knew that skill only takes you halfway, and being smart puts you on the top.

I don't play pool for money. Somehow, I figure, that it pollutes a pure activity. But I'll play for underwear. I know plenty of players who aren't embarrassed over losing money, but no one will proudly lose their shorts. The g-string is hanging on the wall next to a photo of Don Shula, and above a thick T.S. Eliot compendium.

