

INVINCIBLE

Diary of a Pool Shooter

On the Path of Truth and Beauty in The Art of Pocket Billiards

by

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Until one is committed, there is hesitancy,
the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.

Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there
is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills
countless ideas and splendid plans:

That the moment one definitely commits oneself,
then Providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help one that
would never otherwise have occurred.

A whole stream of events issues from the decision,
raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents
and meetings and material assistance, which no man
could have dreamed would have come his way.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.

Boldness has Genius, Power and Magic in it.

Begin it now!

Goethe

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On Being Invincible



Graphic 1 - The McCafferty clan coat of arms

Invincible: *that which can not be defeated, overcome or denied.*

Throughout the ages, one of man's great ambitions was to be Invincible. What follows are some of the words we remember, from a few great minds who have considered the nature of Invincibility.

Your success and happiness lies in you. Resolve to keep happy, and your joy and you shall form an invincible host against difficulties. (Helen Keller)

An invincible determination can accomplish almost anything, and in this lies the great distinction between great men and little men. (Thomas Fuller)

Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible. (George Orwell)

In the depths of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer. (Albert Camus)

It is defeat that turns bone to flint; it is defeat that turns gristle to muscle; it is defeat that makes men invincible. (Henry Ward Beecher)

Faith is an invisible and invincible magnet, and attracts to itself whatever it fervently desires and calmly and persistently expects. (Ralph Waldo Trine)

Virtue alone is invincible. (Anonymous)

Curiosity is the one thing invincible in Nature. (Anonymous)

Justice and Fortitude are Invincible (*Justicia et Fortitudo Invicibilia Sunt*, Motto from the McCafferty family coat of arms, above)

Being invincible comes in quite handy when engaged in competition, pocket billiards, for example. This is what has lead me to adopt INVINCIBLE as the title for the book.

In The Beginning

It was a long time ago, 1964, to be exact. That's the last time I was shooting pool pretty good. I was in college, and didn't have much else to do. Studying didn't interest me as much as shooting some straight pool, or 9 ball. I liked testing my skill against Johnny Green. He was about the best in school.

What followed my college pool-shooting days was **The Dark Ages of No Pool**, 40 years when I rarely played, and then just as a social event. Nothing serious at all. Needless to say, I got out of stroke.

Over those 40 years, I had a pool table in a couple of different homes, but it was seldom used because I was focused on bringing home the bacon as a computer guy, and that takes a lot of time. Most of the pool I shot was alone, late at night after coming home from a very long day. It wasn't even really pool, I was just pushing balls around. It helped me unwind.

There was never any competition. For 40 long years my skills were not tested, but my love for the game stayed strong, and I knew someday I would return to the game with enthusiasm.

And so, in the fullness of time, it has begun again...

It was early autumn of 2003, I moved into a new home. Although it was a rather small condo, the main room was just the perfect size and shape for a pool table. It seemed like a good idea to get a pool table "see how good I could get at the game".

On November 22, 2003 the pool table was installed, and I started on my journey.

At that time, I knew virtually nothing about the game. I couldn't have told you who the top players were, or even the rules of the game. I had no idea what a "push out" was, or what "hill-hill" meant. I was a total green pea. A 62-year-old grasshopper with a brand new pool table, no skill, and the 45 year old pool cue I bought for 15 bucks when I was still a kid.

Within a couple of weeks I had played all my friends, and won. No big deal, none of them were "players". So I was now faced with the prospect of having to leave my perfect new home, to find competition. They weren't going to just show up and knock on my door!

I had no idea where to start so I just "Googled" for pool, billiards and San Diego. That lead me to the American Poolplayers Association San Diego website, where I left a message, like so many others, that I was a newbie looking to find a team.

As luck, or Fate, would have it, the team who accepted me was Tony Sorto's team. It was only a couple of weeks of watching his magic that convinced me that I needed to have an instructor of his caliber to give me private lessons. I bugged, and begged him, many times, but each time he would simply say "I don't teach."

Maybe it was my persistence that finally broke him down, maybe he sensed something different in me, but after a few months of refusing, he finally said: "OK, I'll come by your house on Saturday, and we'll see what happens."

We shot pool for 12 hours that first Saturday. Every Saturday for the next couple of years, Tony would show up at the Fun House, and we would shoot pool and he would teach me various aspects of the game. During the week, I would play on one or two of his teams (8 ball and 9 ball), and absorb more of the game through watching, asking questions, and competing.

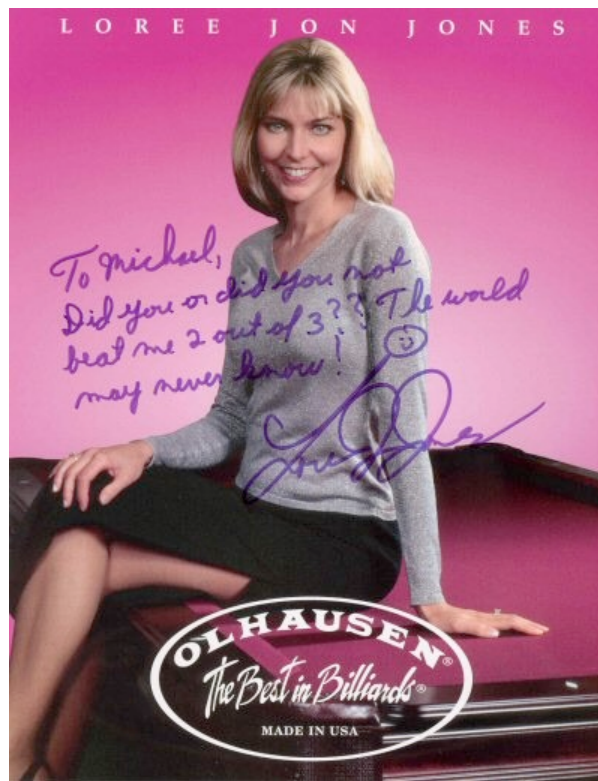
Early on during my pool-learning adventure, I decided to blog about the experience. Writing comes naturally to me, and I find that I enjoy telling a story. Maybe it's the Irish in me. I have done this blog thing even before there were blogs, during my aviation adventures, when I was flying my open-cockpit biplane around the USA and Europe. Each night I would write up the experiences of the day and publish them to my website so people back home could fly along with me.

I also knew that by publishing a blog on my pool experiences, as they happened, I would share my experiences with others, possibly helping others who were also learning. Also, it would commit me fully to my goals. I would work harder and with more attention if I knew that others were watching. Another goal of the blogging was to accumulate material for some day, far in the future, when I would be able to write "The Legend of Fast Mikie". And here it is...

This is the story of those several years, 2004 – 2008, and the highs and lows of learning the art of pocket billiards. Many chapters of this book are taken from my pool blog [Diary of a Pool Shooter – The Adventures of FastMikie](#). The chapters are in sequence, as they happened.

Tuesday, March 24, 2004

FastMikie Retires His Willie



Loree Jon Jones is in the Hall of Fame of the world's best pool players, and holds over 50 major titles including 8 World Championships, and was the all time money winner in women's Nine Ball.

Today she came to San Diego to participate in the Women's Professional Billiard Association tournament at Viejas casino. And tonight she put on an exhibition at the Olhausen Billiards store (where I bought my table) in Kearny Mesa. There were less than a hundred people, including the Channel 10 News video crew, who showed up for this very private showcase of her skills. She began with some excellent trick shots, all of which she executed with extraordinary skill. After the demonstration, she turned to the audience and asked if anyone wanted to challenge her in a game of pool. The room went silent. And then she made her first mistake of the evening. She pointed to me, and said "How about you? Want to play some pool?".

Now I learned a long time ago that it's just plain stupid to turn down an invitation from a good looking woman, no matter what. So what could I do but agree to give it a go...

She asked me what I wanted to play. Eight Ball? Nine Ball? One pocket? Being the gentleman that I am, I asked her what her favorite game was, and she said she prefers Nine Ball, so I said "Nine Ball it is, Ms. Loree."

Of course she gave me the break, her being a World Champion and me being just some Rube off the street. Little did she know that I was feeling pretty good after winning my Nine Ball match just a few days ago in the APA (American Poolplayers Association). I had a little bit of extra self confidence going for me because of that, and also because I was packing a pair of new Predator cues (one for breaking, one for playing) I just picked up this afternoon, and with the playing Predator I ran my first 9 ball rack with that new stick.

But something held me back from using the Predators. I was also packing my venerable old [Willie Hoppe](#) stick that I bought over 45 years ago, when I was just a green pea in this game. Cost me only 15 bucks to buy it brand new, and that's the only stick I ever used in all these years. Well, with all the abuse it has been getting lately now that I'm getting serious about competition, I figured I should get a cue that is designed for breaking the rack, to take some heat off my Willie. And that's what I did just this afternoon. While I was there I also picked up a new playing Predator cue as well, figuring that the new technology shaft would give me less deflection and more accuracy than my old Willie. That Predator sure is a sweet stick, but I haven't played any more than a few racks with it, so when given the choice to play Loree Jon Jones in a room full of witnesses, I went with my tried and true old friend Willie.

Every time I whip out my Willie, people are very impressed, and Loree was no exception. I think she was also impressed to learn that I was playing with my Willie before she was born, and she may have been doing the math on that one when she was racking the balls for me, because I could see she was a lot quieter than she had been during the trick shot exhibition.

Willie pocketed two balls on the break, and I ran the next 3 before getting hooked and I played a safe. She safed too, but left me a shot, and I ran the rest of the table. The audience didn't know what to think of this, as there was only a faint ripple of polite applause. Everyone knows that the pro is supposed to win these challenges, and then give the opponent a few pointers on what they did wrong, and this also helps everyone in the audience learn more.

And everyone knows that these challenges are supposed to be an opportunity for lots of different players in the audience to have the thrill of playing a World Champion, even if they do get only one shot and lose. It's expected. No shame in losing to a World Champion. Only it didn't happen in this case. And what happened next was even more interesting.

Loree Jon Jones did not offer the opportunity to play her to anyone else in the audience. She wanted revenge! She went straight into racking the balls for a rematch, and motioned

for me to get back out of my chair. I was taking my cue apart already, thinking I was done!.

Willie broke those balls real clean but nothing went in, so Loree was up and made her shot on the one ball, and got decent position on the two ball that was lined up with the nine for an easy combination in the corner pocket, and the win. But the unthinkable happened right before our eyes: she missed it! And lucky for me, she left essentially the same combination for me, and I didn't miss. Now Loree Jon Jones, World Champion, was down two games out of two, playing against nobody Michael McCafferty with his 45 year old Willie.

I was taking my cue apart for the second time, figuring that I would be taking advantage of a lady if I were to play any more, and also figuring that I am also playing a bit over my head, and even thinking that the audience would surely want to see the World Champion play someone ELSE in the audience... but Loree Jon Jones was getting her killer instinct fired up and would not be denied another chance to beat this upstart from nowhere.

So once more I whipped out my Willie, but my heart wasn't in it. Not three times in a row. I just couldn't do it, not to a nice lady like her. Heck, she's a MOM for gosh sake. Got 3 kids and a loving husband. How could I? I just wouldn't feel good about myself, and I also was getting hungry, and I knew that if I kept winning, this woman would never let me leave until she had extracted her revenge.

The details of that third game are erased from my memory now, and needless to say that it was the last game we played. Loree Jon Jones got her revenge, and the score for the evening was Mikie 2, Loree 1. I can live with that. Heck, that just may be the highlight of my entire pool playing career, such as it is.

That's one thing about the game of Nine Ball. It's over so quick that almost anything can happen. Sometimes Lady Luck can be a major factor. And Loree did say something about being jet lagged, so she may not have been playing in top form because of it. But then, I missed a shot or two that I thought I should have made. It could have gone either way, I guess. That's why I like Straight Pool, playing to 150 points. Now there's a game of skill, and endurance. That's my game. But nowadays, it's all about Quick, so the TV cameras can break away for commercials often enough to make it profitable.

When I came home tonight, I officially retired my Willie Hoppe cue. Best to go out on a high note, and it just may never get any higher than tonight.

Thanks for the memories, Loree.

Wednesday, August 25, 2004

Agony and Ecstasy in Las Vegas

A story of Humiliation and Redemption at the National Team 9-ball Championships.



Tony Tominna, Michael McCafferty, Mary Ann Erskine-Pourier, Larry Peoples, Tony Sorto, Rob Clark
2004 San Diego City Championship 9 ball team

I hate Las Vegas. I hate the cigarette smoke, and the superficiality, and the low-life people, and the food, and the gambling. But mostly I hate the cigarette smoke. It is omnipresent, unrelenting, stinky, and it'll kill you. Even worse, it can ruin your pool game.

Imagine, if you will: several thousand pool players from all over the USA and Canada, all of them champions of their own little corner of the country, representing their local bar, and virtually every one of these barflies is a smoker. Now put them all into one big room (at the Riviera Hotel, one of the seediest hotels on the Strip, just perfect to host thousands of bar pool junkies), give them 200 pool tables, several hundred thousand dollars in prize money, and an ample supply of beer and whisky, and thousands of those cheap little metal ash trays that are stamped out and almost flat, so even one cigarette's worth of ashes will make a mess of it.

At least half of these pool players are smoking all at once. And when they finally suck all the cancer of out that butt, the other half of them light up. And on it goes, non-stop and round-the-clock during the competition that lasts for more than a week. That's what I just went through...

Our first match was scheduled for 5pm on Friday, against a team of firemen from New York. There must have been a big fire out there, because they didn't show up for the competition, so we won by default.

Our next match was a "bye". So far, so good: We are in the third round and haven't stroked a cue!

It's still the first night of the tournament, and our first real taste of a fight was scheduled for 10pm, but because of administrative delays, we didn't get started until close to midnight. I don't usually have a lot of fight left at that hour, but we don't get a choice of when we play.

Our competitors were a team from Daytona, Florida. Three other team members had their matches before me, so it was more like 1 AM before I chalked up. My match was against a senior citizen named Susie. She had that hardscrabble look of someone who spent a lifetime in bars: smoking, drinking, and shooting pool.

I started off real strong, sinking the first 6 balls with no trouble, and I was feeling pretty good about myself... but then I missed, and Susie finished the rack. And then the next one, and most of the next, and the next...

I've learned that it's not a good thing to look at a competitor, or get involved with them in any way. Just shoot the balls on the table, and ignore the person who leaves them for me. But there was something about Susie that caught my eye.

She seemed to be twitching in her hands like she was real nervous about shooting. Then it became obvious that she was like that on every shot. But it sure wasn't having any effect on her shot-making ability because she was making everything she shot at, even some seriously difficult shots.

When she would line up a shot, her hands and fingers would be shaking like dying leaves on a tree in a breeze. And then, at the very last second, she would somehow relax completely and execute these really excellent shots! Amazing. She had me mesmerized...

And soon enough, after 90 minutes of punishment, she had me beat. Game over. I just never really got going, never got into any rhythm...

Beat by an old woman with the palsy. How bad is that? So much for my debut at the National Championships! Inauspicious, to say the least. Maybe it was the cigarette smoke, maybe it was the late hour, maybe Susie was just a better player, maybe there are some excuses I haven't thought about yet, maybe all of the above. But excuses are irrelevant. I got beat by an old woman with the palsy. I figured it was going to take a long time to live that one down.

And then, things got even worse before they got better...

Our team lost that match, and by 3:30 AM we were all completely exhausted, but looking forward to our next match at 1 PM. We had plenty of time to sleep it off. This was a double elimination tournament, so we had one more chance to stay in the running.

The next team we faced was, by an amazing coincidence, from Bucks County, PA, the home of [McCafferty Ford](#), the dealership my father started from scratch 50 years ago, and many of the team members currently worked there, so we got to talking like old friends, but when the action started they beat us real bad in the first match. Then we came back and won the second.

Finally it was my turn. I was matched against a player with a higher skill rating. The handicap system dictates that he needed 65 points to my 55. He sank the 9 ball on the opening break, and then ran most of the next 5 racks, (he was a really excellent player!!!) and I was well on my way to another defeat, even more humiliating than the one I got the previous night.

At the worst point I was down 47 to 5, and my worthy opponent needed only 18 balls while I needed 50. To anyone who knew better, it was hopeless, but I guess I just didn't know any better. My instructor has told me many times that pool is a mostly mental game and that, no matter what, you can never think that you are beat, because you surely will be. He taught me to keep thinking positively, and to talk to myself in ways that will get me focused on doing the right things. I never let the opponent see me looking like I was being trounced. Instead, I sat it out with a smile and looking like I was waiting for the bank to open so I could cash my winning lottery check.

And then it happened: He missed an easy shot, so I jumped to the table and whupped him like a red-headed stepchild, while he sat there looking like a deer caught in headlights. Out of the next 64 points, I got 50 of them, and won. He still needed 4.

He could hardly move, he was so stunned. I'd have to admit to being surprised too, because I never knew the score during the entire match. I thought that I was down by about 25 balls, but if I knew I was losing by 42 balls I probably would have given up! Instead, I just waited for an opening, and when it arrived, I simply did my thing, and the balls obeyed the laws of physics. When, at last, my team captain told me I only needed one more ball for the win, I thought he was either talking to my opponent, or had it wrong, but I ignored it either way, and just kept on shooting.

Soon the story got around that this guy (me) came back to win from being down 47 to 5 against a higher ranked player, and I was completely surprised to be congratulated by people I didn't even know who were watching the turnaround as it happened. It was generally agreed that no one had ever seen such a recovery to win.

However, one of our team members had long standing plans to be best man at a wedding and had flown back to San Diego for the event. This meant that he had to forfeit his

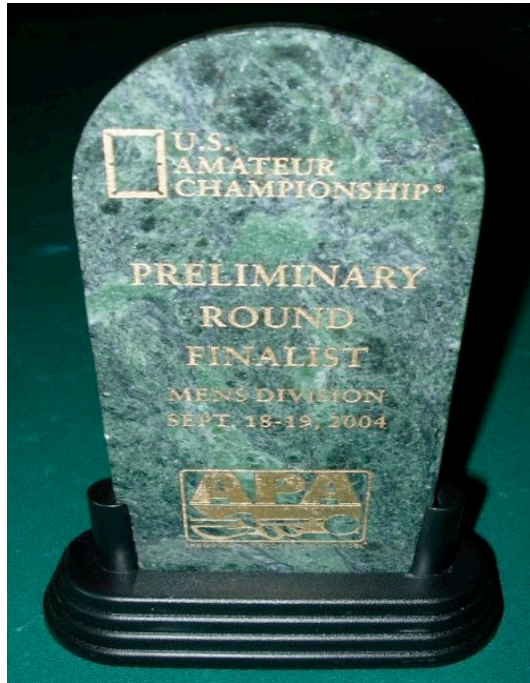
match, and because of this our team had virtually no chance to win. So, while I got to play one of the best matches in my life, our team was out of the Nationals.

The winner of the competition was decided on Monday afternoon, in a match between two beer-guzzling, cigarette smoking teams from Oklahoma. The event was video taped for replay on ESPN2 sometime in the next few months. Look for me in the audience...

You may be wondering what "else" happened while I was in Las Vegas, but you know what they say: "What happens in Vegas, *stays* in Vegas!"

Monday, September 20, 2004

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained



A few months ago I received a completely unexpected letter from the APA (American Poolplayers Association) that started out like this:

"Dear Michael:

"As one of our highly skilled players, we would like to extend a special invitation to you to participate in the nation's most prestigious amateur pocket billiards event -- the 11th Annual **U.S. Amateur Championship**. This is an opportunity to be recognized for your outstanding pool playing ability. **The U.S Amateur Championship** was designed for the *best of the best*".

My first reaction was to recheck the name and address on the envelope. Surely they must have it wrong. "Highly skilled player?" "Best of the best?" "Outstanding ability?" Amazingly, the letter was addressed to me, and for good measure they even had my APA member number on it!

Those people sure do know how to get me to send in my money: Just flatter me senseless! Now, I know darn well that I'm not US Amateur Championship good. I guess I'd have to admit that I'm surely not on the bottom rung of the ladder, but just as surely I'm a couple of steps down the ladder from the top players in San Diego, so maybe the letter was stretching the point.

But I figured: what the heck, it might be a good thing to see what it's like to play some of the best players in the country. What have I got to lose other than my pride? I've sure lost that more than once in my life!

Ever since I got the letter, I've been putting in some focused practice, taking a few lessons, doing some reading on pool, and even doing some self-hypnosis and visualizing to help prepare myself for the big event. Actually the event was more like a middle-sized event, because before I could play for the US Amateur Championship, to be held in Berlin, CT, I had to win a spot in the California playoff to be held in San Jose.

Now, all the time I'm preparing for this California preliminary round, I'm thinking to myself "What the heck am I doing? I have about as much of a chance at winning this California Preliminary round as I have of winning the US Amateur Championship... about Zero!" But, not having anything better to do with my time, I just put my head back down and shot some more balls.

Needless to say, I won. Otherwise, this would be a really stupid story. Also needless to say, because there's that trophy staring you in the face at the start of the story!

I learned a lot from the experience. First of all, I learned just how focused I can become when it is really important to me. I can not remember being that focused for a long time. It seemed that every shot required an intensity of concentration that was beyond anything I recall while playing pool. Second, I relearned the old adage: "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained". In fact, the night before I had to fly up to San Jose for the match, I got my butt handed to me in an 8-ball match (5 to zero!), and went home that night thinking that I must be seriously brain warped if I was going to get up in the morning and enter the US Amateur Championship and get more lessons in humility. It took every last bit of resolve to get up for the match after such a drubbing. I could easily have stayed home and felt sorry for myself. Third: anything can happen! Sometimes even the best players have a bad day, and that just might happen when they are playing me. And, sometimes, maybe, I can play way over my head.

The night before the match I stopped by Shoreline Billiards to get a feel for the tables, and shot a few racks on table #24. I was pleasantly surprised that the tables were clean, with fresh, but not new, cloth, and the balls were very clean. (The proprietor cleans them every night!) Shots ran fast, but not overly fast, and the cushions banked true, and there were no noticeable rolls. It was a classy joint. I went back to the hotel and went to sleep easily while listening to my self-hypnosis recording on my iPod.

The next morning I prepared by doing some extensive yoga/meditation, again accompanied by the pool oriented self-hypnosis recording, and then drove to the pool hall to get there as soon as they opened so I would be sure to have some more practice time.

Registration went without a hitch, and the event started on time. As an unexpected bonus, my first match was a "Bye", so I had a chance to watch some of the other players shoot it

out in the first round. They were all very good, but sooner or later they all miss a shot, and that's all it takes for me to think I might have a chance to win.

My first match, a race to 7, was assigned to table #24 (what luck!) and was against Kong-Ho Lee, a Chinese fellow who put up a good fight and had me down by the slim margin of only one game, at two different points in the 9-ball portion of the match, but we tied that session 4-4 and I rallied to win with a 3-0 finish in the 8-ball session, giving me an overall win of 7-4.

My next match, a race to 7, was also assigned to table #24 (what extraordinary luck!!) and was against Colin Mazaika, a tall red-headed guy who actually worked at Shoreline Billiards, so I was expecting him to know the tables pretty well. But during the 9-ball session I lead him all the way and finished with a 5-3 margin going into the 8-ball session. He battled all the way back and finally got us to hill-hill, but I took the final game for the win.

My last match, a race to 11, was against Mike Fisher. After 6 games of 9-ball we were dead even at 3-3, but I took the next 6 out of 7 games for a 9-4 lead going into the 8-ball session, and needed only 2 games to win, but he needed 7. He seemed to know that it was all over but the shouting, but he played on. Interestingly, he appeared to actually be rooting for me; on several occasions he would congratulate me on making some very good shots, and telling me how well I was playing! I took 2 out of the next 3 games of 8-ball for the win.

I was completely stunned! I was only behind at 2 points in the entire event, and didn't lose a match. It was almost easy if you look at the stats, but I remember being extraordinarily focused and dead serious for every shot.

It was a long day: 9 hours of non-stop high-intensity pool. I collected my trophy and drove back to the hotel for a shower and some well-earned sleep. When I woke, the trophy was still on the night table. It really did happen!

In this morning after, I walked along the meandering pond close by the hotel, and drank deeply of the nectar of ordinary existence. The sun shone warmly through a light rain, the sweet sounds of the breeze through the pines was the purest of music, innocent children gleefully feeding the ducks gave promise of a brighter future for mankind, and all the while I was smiling.

Thursday, March 24, 2005

The Singing Pig Award

"Never try to teach a pig to sing
It's a waste of time and annoys the pig."

Anonymous

Last night was my first match in the Masters' pool tournament. I was feeling pretty smug going in just thinking that I would be playing only the best in San Diego. With no handicapping. Mano a mano.

A true test of my ability. An opportunity! The pool gods were with me last night, and I won every game.

Needless to say, I slept well, and awoke with a smile. And now, in my morning email, words of praise from my Instructor (and pool legend) Tony Sorto:

"I teach and wonder if I'll ever see
anyone learn how to play the game,
but I never thought I would see
someone reach the level of excellence
that you displayed last night.

We can now say without hesitation that
you can play great pool FastMikie."

Tony Sorto

(Original email on file at FastMikie's Fun House)

There is no trophy more valued than those words. But in the grand scheme of things, this moment is fleeting. It is simply a milestone along the Way. While I now "can play great pool", it still must be done. One ball at a time.

Many times in the last year of instruction Tony and I would laugh at the ridiculous situation of trying to teach me to shoot pool. I would liken it to trying to teach a pig to sing, and Tony thought that was just hilarious, probably because, from his perspective, there was so little evidence that his pig was learning anything at all.

But eventually, almost glacially slowly, the faintest evidence of understanding would appear. And with it, Hope. Hope for the teacher, and Hope for the Pig. And with more

Time, and Practice, and Attention, yes, even a pig can be taught to sing. But it may be more to the credit of the teacher than the pig, especially in this case.

I have Googled "Singing Pig Award", and it seems there is none at this time. But I think Tony should be recognized as the Singing Pig Teacher of the Year.

Thursday, May 12, 2005

The Effortless Poetry of "El Maestro"

My Triple Play team had a "bye" tonight. So I'm working on my short-range pop-kill-throw shot when the phone rings...

Tony calls and wants to shoot some pool, wants to get in some strokes before the 9 Ball Blast this weekend. So he passes closer pool halls, and comes all the way to Del Mar, to shoot some balls on my funny-rolling table. I'm honored. Maybe I'll learn something...

What I learn is that I have so much to learn that it sometimes seems hopeless that I could ever learn it all, that I would need another lifetime to achieve the skill of The Master.

I have had the privilege of watching Tony shoot pool about once a week, at least, for the past year and a half. You would think it would be a yawn by now. But it remains one of life's most fascinating experiences to me, and to many others.

When Tony is on (and he is rarely "off"), the balls literally melt their way off the table. It appears so smoothly, so swiftly, so naturally, so beautifully. And this happens rack after rack, without even the slightest appearance of trouble. What 99% of us would consider a difficult, or even impossible shot, he finds the pocket we never thought about. His cue ball seems to have a small motor in it, and it motors its way to the perfect place for the next shot, the only place on the table that will allow him to get in shape for the 3rd shot down the line, and for every shot next in the rack. He sees it all in advance, and he plays out the rack as if in a movie of his own creation.

The technical skill with which the shots are executed is without flaw, of course. What elevates Tony's performance at the table is the creativity he displays. Sometimes he will take a perfectly simple straight in stop shot and instead make the cue ball travel three cushions to get the same position, just so that he doesn't have to walk around the other side of the table for his next shot. Most shots have plenty of options for how a shooter could do it, and Tony seems to have them all in his head simultaneously, and his computer is always balancing effectiveness, efficiency, safety, and playful artwork! And all this stuff is going on in his head, his expression never changes, and he never slows down, and all the balls just melt off the table.

Most people miss the subtle things that happen when Tony shoots pool. I'm just starting to pick up on some of it. It goes deep.

It just doesn't seem possible that someone could be that good at pool. I have seen professionals shoot pool, up close. Tony makes them look like amateurs. While we are

struggling with the elements of reading and writing, Tony is creating effortless and beautiful poetry.

And yet, this a man who is trying to teach a pig to sing. You would think he has more intelligence than to try such a thing. But the pig appeared before him one day, and expressed with all his heart that he wanted to sing. Is it really possible to teach a pig to sing? El Maestro knew that he must attempt this great challenge.

I am that pig. I want to sing pool.

The writer in me will write the song into this journal.

Sunday, May 15, 2005

Look away... I'm Hideous!

What a curious disease I have. I am addicted to poking a ball with a stick. Oh, Lordy, devil Pool has got a hold on me! I am not free.

In darkened places I fill my needs. I feed off the misfortune of others, doing to them what they intend for me. Look away. I'm hideous...

And so it is when trapped in a zero-sum game.

I must leave a different legacy. I will change the paradigm of pool forever. I will remove all negativity from winning or losing when I play. Pool for me will be an ever-changing, inspired and fun performance with a foregone conclusion (I win). Now that's the spirit!

Ok, now I can go back to the table, and live out my Destiny. I shoot pool, therefore I am.

Wednesday, June 01, 2005

It's Good to be King!

<div> American Poolplayers Association <small>(San Diego North County Coastal)</small> Masters Division <small>Player Performance List</small> <small>Spring Session, as of July 7, 2005 (FINAL)</small></div>						
Rank	Name	Team	Skill	Matches Played	Matches Won	Points
#1	<u>Michael McCafferty</u>	Destiny's Team	6	10	10	58
2nd	James Arballo	Lucky Stroke	7	11	10	55
3rd	David Flaker	On The Break	7	11	7	44
4th	Frank Contreras	Lucky Stroke	6	10	7	37
5th	Tony Sorto	Destiny's Team	7	6	6	33
6th	Don Turner	On The Break	6	8	6	32
7th	Tom Oeschger	Destiny's Team	6	6	6	30
8th	Scott Bishop	Lucky Stroke	6	8	5	28
9th	Tom Sanders	On The Break	6	9	5	27
10th	Michael Adamson	Quiet Runners	5	7	5	25
11th	Mike Birtcher	Quiet Runners	7	6	4	20
12th	Tony Bigbee	Destiny's Team	6	8	4	19
13th	Jeffrey Trader	Quiet Runners	6	5	3	16
14th	Seth Walter	Quiet Runners	6	6	3	14

Last night's match was memorable! Our team ("Destiny's Team") was in first place with a slim lead of only two points (and we know how fragile slim leads are). We played the second place team and it could have gone either way, but we came out on top in points for the match, so we stay in first place. Yay, team.

Now for the good part: Me!

Our carefully crafted game plan came apart at the last minute and I found myself matched against "Dave" A. who has been stalking me closely in the rankings. Dave is a top-rated

player. His skill level is 7, the highest. I am only a 6. And we were playing head to head, no handicap. This was going to be an uphill battle! He has been in second place, but only by one point, so the pressure for me to continue to win has been extreme. Now, here we were, face to face. One of us would walk away in first place, the other one a loser.

He won the first game, I won the second. After 8 games of 9 ball, we were even 4-4. And then I won the next 3 games of 8 ball for the 7-4 match win. I made some good shots, including some good safeties. But I also made some mistakes. I must stop making elementary mistakes. (Yeah, right: I must stop being human!)

I have been looking forward to this match all week. I knew we were going to have a real showdown, and that all the marbles were riding on this one. Usually I get myself all worked up thinking about these things, and by the time of the match, I'm a basket case. So I tried a little technique from NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming). I made a list of some of the extraordinary things I have accomplished &/or survived so far in my lifetime, and then meditated on that to get myself into a super-confident state of mind. It worked! I didn't feel nervous at all, even when I was behind in the match. And, even more remarkably, I was unperturbed even when I was surprised by being matched against a higher skill level player instead of the equal skill level player I was expecting to play.

Other things I did right: I got there early and got in some good practice time. And that paid off big time because the tables had brand new cloth and they were a lot faster than just last week. The other team didn't get any practice time at all because they didn't get there early. Preparation pays!

How fast were those tables? It was the first time I ever saw ball speed effected by a ceiling fan!

It's good to be king! But in this league, you get to be king for a week. I have to earn it again next week. Everybody will be looking to take me down a peg. Back to the practice table...

Thursday, June 02, 2005

Signature of a Shooter

At the very end of last night's match, I was looking at a straight in stop shot for easy shape on the game/match 8 ball straight into the opposite corner. But, for some unexplainable reason, I chose to turn the simple into the ridiculously complex and cheat the pocket with high right English to come three rails to get perfect shape on the short side for a straight in shot into the side pocket.

Looking back on it, I was doing something that was very wrong, but it turned out right. I can't figure out if I even saw the simpler stop shot. I saw the 3 rail position, that's for sure, but it was inappropriately risky. I think I did it more out of a playful nature, writing my signature on the finish of the match. As if a simple stop shot and a straight in for the win would be too boring, too easy.

I knew I had the match in the bag. I was two games ahead, and at the table looking at the last two balls. I sensed that my opponent had already given up in his heart. But I was still playing the game, and it must have been my playful, childlike persona who took control of my computer-mind, and invented a shot that was intended to be spectacular, all for the fun of it. My signature, writ large. I have seen El Maestro do this sort of thing many times. Monkey see, monkey do.

It reminds me of the signature of an aviator, the way he lands his airplane. In shooting a shot in pool, and in landing an airplane, it has to be done right the first time, there are no "do-overs". Even people new to flying can tell if a landing is executed well. But the real judges are all the people at the airport who are watching you all the way down. Fellow pilots, non-flying old-timers, student pilots, wannabes, and even mechanics who will put the pieces back together if you screw it all up... they are all there watching your every move with detachment from the security and anonymity of terra firma.

With so many critical judges, the aviator must execute a technically perfect landing (3-point, no bounce, short roll out, smooth, etc.). And to do it with some flair, some particular signature move that gets the juices flowing in pilot and voyeur alike... now *that* is the goal of an aviator's signature landing. I was particularly focused on making my landings, my aviator's signature, a thing of beauty.

Here's another example: Porsche and Ferrari people are completely different. There is an old saying that Porsche is to Ferrari as artificial insemination is to mad, passionate lovemaking. In this way, Allison Fisher would be the Porsche of the pool world while Fast Eddie Felson, shooting "fast and loose" would be the Ferrari. As an ardent fan of the Ferrari mystique (I have owned 5 different Ferrari over the last 30 years), I want to see my pool game evolve more along the lines of the mad, passionate lovemaking, but with a good bit of play, humor, and even surprise thrown in. Capricious, possibly. And yet, winning at a world class level. And then I woke up. Back to the practice table...

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

Touch: Learnable but Unteachable

On the practice table this evening I am stroking shots with a sense of Touch that is as pleasurable as the visual I am creating. It strikes me that the sense of touch that comes while "in the zone" is Un-Teachable. It seems that it can only be learned by Experience. Lots of Experience, with Attention.



Figure 1 The open cockpit biplane I flew for 7 years prior to taking up the game of pool.

It reminds me of the sense of touch that is required when landing an open-cockpit biplane. Now there is something that can not be taught, primarily because there are so many variables, and they are varying simultaneously, all the while you are defying Gravity and Death, while creating a Thing of Beauty by touching down with the least possible sensation, at the exact moment airspeed goes to Stall, sink rate equals zero, forward speed is minimized, and the rollout is straight as an arrow. And doing all of this while going through the landing checklist, communicating with the tower and passengers, being aware of all the radio chatter of other airplanes in the vicinity, and looking out for traffic in the sky and on the ground, all the while being ready for a go-around at any instant.

And if that weren't enough, there is an interesting phenomenon that occurs while landing a biplane that ***Demands*** a sense of touch: the sense of sight is lost! As incredible as it seems, all forward vision is lost while landing because the nose is high. Additionally, the lower wing blocks vision straight down, so you can't really see how close you are to the runway. It's all done with Intuition. And peripheral vision takes over to keep the biplane straight at the moment of touchdown and subsequent rollout.

The inputs to the sense of touch are primarily from the control stick, held in the right hand (a lot like a vertical pool cue) that controls nose up/down, and wings level and with the left hand that controls power and with both feet that control nose left/right.

So both hands and feet are engaged in this intuitive dance while the ears are listening for the music of the air over the wires connecting the wings, and the sound of the engine, and the squeak of the tires on the runway, or slipping on a wet grass field. Even the pilot's face is engaged in the process as he feels the wind on his cheeks... It all adds up to a symphony of sensations all happening and changing while the biplane goes from 100mph to zero, and doing it with beauty and personal style.

I remember the many hundreds of landings it took me to put it all together, and to develop the Confidence that I would make the right choices, and do the right things, even under extraordinarily challenging situations.

It occurs to me that if I can develop the Touch to make awesome landings in an open cockpit biplane, surely I can develop the touch to shoot pool at a very high level...

I wonder if there are other biplane pilots who shoot pool in competition? I'm thinking that my biplane experiences have given me a great advantage at the pool table.

Saturday, July 30, 2005

When Is A Win Not A Win?

Tony "El Maestro" Sorto arrived around 2pm to give me my regular Saturday lesson.

First we played some 9 ball, but using bank shots and kicks ONLY! What a great way to learn these shots...

Next, I told him I wanted to play a match, in the Masters format (up to 8 games of 9 ball and up to 5 games of 8 ball, in a race to 7). I also wanted to give it my total focus, and let there be no talking whatsoever during the match. Usually we both have the motor-mouth going, talking about pool and everything else under the sun, including some good natured sharking. This time I wanted to practice what it would be like when playing in the finals of US Amateur Championships.

The rule was that any talking whatsoever by one player would be treated as a foul, and give ball in hand to the other player. Amazingly, we spoke only once in the match, to clarify a rule, then went back to silence.

I got off to a great start in the 9 ball games, getting up 3-0, but El Maestro came back strong. We finished the 9 ball games tied at 4 games each.

The 8 ball games were very hard fought, with one game going what seemed to be at least 20+ safeties. Amazingly, I got on the hill first, then Tony caught up and we were facing each other for the match with only one rack left. Many more safeties ensued, as both of us were playing each other very tight. But Tony finally broke free and ran the remaining stripes only to get himself out of shape on the 8. He made the 8, but scratched after his cue ball caromed off one of my solids.

It was at this exact moment that I let out a blood-curdling yell of triumph, as Tony unscrewed his cue. It was certainly one of the most hard fought matches I have ever played.

But was it a true "win"? Is it a victory when your mortal enemy has you at his mercy, and then trips and falls on his own sword?

Did I win, or did I merely survive?

Sunday, July 31, 2005

Practice Performs Miracles!

“Practice makes perfect” may be an overstatement, but practice sure does make Better. This morning I’m practicing behind the back shots. Shooting rotation pool where every shot is with the cue behind my back. Good physical exercise, that’s for sure. And some of the body positions that are required are more extreme than many of my yoga "asanas".

Why I chose to practice behind the back shots was probably influenced by El Maestro's suggestion during yesterday's practice that I should practice left handed shots.

El Maestro made the point that it would be good for me to review the Basics and that shooting left handed would force me to look at, and practice, each Element of Shot Making.

I replied that teaching me to shoot left handed is a low payoff exercise... My left hand is so completely uncoordinated that it is laughable. It would take an eternity of repetition to build coordination into muscle memory. My objection was really fear of the unknown, fear of looking stupid, fear of being weak. I used my Intellect to invent a reason, but it was driven by Emotion. If I were to take my emotions out of it, I would have practiced left handed.

I wanted to spend my time on Lessons that would pay off in the short term. (Greedy!) I couldn't see that time practicing the Elements of shot making is always a good investment as it enhances every shot.

So yesterday I was the Rebel, and today I am the Student again. I must have given El Maestro's words some good thought while sleeping in my hammock last night.

Later in the morning, I did experiments with reverse English with heavy follow on long straight shots in the corner pocket, bringing the cue ball four cushions to the opposite end of the table.

Practice performs miracles!

Wednesday, November 09, 2005

The Joy of Break and Run

It was an 8-ball match. I broke and ran out. It felt so good!

Of course I have done this before. But this time felt better than those other times. This time it was easy. There were tough shots in the run, but they went down easy. There was no stress, no hard thinking. The run just happened.

And then I sensed my opponent's helplessness. It was perfect. The next game, he broke and missed. I ran out again. He never scored a win. It was over too soon. It's feels so good when the stroke is on.

Friday, November 11, 2005

Bring On The Spectators!

I have it good. I can feed my addiction anytime I want, as much as I want. I have a pool table in my living room. On a moment's notice I can slip into my other self. Fast Mikie, pool shooter.

Sometimes, when I'm shooting pool, it's like I'm in another universe, the cue dances in my hands, my eyes can see every angle, and I'm having so much fun. All the hits are clean. Click. Plop.

I'm alone, usually, but sometimes shooting with another player. Quiet, except for the sounds of the surf in the distance. And the Click, Plop.

Ah, the sweet serenity of solitude. To be alone with the most important thoughts in the world. Mine. And then, almost without notice, to have no thoughts at all.

That's where pool comes in. It's a meditation. This is where I find peace. Playing with the Laws of the Universe (physics) on a table green with cloth, and filled with celestial spheres, and me, the Grand Mover, poking his toys with a stick.

What mankind-benefiting thought could you have while wasting your time away with such trivia as pool?

And that's just the point: to think no thought at all. To be of no conscious mind. To let pool be played, and let me be the player. This is the meditation. The person who gets to this place is FastMikie.

It is not a competition. It is an exhibition of an altered state of consciousness, during a beautiful performance occurs, moments of impromptu virtuoso, a magic wand is waved and objects disappear, while other objects spin wondrously 'round the table, as if by some impossible, invisible force.

There is no competitor when I am like this. He becomes a spectator. Bring on the spectators!

Tuesday, January 03, 2006

Shoot With Confidence

During a time many months ago, when I was shooting poorly, El Maestro told me: "Shoot With Confidence".

Of course I wanted to shoot with confidence, but how do I do that if I have been missing shots frequently, and I am not sure the shot will work as needed?

I had learned this lesson many years ago. At that time the lesson was in a business setting, not pool. I didn't think to apply this truth to my game. I just needed El Maestro's reminder.

The amazing answer is to *just do it*. Shoot "as if" you were shooting with confidence!

A confident stroke will follow through. A confident stroke will be natural. A confident stroke is a thing of beauty. Even if you are not confident, act as if you are! The results are truly magical.

"The result cannot be achieved
unless the experiment is made."

(Paramahansa Yogananda)

Friday, January 06, 2006

Favorite Strokes

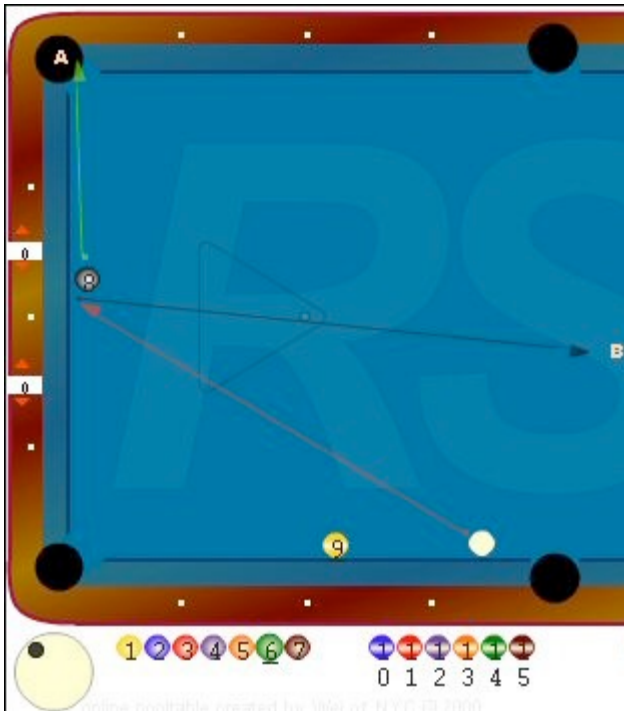
I have been developing two favorite strokes. The strong shot has maximum confidence. Hit hard enough to go about 3 lengths without opposition. Usually with low English, or stop, or float. I like the sound of a clean hit at that speed.

The other favorite is the finesse shot. Usually with follow, and sometimes with English enough to throw the object ball, arriving with just enough energy to drop, fully spent, into the pocket.

There is peace and beauty in slow motion. Elegance through Simplicity.

Monday, January 30, 2006

Turning Fear into Fun



Here's a shot I have missed so many times I cringe whenever I get something like it.

The cue ball is frozen to the side rail. The 8-ball is just off the foot rail. In order to get the cue ball to come back for a shot on the 9, it needs left english. Since only top spin is available (frozen to rail) and hitting down with top left will cause the cue ball to curve it's a real judgment shot as to how much curve.

Last night, after one more painful miss in the presence of El Maestro, he forced me to look deeply into this shot. I must have tried it 50 times before I started to "see" the shot, and sense the curve.

An alternate way to shoot this is with top right and come off 2, 3 or 4 rails for shape on the nine, but that would violate the rule to "minimize cue ball movement".

I have committed to practice this shot until all fear is gone and until, when I see this shot in a match, I smile with anticipation of the win!

Wednesday, February 8, 2006

The Big Win - A Story of Karma and Victory

The Warm-up

The day started out like most others, slow and easy without stress or worry, but I knew there were challenges ahead. Two big meetings at the bank and then the 9-ball tournament in the evening.

I had been sluggish lately, hadn't done the treadmill or weights for a week, so to prepare for the day's events, I put myself to the task, and did the work. Truly a paradox, it is, how spending energy (on the treadmill and weights) actually creates energy!

It was a good workout, and I hit a new high speed on the treadmill. The meetings went well, and I got home just in time for sunset, then one of my favorite meals before driving north to the tournament.

I was just setting up for some solo practice (El Maestro Tony Sorto had not yet arrived) when Vince asks if I want to shoot some games. No, I do NOT want to shoot some games... I want REVENGE!

Vince beat me in the last tournament, 3-0, and he even beat El Maestro himself 3-0 with only 4 shots! That is one incredible accomplishment, especially for a "B" player, but it is also a testament to how much luck is involved in matches of only 3 games. In a short race, anything can happen!

I win the first game against Vince, convincingly, and say "That's one I owed you!" to let him know I'm paying him back for last time. In the middle of the second game, Tony arrives to watch the carnage. "That's two, Vince. I owe you one more!"

I'm shooting with a purpose, making some real nice shots, and game three comes my way. Vince is paid in full: FastMikie wins 3-0. Now, this is just pre-tournament warm-up, but already I feel that my night is a success, no matter what happens later. Tony continues the Vince-bashing, while I take a break to bask in sweet victory.

A short note about Vince... Don't get me wrong. I like Vince. He reminds me a lot of me: Quiet, humble, with a real desire to learn. Nice-enough guy, it seems, but this is war. Nothing personal involved here. It is my job to crush him, as it is with any competitor.

Soon enough the tournament begins...

First Match

There are many elements of luck involved in these tournaments. The first of these is the luck of the draw, that is, who you get matched up against.

When it was announced who my first match was with, I was completely overjoyed, but at the same time a bit nervous.

David Nakano rates himself as an "A" player. He seems to be a likable guy, clean cut, well groomed, quiet, composed. He had always impressed me with his shot making. Although I had never played against him, I had checked his "speed" briefly, a couple of times, and he looked as though he knew what he was doing. I had always thought he would be tough to beat. It's interesting how first impressions can be wrong.

Although we had never met before, he must have been checking my speed as well, because this past December he came up to me between matches, and told me: "Mike, you should NOT be playing as an A-level shooter!"

Now it is important to put this in perspective. It was only in November that I started playing as an "A". Prior to that I was playing as a "C". It may have taken some people by surprise that someone would completely skip over the "B" level, but this was done on the advice of my instructor, El Maestro Tony Sorto.

I told David Nakano that I was only doing what my instructor told me to do. But David went on, showing me a chart, from a scrapbook of notes he keeps, and the chart mentions the different levels of players, and describes the playing characteristics for each. And, according to David's interpretation, after watching me shoot a few balls in a few games, and never having played against me himself, he figured I was rating myself higher than I should. He said I was setting myself up for disappointment. He said he figures he is the best handicapper around, and can tell very accurately who can beat who, and by how much. I asked for a copy of the chart, but David said "No Way! This stuff has taken me a long time to collect. This is private stuff." I showed him that the printout was from a public website, and that I could get it easily in minutes, but he still said I couldn't have it.

Now, one has to wonder what would be his motivation for coming up to me to tell me I was over-rating myself (in his "expert" opinion). Is he the rating police? Is it a crime to over-rate myself? Surely it would be hustling if I under-rated myself, in order to get more weight from my competition, but to over-rate myself only makes it easier for my competitors to beat me. So what could be his motivation for putting me down?

Was he offended that some newbie would edge into his exalted hierarchy? Was he trying to "get over" on me in advance of the impending day that we would surely play mano a mano?

Your guess is as good as mine, and I took it all in stride, and ignored it. I was polite, and stayed playing as an "A". But internally I told myself that, one day, I would surely beat David Nakano at pool, and that he would truly rue the day he said I was no "A" player.

And so, in the fullness of time, here we were, face to face for our first match ever, and I was ecstatic at the potential of the moment. Surely, it was expected that I would lose to

him. Surely he felt that way, as an expert handicapper. Surely everyone else in the place would have agreed. But it didn't turn out that way, did it David? I won, 3-1, and sent David Nakano to the Loser's side, where Tony Sorto knocked him out of the double elimination tournament. It was not David Nakano's day, losing first to the student, then The Master. (see photo)

I held my tongue, even though I burned to ask him "Still think I'm not an A player?" or "If you lose to a Not-A player, does that mean that you are less than A?" I saw no purpose in rubbing it in...

An interesting thing happened during the match. I won the first game, and the second. In the third game I was bridging over a ball and moved it into the cue ball. This is a foul, and I backed away from the table. David N. looked up and said "What's wrong?" And from this I could tell he didn't see the foul. I could have taken advantage of his inattention, and continued to shoot, but I told him I moved the ball. He said he didn't see it, and I told him "No, but I did." and relinquished my turn, giving him ball in hand, and he easily ran the two remaining balls for his only win. What is interesting is that at that moment, I had the power of the great knight Sir Galahad: "my strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure". I could call a foul on myself and still win.

The great champion Babe Cranfield was well known for this trait, and won the world championship in straight pool, even though he called a foul on himself that neither the referee nor competitor saw.

So far, so good. The mighty David Nakano is vanquished. This was shaping up to be a good time...

Second Match

Next up was Armando, a young guy, level "C" player. Nice guy, pleasant, seemed eager to learn. He was there with a friend, who sat in his corner, and kept a running commentary going, asking me questions and talking a good bit.

Tony says "C" players are the most dangerous because it is easy to not respect them. It is easy to shoot down to their level. It is easy to let up, be complacent, and when you miss, to expect to shoot again.

When a "C" player is matched against an "A", the C gets a big spot: the 7-ball. This means they get TWO money balls, two chances to win on either the 7 or 9. They get two chances to get lucky on the break, two chances to get an easy early out combo, two chances to get lucky on an unintentional carom. It's almost easier to play head to head against an "A" because you MUST focus on every shot, and can not let up for a second.

Tony says "There is no small enemy." This is the advice that was ringing in my ears as I started into the game. I did shoot ok, but not great. I felt how easy it is to let up. I'm too nice a guy, I guess, because I took myself out of my game to answer his questions about

my cue, and my tip-shaping tool, and the rules of the "push-out" move. If I were more professional, I would have ignored him, and his friend, or just barely smiled and said nothing, and focused entirely on the game. But noooooooo, I'm Mr. Nice Guy! And I could have paid the price for it. But I won 3-0.

Third Match

My next match was giving me some concern. Ken J. is a seriously strong competitor. "A" rated, of course. I have played against him twice before. Once in a match that Tony set up, where I went hill-hill with him, and lost. Another time in this 9-ball tournament, and he beat me 3-0. But those losses to him were when I was a "C". And although we were now rated equally, it is tough to shake off two previous losses, and get yourself into a mind-set of superiority.

But you do what you gotta do, and I did it. Was Ken J. rattled after I beat David Nakano? I'm doubtful about that. Ken J. doesn't seem to be so easily rattled. I have enormous respect for his game. And he played good. I think I played pretty good too, but not great. I remember making some awesome shots, and one or two super-fine run outs, but in a match that is only 3 games, it might have gone either way.

But it went my way. That was a real confidence builder. And maybe an over-confidence builder based on what happened in the next match...

Fourth Match

I was riding high on adrenaline and confidence with three wins in a row, so when I learned that my next match was with Vince, who I had crushed 3-0 just before the tournament, I thought I would have an easy time of it.

And that should have been a signal that I was not thinking correctly. I should have thought that Vince had also won his last 3 matches, just like me. I should have remembered "There is no small enemy." I should have remembered the first time I played Vince, and he beat me.

But noooooooo... They say that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So maybe I got stronger after losing that match to Vince. But it sure seemed like a stupid way to get stronger. Vince was playing as a "B" rated player, and that means I had to give him the 8-ball. And, if a "C" player is dangerous, a "B" player can be downright deadly.

My overconfidence led me to dog an 8 ball and rattle it in the pocket, giving Vince an easy win. My overconfidence led me to dog a 9 ball and rattle it in the pocket, giving Vince an easy win. My overconfidence led me to under hit a safety shot, leaving a 1-9 combo to win. It was over before it began, as they say. It can not be said that Vince won, but it can surely be said that I lost.

Pool is 90% mental. And the other half is all in your head. ;o)

Fully and soundly humbled, I go to the loser's side. Oh, the agony of defeat.

Fifth Match

Now on the losers side of the bracket, I must win my next match, or I'm out of it.

And who do I have to play? Ken J. again! I put him on the losers' side, and you just KNOW he's going to want revenge. I was scared of Ken J. before, and now I feel like I just poked the bear, and that's not a good thing.

But this no time to be thinking negative. Just play the game. One shot at a time. And that's what I did. Slowed the game down a lot. Pre-shot routine was very consistent. Played tight position, and ducked with safety shots when I didn't have a high percentage choice.

And it worked. FastMikie moves into the finals. Who'da thunk it!? I'm liking this winning thing...

The Finals!

This is it, folks: the Finals!

And I'm up against Vince again, who has gone undefeated. He's got to be feeling bulletproof right about now. Looking at me as the guy who choked in our last match, and handed him the game. I'll bet he's thinking he can't lose.

"Wanna split the pot?" he asks. Split the pot? Is he kidding? This is a concept I just can not understand. I have seen this happen a lot around here. The last two players split the prize money for the first two places, and they don't play the match. There is no winner, no second place. What is the point of that?

So I ask Vince: "Have you ever won this tournament?" "No", he admits. Well, neither have I. And if we split the pot, we would still be two guys who never won! That's just wrong. In fact, we have both advanced farther along than ever before, in this tournament. (I snagged a third place in my first try.)

To walk away without even going for it is senseless. Vince and I have played two matches today. And we are even. The universe demands a decision. One of us must be a winner. This tournament needs a winner. So I refused to split the pot, forcing us to play it out. And I almost regretted it!

I won the first game. He won the second, and the third, and the fourth. When he won the fourth game, with the score 3-1, I thought it was over, and that I had lost. But the finals is a race to FIVE games, not 3! It seemed to be a sign. I'm not dead yet.

I won the next game. Now it's 3-2. But the hour is getting late. I am surprised by a yawn. I'm getting hungry. My attention is waning.

He misses a shot and scratches. I have ball in hand with the 8 in the center of the table. The 9 is by a corner pocket. A child, could get out from here. A moron could get out from here. And I miscue!

There is no greater stupidity than to scratch with ball in hand. No greater humiliation.

Now, I'm not just tired, I am exhausted.

Vince is now "on the hill". He needs only one game to win the tournament. I need three games in a row. And after my last display of mental breakdown, it is looking impossible.

But I did what I had to do. I dug deep and found some hidden reserve. I focused like a junk yard dog. Nothing entered my mind except one shot at a time. I became a man possessed.

Miraculously, I won my next three games, and the tournament. But you already knew that. I wish you could have been there to hear the primal scream I let out, and to see El Maestro's proud smile.

The prize money was only \$100.00, And like all my pool winnings, is donated to charity, but this win was so rewarding, I'm going to double the donation.



I broke down my cue, collected the cash, and went outside into the cool, sweet, early morning air. And I never said a word to David Nakano.

It is moments like this that make long hours of practice worth while.

Tuesday, July 4, 2006

FastMikie's Epic Road Trip

Tomorrow morning begins a Great Adventure... For several months, this idea has been coming together, evolving through stages of development. Several planets have aligned, and the time is at hand to begin.

I feel like Superman (the movie), when the boy was about to leave home and start his public life as a superhero... He was standing one last time with his earth-mother who found him as an infant.

She held his hand softly and asked: "Where will you go?" After an introspective pause, The Man of Steel replied resolutely: "North" And so, I too will go North.

One reason for going north is to attend the wedding of a good friend. His invitation for me to attend, was harder to decline than all the other invitations to visit his home in Seattle. He has been a guest in my home many times, and we are good friends. I would say of him the way my friend in Australia says of me: You can camp by my fire anytime."

For months I have known the wedding date. I figured I would just hop on a plane to Vancouver, then rental car to the destination. Simple. Easy. But, during the waiting period for the wedding, other events have been coming together.



I bought a new car to replace my aging Jaguar XK8 convertible, now over 5.5 years old and out of warranty. And, although it is in good shape, and a stunningly good looking shade in Pacific blue, with only 32,500 miles on the clock, I have to admit I was getting bored with it. After driving the Viper GTS for 5 years, and the Ferrari 550 Maranello, the Jag seemed to be lacking at least 100 horsepower.

I have been looking through the crop of interesting rides, and settled on the Corvette as the best bang-for-the-buck. Then over several weeks studied and searched for a model I could like, with the right color, options, etc. I thought I wanted a sedate dark blue, with gray interior. But my last 3 cars have been that color, so I was open to other thoughts.

And then I saw the Monterey Red color. In cloudy conditions it reminds me of my

second Ferrari. Burgundy. I love understated beauty. A beauty so quiet you almost overlook it, and then you discover it waiting humbly for your attention.

In the sun, this burgundy comes alive! It is so brilliant, it could be candy-apple red, and more. And with the metallic highlights, the slightly shaded shapes retreat to the mellow and retiring burgundy.

What character! I was sold on the color, and chose black for the interior and top to subdue the package even more.

No car existed such as I wanted, not anywhere in the USA, not with the options I wanted, in the color I wanted. So I had to order it and wait six weeks for delivery.

It did not escape my attention that the possible delivery date of the new car was a couple of weeks before the wedding.

Now, these two events, the wedding of a friend in Canada, and the purchase of a new car, were completely independent, and as serendipity would have it, when they came together in thought, an idea leaped into my mind:

How great it would be to drive the new car along the California coastline, and the Oregon coastline, and Washington coastline, with the top down... A great idea for a road trip. Two planets were now aligned.

While I was loving this new idea, the concept of driving home was unpleasant. I hate to retrace my steps. The road to adventure lies ahead.

And then it hit me: I would take my pool cue, and after the wedding, instead of coming home, I just stay on the road.

The western United States seemed achievable. There are only 11 of them. Granted, they're big, but they're good big. Lots to see and do. And I know some people in a lot of those places.

How long could I stay out on the road? I wanted to be in Philly for my father's 91st birthday in the middle of August, so that would leave me about 40 days on the road. That's a serious road trip! But would it have to end with Philly, or would Philly just be another stop along the road?

I was thinking I would have to come back home first, then take off for Philly for a week, and come home again. More thinking on the plan reveals that I could just park the car at any Chevrolet dealer, for an oil change and checkup, and I can get a cab to the nearest airport fly to Philly for the birthday party, and fly back to the Corvette, wherever it is, and continue with the road trip.

Will it ever end? Sure. The big focus of the extended road trip is to prepare for the

Amateur championships in late September. I really should be back at least 2 weeks before that.

So at the outside, that's 60 days on the road. Shooting pool. Driving a hot car. Through magnificent territory. Learning the meaning of Life. A Journey of Self-Realization.

Can truth and beauty be found in pool halls?

Other planets have aligned as well. It occurs to me that this trip will be solo. There is no wife to take along, or to forbid it. No dependents who need me. I stand alone. I recovered from that mis-step 28 years ago. It took me 8 years of marriage to know myself as a hermit. I loved that woman greatly, but my Self was dying slowly. It was only with great fear and resolve that I could bring myself to return to Solitude.

And so, this essential planet slipped into place many years ago, and has been waiting for the others to arrive.

In quiet moments, this whole road trip idea seems too much. So I tell only very close friends, to judge their reaction, to see if they think that maybe I have completely lost touch with Reality.

I keep thinking of the joke/truth: "If you want to make God laugh, make Plans."

So I don't make too many plans, telling myself that will make it more of an adventure. And more enjoyable without the stress of a schedule.

Insecurity assails me, with thoughts like: "Who do you think you are, to do such a thing?" I am FastMikie, shooter of pool, student of the game.

"Why do you do this?" Because I can. If I could, and did not, you would fault me, and I must be true to my Destiny. This is a dream since my college pool-shooting days.

"Won't you get lonely?" Not in the least. I'm a hermit. Duh.

"Won't you miss your Home?" Aye! Now there's the rub. A hermit and his home are not easily parted. FastMikie's Fun House is an island of Perfection. A Place I have built to be that way. My refuge by the sea. But Home is the price of Adventure. And Adventure is the price of Home.

Ah, the wonderful Duality of Reality.

Today is July 4, 2006. Independence Day seems appropriate to launch such a road trip. Although I will leave tomorrow morning, it is Today, with this writing and publishing, I give this Adventure my Commitment. I will sleep fully and awake with Resolve, I will pack my bags and walk out the door. And I will go North.

And yet, it all seems so overpowering. Looking at maps of the Western US, it's a huge territory. So many pool rooms, so many trials. It is too much to deal with all at once. And I am reminded that a journey of 1,000 miles begins with the first step. It is only one step at a time, one day at a time, one ball at a time, one breath at a time.

I am reminded of other Great Adventures. They were even more extraordinary. And longer. And they happened just one step at a time.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Smile.

And so the seconds tick by, the sun sets into the Pacific, night falls, the moon rises, and soon enough the morning will come...

I wonder what will happen next...

(the entire 54 day road trip is online at "[Fast Mikie's Epic Road Trip](#)")

Friday, September 08, 2006

I can't wait until tomorrow...

Why? Because I get better at this game every day!

I'm taking a break from practice right now, but about half an hour ago, when I was shooting, it kept occurring to me that my skill level is so much better than it was a year ago. I am hitting the ball with much more authority. I have so much more confidence. My position play is so much more accurate. Strategy is at a much higher level.

Imagine how much better I'll be next year, and the year after, and the year after that!

All of this is just a preface to the real story I have been trying for a week to put into words...

El Maestro came by FastMikie's Fun House last Friday, his day off from work, and the first chance to check out my game since I returned from my Road Trip, to see if there was any improvement in my game.

We shot a couple of sets of 9-ball, races to 7. He won the first, I took the second. We took a break for some coffee, and it was then that he said that he was done with me, that I had learned all he could teach me, and now it was up to me to execute.

We both knew it was coming for some time, and we had several times talked about it coming, but now that the end of an era has come to pass, it will have a major positive effect on my game.

I feel a lot like I did when I was learning to fly, and after many lessons on the ground and in the air, on one fine day of takeoffs and landings, my flight instructor had me pull over to the side of the taxiway, then he jumped out and said: "Ok, you're ready to solo!"

It's a very liberating feeling, and at the same time a little bit scary, to be up there all alone for the first time. (The consequences for screwing up are a lot greater in the air than they are when you miss the 9-ball!) Although a pilot's first solo is a major milestone event, it certainly doesn't mean you have all the answers, because that will never happen, not in this life. It simply means that you know enough to solo, and you can now spend the rest of your aviation life continuing the endless pursuit of the aviator.

In the immortal words of Lao Tzu: "The greater the island of knowledge, the greater the shoreline of wondering."

And so it is with pool. El Maestro has set me free, given me my solo wings, but more than anything has given me the insight into how to think about pool from the perspective of a great player.

He has taught me how to learn, how to continue my search for perfect control, and the

confidence that I am on the Path.

It has been a most memorable two and a half years, during El Maestro has come every Saturday to teach me secrets he has never told any other person.

I don't know how I got so lucky to be his student. What could he have seen in me that would make him change from his long standing refusal to take on any student? I guess it doesn't matter, the reasons why. It happened. He taught. I learned. It's over. Life goes on.

It was a great privilege, Tony. Thank you. Namasté

Friday, September 29, 2006

Patience, grasshopper...

I have recently become more aware of the essential nature of Patience.

If I wait, wait, wait... until I get that *special feeling*, in my body, when I'm taking warm up strokes and seeing in my mind where I want the balls to go, and sensing the weight and balance of the cue in my hands, and sensing the speed with which I need to deliver the cue to the cue ball, and with what spin, and with what draw/follow, and with what follow-through, so that the cue ball goes *there* (and maybe after going several rails to get *there*)... that perfect place on the table so that the next shot is easy.

When I get that special feeling, I almost always make the shot, and get shape on the next shot.

The problem is that I get greedy, I want that feeling sooner than it wants to be there...

That special feeling comes to a quiet mind. A confident mind. A relaxed mind.

Patience, grasshopper.

This feeling in the body may be the elusive "rhythm" that El Maestro revealed to me, but that I have seldom attained.

Tuesday, November 28, 2006

I have discovered a stroke!

Lately, I have been getting the feeling that I have finally developed a stroke.

This is a major breakthrough for me, because for the last 3 years I have felt that I did not have anything close to what could be called a stroke.

What I have been searching for is a stroke that is smooth, flowing, reliable, confident, accurate, and above all, looks and feels good.

I have this theory that if a thing looks and feels good, that it is probably natural and effective.

Recently I have discovered what it means to have a stroke. I am getting a new feeling as I follow through. Confidence, definitely. But the feel is something else. A lightness in the cue, as if it floats and slides easily in my right hand. Almost weightless.

I am thinking that I am experiencing what is said about "letting the cue do the work". And that other famous quote about a stroke being "a beautiful throwing motion".

The best stroke I have ever seen was during my Road Trip, in Aurora, Colorado, at a place called the Rack 'em Cue Club. The shooter was a black dude called "Georgia Boy". He was a road player and a hustler, and called New York City his home. Had been playing the game for over 50 years, and his stroke was such a thing of beauty that it is almost impossible to describe.

The thing that struck me the most was how the cue almost danced in his hands with what I think is called a slip-stroke, whereby the forward (hit) motion of the cue was actually completely un-gripped. His stroking hand was not touching the cue in any way. Rather it had been thrown forward at the beginning of the stroke, and was caught at the end of the stroke. His wrist was extremely light and flexible, almost whippy (although not as much as Bustamante).

It was totally mesmerizing. He wouldn't let me videotape his stroke, but I have it clearly imprinted on my mind.

It could be that meditating on his stroke has caused mine to become more like his, or, rather more like a true stroke that is personalized to me.

It is the job of the stroke to deliver a variable amount of energy along a variable longitudinal plane along a variable vertical deviation from the horizontal and have the cue tip delivered to a variable place on the cue ball, and to continue to follow-thru after the hit either on the same or different variable energy, plane, etc.

The stroke, or the forward motion of the cue, guided by the hand/wrist/forearm/arm, is what delivers all the above variables.

The evolution of my stroke made a major step forward when I started to deliver a *full* stroke whenever possible. A full stroke is a confident stroke and it delivers consistent, known results.

I have learned that it is better to deliver a full stroke and adjust with english/throw/draw/follow than it is to vary the speed of the stroke, especially at the low end where table anomalies are more influential.

Although I have heard these things for almost 3 years from El Maestro himself, and from reading, but some things can only be learned by doing, over and over and over. Time and attention are the keys to learning.

I'm sure there were many times when El Maestro must have thought I was a complete dunce, but I knew that "I will persist until I succeed".

One of my favorite sayings is: "The ox is slow, but the earth is patient."

Friday, December 15, 2006

It's Alive!

Many times in our practice sessions, when the occasion called for it, El Maestro would encourage me to use my left hand, instead of a bridge, but every time I would pass on that, explaining that my left hand was completely useless, unfeeling, inert, uncoordinated.

And besides...(my father, a wise man in such matters, says that a person's *real reason* always comes after "...and besides...") I would be mighty embarrassed to miss a feeble left-handed poke.

The Irish have this saying: "Tis better the devil you know, than the devil you don't know."

I prefer to use a bridge, than to expand my skills? Doesn't make sense does it? For 3 years I never even tried.

But a few months ago, in the privacy of my solo practice, I actually tried a left handed shot, and it went in. Of course it was a very straight, short shot. And it felt really strange. But it went in.

Over some weeks, I found a new freedom from the bridge and learned to focus and trust my left hand.

About a month ago, in a match with El Maestro, and in a public pool hall, for all the world to see, I took a left handed shot, made it, and got position.

Now, don't get me wrong, there is still much work that I can do to get a natural, fluid stroke with the left.

But I am On The Path...

Saturday, January 06, 2007

Praise from El Maestro

The last time Tony and I shot some pool, a couple of weeks ago, I ran through a rack of 8 ball, and then almost all of another rack (missed on the last shot) and he actually told me "Those two racks were PROFESSIONAL quality".

He was referring to the choices, the shot selection, etc that I made, as well as the precision position.

That really made me feel great, and affirmed what I had been suspecting for some time: that my game has taken a step up. It was only a few months ago that my 8-ball patterns were awful.

Again today, after shooting for about 7 hours straight, he gave it up again telling me that I was shooting good. So I guess I'd have to say I'm feeling pretty good about that.

For the last 3 years, I thought he wasn't giving my game any compliments because he was some kind of tough guy. But all the while it was just because I didn't deserve any compliments!

But I still have a LONG way to go to reach his level. Some of the things he does with the cue ball are just plain unbelievable until you see it happen, repeatedly.

Namaste' El Maestro!

Friday, February 02, 2007

Winning Ugly

Last night was the APA team 8 ball match. It was a struggle.

My mojo was late at the gate, again. It was a full moon, and cold outside. Our table was by the door, so I got lots of chilly drafts while I was waiting for my match. When I get cold, it's tough to shoot. I'm tense, nervous, shaking. And it's tough to warm up again.

Finally, I'm playing #3 match, with Ripley, who has tested me before, maybe twice. Although I have won, it was a struggle, so I was expecting more of the same. And I got it.

He won the first game. I got the second. He won the third game. I got the fourth.

My break was ineffective yielding multi-cluster racks, no run outs, and lots of safeties.

The tables had brand new Simonis 860 cloth, so they were extra fast, and the balls tend to skid.

I was having trouble with my right eye. Burning and itching, possibly from the cigarette smoke of the addicts just outside the door, who seem to need to blow out the last lungful of smoke as they re-enter the bar right by our table.

I didn't say anything about it, because I have learned to only speak positive, to never give voice to a possible excuse.

I did make a couple of nice shots, but on the whole I was working hard. There was no flow.

El Maestro's advice: Trust your stroke. Shoot soft. Let the other guy make the mistakes.

My thinking was clouded, it seems, because El Maestro used a few timeouts to coach me on strategy.

It helped a lot. I won, 5-3.

Gracias, El Maestro.

Friday, February 16, 2007

Excuses



APA team 8-ball night again...

All day long, I'm thinking I'm going to lose, because all day long I'm thinking of excuses. I'm actually thinking of writing a list of all the excuses that apply to me, personally. I almost convince myself that it would be good therapy. Just once.

As game time approaches, I realise that I absolutely **MUST** pull out of this negative thinking downward spiral. The only way to do that is to force myself to think positive thoughts.

Before I start with the positive, I visualize all the excuses, written on a list, and I burn the list, and watch the smoke disappear with all my excuses...

This is a technique of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

Now back to the positive thoughts, I focused on the reasons why I should win. I think of a few things like experience and knowledge and skill and intelligence, and then I wonder if the first letters of those words spell anything, so I arrange them in different orders until I come up with a good one:

Skill

Knowledge

Intelligence

Experience

Sorto

S - K - I - E - S

That's easy enough to remember. (for an open cockpit biplane pilot like me) So, over and over in my head I'm thinking **SKIES**, and saying the words each letter represents and filling my head with the thoughts of a winner. Soon, I'm thinking of other reasons why I

should win. Creativity. Track Record. Life Experience. Wisdom. Touch. Karma. But enough about me... And I need to keep it simple and focused. **SKIES** is good enough for now. It's the best I can do on short notice.

Tonight, Seth was out to get me. Same skill level. Quiet, methodical, good shooter. He will be a tough opponent.

Or would he? Does the competitor really matter? I have been coming to the conclusion that the opponent is irrelevant and therefore not to be feared. Do not look in their eyes. Give them no power. It's nothing personal. Their role is simply to re-arrange the balls, when/if I miss or need to play safe.

My focus has zero to do with the opponent, and 100% to do with the table surface, rails, and balls. Period.

The game of pool is all about green and gray. The table's green cloth & the brain's gray matter. Eliminate all other elements and you have the recipe for success.

These are my thoughts, over and over. I'm breathing deeply to relax. At the lag for break, I lay the ball within a half-inch of the rail. But I lose the first game. I hate when that happens!

I win the second game. We're even. He wins again, and now leads 2-1. I'm thinking I need to bear down... I win the next 4 games and the match, 5-2. There was a break and run in there somewhere. That felt good.

I feel good that my techniques for dealing with excuses and for positive thinking seem to have worked tonight.

After one of the last games in the match, I felt that I was ahead, but was unsure of the score. I wanted to check with the scorekeeper, but El Maestro's teaching came back to me:

Ignore the score. It is irrelevant. If I win, someone will tell me. If I lose, someone will tell me. There is no need to know the score. How can it contribute to my game? Will I play better because I know the score? Focus only on the table.

El Maestro was right. (What else is new?)

A note about skill levels: I'm currently listed as a 6 in 8-ball (7 is highest). The APA uses some secret formula that takes into consideration all sorts of stats like matches played and won, number of innings, runs, safeties, and the skill levels of your opponents and who knows, maybe the phase of the moon. My goal is to achieve the highest skill level.

Sunday, March 04, 2007

Focus vs. Concentration

Concentrate

- A. to bring all efforts, faculties, activities, etc., to bear on one thing or activity
- B. to come to or toward a common center;
- C. to become more intense, stronger, or purer.

Focus

- A. to concentrate: to focus one's thoughts.

So much for Dictionary.com's meanings of these words.

The reason for a fuller analysis of these words is because El Maestro and I went at it yesterday on the keys to success in pool.

I have always used these words interchangeably, and, based on the definitions above, you might see how I could do that. But in the pool world of El Maestro, these words have different meanings.

It was only yesterday, after 3 years of my dogged determination to learn did I finally press the issue when he told me that I have NEVER YET been focused in a pool match.

Needless to say, this was a stinging rebuke, and my first and natural reaction was to completely reject his hypothesis. But I suspected it might be some language issue (what with him being Honduran born and raised and English being his second language) so I pressed for a more complete analysis of his meaning.

For an example of "focus" he offered his own performance. When he is playing a match, he does not recognize distractions, never talks, never shows emotion even on the rare occasion of a missed shot. He never sits down, never recognizes any person even if they come up to him during a match.

He is a rock. There is nothing in his mind except the table. He never looks at his opponent, even when he (the opponent) is shooting. Instead, El Maestro will tend to the tip of his cue, which may be one reason why he gets fewer hits per tip than anyone I have

known.

In comparison, he tells me that I have some need to be a nice person and talk with those who talk to me, that I show emotion during the game, that my attention wanders all over the place from the TV to the spectators, players, loud noises and shiny objects. In short, I am a mess.

I complain bitterly to El Maestro that his characterization is excessive, and that surely I must have had at least one match when I had good focus? No. Ouch!

In fact, he says, it is his judgment that I have probably never been focused in my life.

What? Impossible! Surely my successes in yoga, business and aviation...landing an open cockpit biplane in a high crosswind on a narrow runway...Was it all just luck?

Now he's pissing me off. Who is he to negate my ability to focus?

Well, actually, he's the best pool shooter I have ever seen, so he just may have some basis for his assertions.

It may be time for me to assume some humility and listen up.

El Maestro suggests that, maybe I might want to actually try to focus and see how my game improves.

I am reminded of Paramahansa Yogananda's quote: "The results can not be achieved unless the experiment is made."

So, with some humility, and great determination, I agree.

He challenges me to a race to 7 in 8 ball, followed by a race to 7 in 9 ball. In complete silence, and total focus.

We go hill-hill in 8 ball, and in the last game I do an offensive safety. He kicks at his 8 and sinks it cross corner for the win. My focus was not shaken even though he visibly marked the cushion with chalk where he needed to kick at the ball, (totally illegal) and even though he did not call his pocket.

In 9 ball, I won 7-2. Again, in complete silence, even though there were several times when he sharked me by moving in my field of view while I was shooting. His antics, of course, were a test for me, and not his usual style of competition.

Concentration, in the world of El Maestro, is what is needed at the time of shot-making. If something happens to interrupt the concentration, then, without losing focus, one simply restarts the shot routine.

So, maybe Focus is "big picture" and concentration is "little picture". But you can't have concentration without focus.

Lose concentration, and you will probably miss the shot. Lose focus, and you will probably lose the match.

Friday, March 16, 2007

Just Doing My Job

Another Thursday night, another APA team 8-ball match.

My match was dead last in the lineup, my least favorite... I prefer to go first, take care of business, and get out of there. Hanging out in bars ain't for hermits like me.

I won the first game, lost the second.

I have come to realize something about myself: I really, really dislike losing. It kinda puts me in a funky mood, and, for a hedonist like me, what's the point?

So, with the score 1-1 and my opponent (Ken Conley) with the fresh taste of my blood, I decide that I will tighten the screws.

This is something I learned from El Maestro. Many times he will play safe when there is no need, just to frustrate the opponent. The cat toying with the doomed mouse.

While El Maestro has refined this to an art form, it is not my preferred style. I'm a lover, not a fighter, and certainly not a torturer. (not that there's anything wrong with that!)

I would much prefer to run out clean than to drag things out by duckin' and divin' and playing an unnecessary chess match, but something inside me wanted to try a new tactic.

An evil spirit welled up within me, and I played shot after shot that was devious, gratuitous and even malicious. I hated myself for it, and yet, somehow, it felt so good.

My strategy worked. I won the match 5-1.

And now, on the morning after, I still feel dirty, but it's a good kind of dirty, if you know what I mean.

Monday, March 19, 2007

The Price of Greatness: 10 years, One Million Balls

How many balls do you have to shoot before you get really good at this game?

I got interested in this question recently while talking with a team member who is just starting down the long and painful road to excellence in pool.

She was feeling kind of glum after losing her match, and I was trying to console her with the fact that, with practice, she will absolutely get better.

And then, I blurted out the not-so-consoling fact that it probably only takes hitting a million balls before she will get really, really good at the game.

Of course, I had no idea what the real number is. I was just winging it. Who counts every ball they hit? Not me! However, I do know that you gotta hit a lotta balls.

Over the next few days, the question of just how many balls kept running through my mind. So I put the question to one of this blog's readers. He's a techie sort of guy, and he just recently achieved the highest 9-ball skill level (APA).

He did some calculating and came up with the fact that he has probably hit 700,000 balls over 10 years that he's been playing the game.

Well, that's pretty darn close to a million. And *maybe* it would take another 300,000 shots to achieve touring pro level, if he had the intention of doing such a thing.

These numbers seem to be in the ball park with another study on the topic of what it takes to master ANY endeavor.

I wrote about this study in another blog I write [The Art and Science of Success in Business](#).

Here is the relevant entry from that blog:

Practice, Perseverance, Passion

What does it take to be Great? Is there such a thing as a "natural"?

The answers are [here](#) in a recent story in Fortune Magazine.

The bottom line is that all exceptional results require lots of Practice, about 10 years of it according to the story. And that's *focused* practice, not just putting in time.

Here's their System for Practice:

1. Approach each critical task with an explicit goal of getting much better at it.
2. As you do the task, focus on what's happening and why you're doing it the way you are.
3. After the task, get feedback on your performance from multiple sources. Make changes in your behavior as necessary.
4. Continually build mental models of your situation - your industry, your company, your career. Enlarge the models to encompass more factors.
5. Do those steps regularly, not sporadically. Occasional practice does not work.

(Notice the feedback loop: an essential ingredient for any System if it is to react to the constantly changing environment.)

On this same topic, Calvin Coolidge said it perfectly:

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.

Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent.

Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.

Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts.

Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

Of course, if you have a Passion for what you do, Practice and Perseverance come naturally. Consider this well...

So, if you practice with passion for about 10 years, you will probably hit a million balls, and you will be great. Absolutely.

Friday, March 30, 2007

Character

I won 4-3 against a player of the highest skill level (7) although it wasn't my best performance.

On the other hand, my opponent distinguished himself with a display of integrity.

It has been said that the true character of a man is revealed by what he does when no one is looking.

In the middle of last night's match, when the games were about even between us, Dave Arballo, man of integrity, called a foul on himself, a double hit on the cue ball, giving me control of the table, with ball in hand. And, as might be expected, it cost him the game.

I did not see him foul, so of course I could not disagree with him, and since he is an advanced player, he would know a double hit when it happens. There was nothing I could do.

It was just another example of the ebb and flow of the tides of fortune and fate. I was in a similar situation not long ago, and I called a foul on myself, but in this case I went on to win the match, and the tournament. So, it could have gone the other way for Dave.

I made a couple of mistakes myself last night, so it was a good learning experience.

The match was notable for one other reason: For the first time ever, I allowed a friend to attend one of my matches. George had arrived earlier in the afternoon, on a motorcycle ride from Washington to Phoenix. He is a real good buddy, I attended his wedding last summer, so it was difficult to tell him no.

I decided to let him watch, as a test of my ability to focus. I knew I was playing with fire by doing this, because I also knew there was a good chance I would be playing Dave, who has a higher skill level, and my focus needed to be absolute.

And now back to the subject: Character.

The measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out.

Baron Thomas Babington Macaulay, English historian and statesman (1800-1859)

Most people say that it is the intellect that makes a great scientist. They are wrong: it is character.

Albert Einstein, Swiss-American mathematician, physicist and public philosopher (1879-1955)

Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike.

Theodore Roosevelt, American adventurer and 26th president (1858-1919)

Character, not circumstance, makes the person.

Booker T. Washington, American educator and civil rights activist (1856-1915)

Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wing, and only character endures.

Horace Greeley, American journalist and educator (1811-1872)

Friday, April 20, 2007

An Opportunity to Do Something Extraordinary

It's Thursday again, and that means APA team 8-ball, and that also means that I start getting the pre-match head trips.

So I take some time to update my affirmations, and print them out and read them aloud. But I'm still antsy and nervous on the drive north, but some deep, slow breathing helps calm me down.

And then the thought hits me: Each trip to the table is ***an opportunity to do something extraordinary***. Of course, I could screw it up completely, but I could also do something great. I don't really know how it will turn out, but it certainly is an opportunity.

That's the positive visualization I needed... During my match I keep repeating this to myself.

I win, 5-1, vs. Miles H. One game went 18 innings due to extensive safety play and that was a lot of fun. My session record is now 9 and 2 for a win rate of 82%. When I look back on those two losses I can see that I may have won if I had a more positive attitude during the match.

I am reminded of the great quote from the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey...
"Something's going to happen, something wonderful."

Friday, June 29, 2007

Invincible

Last night, two alpha dogs faced off in battle. One of them was me.

Only one of us would emerge the Victor. It was him or me.

I entered this battle with a perfect record of 6 matches, 6 wins. This is what I had at stake. I was loathe to lose and soil my spotless record. I *had* to win.

The match was an ugly slugfest. My strategy was to cut off his oxygen, to give him no hope, to frustrate him, to let him see only darkness, reduce his odds of success, to burden him with doubt...

In so doing, I played tight, I did not Flow, and I missed shots, there were distractions, the tables, bar boxes, were pure garbage.

At the end, after two and a half hours of chess match, I ruled the day. (5-2 vs. Tony Bigbee, skill level 7)

Seven matches played, seven won. I remain undefeated. Alone, at the top.

In all of San Diego APA 8-ball, with more than 1600 players, there are only 84 (less than 5%) who are ranked Skill Level Seven that is the highest skill level possible. I'm one of them.

As of this time, now past the middle of the session, I have won more matches than any other Seven, and I am undefeated.

It is early morning as I write this. I woke up after only 4 hours sleep. The adrenaline of last night's victory still pumping hot in my veins.

More juicy than the victory itself is that it takes me to the highest point. Victorious in *every* contest. No matter the opponent, no matter the venue, no matter the conditions.

In the Fullness of Time, it has come to pass that I walk among the Sevens as One of Them, and, *for this moment*, I am undefeated. I fear no one.

After last night's match, El Maestro shook my hand, looked at me squarely, and in all dead seriousness said: "No one can beat you."

Wow.

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

Confidence

"Confidence" in the game of billiards can be heard in the sounds of chalking, hitting the cue ball, the drop of object ball in the pocket.

Confidence can be heard in the tone of your voice when you call "Safety". Do you say it as a statement of fact or as a question?

Confidence can be seen in the expression on your face.

Confidence can be seen in the way you move around the table, and in your pre-shot routine, and staying down on the shot.

Confidence can be seen in the behavior of the balls. They go in clean. There is no unintended bumping of cushion or other balls. Shape is natural and simple. Cue ball travel is minimized. Full control is evident.

Confidence lives in the Spirit. A Quiet Spirit is Patient, allowing the shot to appear without rushing it. A Quiet Spirit overcomes all without trying. A Quiet Spirit is Invincible.

Confidence lives in the breath. Breathe slowly, and deeply into the lowest part of the lungs. Let the belly expand while breathing in.

Confidence lives in your core, in your center of gravity, in the lowest part of your gut. Move from your core. Strengthen your core. Listen for the message of confidence from your gut. Truth lives in the core.

Confidence lives in your mind. You pay full Attention. You are focused, concentrated. You see the angles easily. Strategy is clear.

Confidence lives in your arm and wrist. Your sense of touch is natural and precise, and can create on the table what you see in your mind.

Confidence is an ethereal Energy living in the Body/Mind/Spirit.

How do we create it? How can we keep it and increase it? In one of my most profound discoveries, I learned that emotions (including confidence) can be *the result and the cause* of Actions. Acting as if you are confident will create confidence. If you reproduce the physical actions that occur with confidence (even if you are not really confident) you will get your brain to fire the neurons of confidence, releasing the chemistry of confidence, which reinforces the physical actions of confidence thereby continuing the cycle.

Caution: False Confidence is easily detected by the Body/Mind/Spirit. It can evaporate in an instant. You can detect false confidence in others: they are bluffers, posers. El Maestro taught me not to fear these people (Fear No One) for their game is weak, they are trying to intimidate you, take you out of your game.

Your opponent may strut and make noise, drawing attention to himself, but a stronger man remains calm and quiet. If your Actions are the actions of a quiet man, a strong man, a confident man, you will confuse your bluffing opponent. Ignore his vain attempts, and he will try harder, waste energy, and weaken. He will lose.

Experience is a source of true confidence. Experience that lives in muscle memory. Experience that lives in the memory of other victories.

A technique of NLP (Neuro-linguistic programming) is to put yourself in a state of confidence by replaying in your mind times in your life when you experienced a peak performance, even in unrelated areas.

When I re-started shooting pool 4 years ago, I had no confidence in my shots, because I had not built up the experiences of shot-making. Even though I had no fresh pool memories of victory, I created confidence by recalling other moments of extraordinary success against great odds for example with aviation, yoga, etc.

Recalling your peak experiences helps you stay calm under pressure, helps you breathe more naturally, get more air to your brain, helps you think clearly, helps you become patient, relaxed.

Where there is no confidence, there is Fear. You must not wait for confidence to come, you must create it.

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams,
and endeavors to live the life that he has imagined,
he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.
He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary;
new, universal, and more liberal laws
will begin to establish themselves around and within him;
or old laws will be expanded and interpreted
in his favor in a more liberal sense,
and he will live with the license of *a higher order of beings*.

Henry David Thoreau

Imagine: The laws of the universe working in your favor! Becoming "a higher order of being"! It's true, if you "advance confidently in the direction of your dreams".

Tuesday, September 04, 2007

How Sweet It Is

In a dramatic turnaround from this past weekend when El Maestro came by the Fun House and for 9 hours beat me like a red-headed stepchild in 8-ball and 9-ball, tonight I turned the tables and went undefeated in the weekly Stagecoach 8-ball tournament, finishing with a finals match against El Maestro himself.

The 80 bucks for first place goes to my favorite charity, as usual.

I had to post this blog entry right away, just in case I died in my sleep tonight and didn't get the chance to record this epic win.

Saturday, November 10, 2007

The Way of The Cue

As with The Way of The Sword, The Way of The Cue is a way of Life, whereby a participant discovers their true Self, and the secrets of the Universe.

As the Samurai has his sword, the pool shooter has his cue. Each is a Warrior who faces opponents in a contest where there is only one winner.

The one who has greatest focus, concentration, stamina, knowledge and skill will survive to be victorious.

Full Attention is the primary element.

The Way of The Cue is celebrated in its highest form in a formal event. There are 4 types of events:

1. The Lesson
2. The Competition
3. The Exhibition
4. Practice

Each event has these defined elements:

1. It is video recorded. Each participant gets a copy.
2. One - two hour segments.
3. 15 minute break before resuming next segment.

Pre-Event Preparation

At Home

1. Full body cleansing with *unscented* soaps, deodorants, etc.
2. Uniform: all black, pants, shirt, no adornments, no advertisements, jewelry, buckles, rivets, etc.
(respect for the table)
3. Water, candy, etc.
4. Equipment: case, 2 cues, 2 spare shafts, chalk, tool, towel, glove,
(no powder - respect for the table)
5. Meditation, self-hypnosis, affirmations, etc.
6. Any item not specifically permitted above is disallowed.
(no iPods, earplugs, books, papers, computers, PDAs, etc.)

Note on chalk use: participants keep personal chalk in pants pocket at all times when not

chalking, not on table. Chalking takes place over the floor, not over the playing surface or rails.

Pre-Event Site Preparation

1. Clean balls
2. Clean table (vacuum, Chalk-off, then brush)
3. Video setup
4. Refrigeration for water
5. Participants' personal private area (restroom, soap, towels)
6. Participants' event chairs and table

Immediate Pre-Event Preparation

1. Participants remain in dressing rooms until one minute before the event.
2. Meditation, final equipment preparations,
3. Use the loo, wash hands.

The Four Event Types:

1. The **Competition**

is a contest between two or more participants with only one winner determined by known rules.

- a. quiet: no talking, etc. no sounds.
- b. calm: no displays of emotion
- c. respect: integrity, sportsmanship, no sharking, etc.
- d. At start and finish, Participants face each other, bow.
(no physical contact during entire event)

2. The **Lesson** is an event whereby the student and teacher work on one specific element of the Way.

3. The **Exhibition** is an event whereby a 1 or 2 participants perform.

4. **Practice** is an event whereby a sole participant focuses on one or more elements of the Way.

Each event is identified with a unique series of letters and numbers, and a website address where more information about the event is available. (Names of participants, date, location, notes, etc) Also at this website address is an open forum for further discussion after the event.

Sunday, November 18, 2007

Not the shameless self-promotion it appears

This entry may seem entirely self-congratulatory, and even capriciously, gratuitously so. However, I can assure you that all is not as it appears.



Today is cleaning day here at FastMikie's Fun House. A trained professional comes in to do the job right, and to take care of the heavy lifting, an activity to which I have become increasingly allergic over the years.

Since the last Fun House major cleaning, just a month ago, there were huge wildfires surrounding Del Mar. Wildfires cause ash, and it gets everywhere, even into the hallowed halls of FastMikie's Fun House, and even, (oh, the horror) onto my cherished pool trophies.

I like my trophies. But I don't gloat about them so much, as time goes by. After a year or so, they're kinda old news. I like the memories, that's the best, but the trophies seem to accumulate, get moved around the Fun House, used as paperweights, doorstops, etc. Been there, done that. What's next? Show me something I can't do...

And now, here is this cleaning mission I didn't ask for. It was an Act of God. (the fire

thing, remember?)

So I had the need to gather up these trophies, for special handling purposes only, you see. Even a trained professional cleaning technician should not be given such important personal mementos, especially with the pointy sticks, delicate materials, etc.

Now here I am presented with a gaggle of trophies. A bundle of bling, if you will. And, the photographer in me immediately noticed the Kodak Moment.

Now you know the story. Every word of it true. It was an Act of God. God wanted me to show you all my trophies. I've done my part.

Now I know what you are asking: "What are all those trophies FOR?" right? Ok, here goes:

Left Side, front to back:

1. 2005 Triple Play "Masters" MVP (undefeated)
2. 2007 Perfect Season (undefeated) 8-ball
3. 2004 Division 9 ball champions (team)

Middle column, front to back:

1. 2005 Division 8-ball champions (team)
2. 2004 City Champions 9-ball (team)

Right Side, front to back:

1. 2007 MVP 8 ball (undefeated)
2. 2004 US Amateur Championships, California (undefeated)
3. 2007 Division Champions 8 ball (team)

Included in the photo are various patches to wear, for those times when carrying your trophies into a party or to the store, is a bit awkward. And that's my cue butt (Samsara #1676) in the foreground. It seems my cue is always butting into the picture.

All right, little children. You're all cleaned up and now off you go. Back to your lonely lives as doorstops, paperweights, and bookends. Back to your lives of obscurity, to serve quietly until some wayward glance will greet you, and memories of your big day will give me a smile.

And today was another shining hour, with all your friends, brought together for a moment in the sun. I hope you all enjoyed it.

There you have it, dear reader. True story. Act of God. I'm not the raving ego-maniac you might judge me to be.

Saturday, March 1, 2008

Optimum Practice

About 4 years ago I decided to get as good as I can at billiards. And I got pretty darn good. I could get a lot better if I practiced more, but I'm lazy, so I try to get by with the least possible amount of effort.

That's not a winning attitude, of course, so I decided to develop the Optimum Practice routine that would give me the *maximum results* with the *minimum effort*.

I have been building this Optimum Practice routine for about 4 years, and it has been working very well. You might call it the Lazy Man's Path to Success.

In May of 2007 I decided that a key element in this Optimum Practice routine must be a Practice Assistant. Over the next 9 months I developed the concept of a Practice Assistant and set out to find and train such a person.

And just two days ago, Dave, the world's first Billiards Practice Assistant, started to work at FastMikie's Fun House.

After last night's Optimum Practice session #2, it is clearly delivering immediate results, and yet there are many improvements that can be made to the process, leading to even better results.

That got me to thinking that this process I have built applies to all sorts of human endeavors that require practice.

And then, my entrepreneurial mind takes over...

It's a classic joke: A tourist in New York City asks a man walking by with a violin case: "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The musician says: "Practice, man... practice." To get better at anything, practice is essential.

But, there is practice, the way you are doing it now, and then there is *Optimum Practice*. Results of Optimum Practice will be *double or triple* what ordinary practice will bring, *at a minimum*. The best part is that these results begin *immediately*.

One of the primary goals of practice is to increase muscle memory, and that requires going through the motions.

For a pool player, Optimum Practice delivers at least twice as many shots in the same amount of practice time. Therefore results are *guaranteed* to double.

But wait! There's more... (the voice in my head is W.C. Fields, selling knives on late-night TV) Optimum Practice includes graphic feedback on your results and identifies areas needing more focus.

Optimum Practice is the trademark name for a methodology that brings together many disciplines in a unique way and uses the internet to leverage even more results.

Optimum Practice brings cutting edge technology to power your practice sessions.

This Optimum Practice website will become a wonderland of resources to help you improve your practice sessions. Click OptimumPractice.com

It was at this point that I thought: "I wonder if that website address is available?" So I went to GoDaddy.com to check it out, and sure enough, it was, so I got it, of course, because by now I've already spent the first hundred million from this new business adventure, so what's a mere ten bucks for a URL?

OK, now I'm back on planet Earth, and realize that taking Optimum Practice global is going to take a lot of work, and I remember that I'm lazy, so I'm thinking that I probably won't change the world after all...

Then, in a flash of genius, (duh) I remember that it was my being lazy that created the *need* for Optimum Practice in the first place!

It's the Great Circle of Life. Stay tuned...

Sunday, May 18, 2008

The New Improved FastMikie

I shot some pool with El Maestro today, at Family Billiards in Oceanside, where the tables seem to produce random results from cushions with dead spots, unlevel slate, and torn cloth. It was challenging, and even laughable, but it reminded me that I need to play on such horrible conditions because this is the Real World, a world apart from the perfection of FastMikie's Fun House. It is the Real World where competitors are waiting to test me. So I must be able to play, and win, under such extreme conditions.

Afterwards, we talked at the local Starbucks, where El Maestro made it clear that I must work on my mental game. He readily admits that I can make the shots, but my overall game will improve as I improve my ability to focus and stay positive. As an example of my failing in this regard, he referred me to my last post on this blog where I allowed myself to accept 3rd place because I was tired, and of course that is completely *unacceptable*.

As he is telling me these things, and reminding me that he has mentioned many times before the fact that pool is 90% mental, I found myself fully agreeing with him, and realizing that I have heard this many times, and realizing that I am one of the most positive people I know... but in the case of Thursday night, I was not positive enough to fight the fatigue, to hang tough, and to find the way to win.

I had been looking at this past Thursday night tournament as just one of many tournaments that I'll be playing on the long road to the US Amateur Championship in September. I was just *going through the motions*, getting some tournament experience after several months of no competition, I wasn't expecting anything extraordinary, I wasn't expecting to win, and with an attitude like that, of course, it would be highly unlikely that I would win anything.

What I learned from talking with El Maestro today is that I need to treat every shot, every game, every tournament as an opportunity to prove, and improve, my ability to focus, to concentrate, to ignore distractions, to fight like a junk yard dog, and to win.

I know I can do this. My success in business has been the result of highly focused behavior over long periods regardless of distractions and fatigue. I know that winners never quit, and quitters never win. I know that not just pool, but all of life is 90% mental. My challenge is to demonstrate that I can master the mental game.

And so it is, that on this day I do begin life again as the New, Improved FastMikie, who will never again offer an excuse, or speak negatively in any way, and will continue to look for every opportunity to improve my ability to focus and improve my mental game. Gracias, El Maestro.

Wednesday, July 16, 2008

Johnny & Earl Visit FastMikie's Fun House

Yes, true story... Johnny Archer and Earl Strickland stopped by tonight. We started the evening with a really fine dining experience overlooking the ocean at the totally excellent Pacifica Del Mar restaurant, and then headed back to my home (lovingly known as "FastMikie's Fun House") for some pool. Yeah, it really happened.

It's not every day that I get two of the world's greatest players to hang out at my place and stroke a few, so pardon me if I'm still a bit amazed by it all.

I set the tone of the evening right off the bat. I said right up front that I already knew they were great, so they didn't have to prove it with fancy trick shots. What I wanted was hard core lessons. Watch me shoot for a bit and then tell me where I need to change. I told them to relax, no performance anxiety here, it's not about you guys entertaining me, it's all about me learning what I can in the few hours we had together.

We started off with Johnny and me shooting some straight pool, which he says he really enjoys. He showed it, running a couple of racks on me, and of course I was completely out of stroke after not shooting for the last 10 days, and nervous of course, what with me playing one world champion while another world champion is watching.

Earl noticed that he could help me with my bridge, so we got into that for a while, and then Johnny shows me how to use my new jump stick (Predator Air), which was very interesting because I never jumped a ball before, but Johnny had me doing it in no time flat. Then Earl gets me using *his* stick to hit some radical English/draw/cut shots that I can not make with my stick, and we start talking cue weights, and tips, and wraps, and taper. And they both worked with me on my draw shot. Oh, I can draw the ball, of course, but my draw fades fast when I get 5 diamonds away from the object ball. They showed me how to deal with that. Next we worked on my break shot. Johnny helped a lot with that.

Do you get the impression that I was getting light speed pool lessons and that I could never learn at such a pace? Well, that's why I had the video camera running the entire time!!

After several hours of trying to absorb the wisdom of pool champions, we took a break and just sat down and talked pool for a while. Just two gods and a wannabe, hanging out. Johnny drinking Mountain Dew and Earl and me drinking water. We talked about the early days, when they were just getting into the game, we talked about some of the mental part of the game, how they prepare for competition, and how they deal with the pressure, and on and on...

And of course the video camera was running the entire time. But it wasn't "in your face"

video like you have on TV. The camera was on a tripod across the room, and I operated it with a remote control without a lot of fuss, so it was really like it wasn't even there. But some things came up that they wouldn't want to get out, so of course none of that video will be seen on YouTube unless they approve it first. I promised them that up front, so they would feel completely comfortable with the camera running.

Just before midnight they had to leave, to drive north to Los Angeles to get some shut-eye before their next tour stop, so I asked them one final favor: to show me their favorite shot, but not a trick shot... a shot that comes up in competition, a shot they are faced with that is real tough, but for some reason they just smile because they love the shot, the action, the challenge. And, of course, the video camera got it all.

I guess I'll be doing some video editing for a while.

I walked them to their car, and realized that I didn't take any photos, but it really didn't matter. I don't need my ugly mug messing up a photo of Johnny and Earl just to impress others. I would prefer if what I learned from them could find its way into my stroke and my game, and some day, after pulling off some incredible tournament-winning shot, I could simply say: "Johnny showed me that." or "I learned that from Earl." That's good enough for me.

What impressed me the most about the entire evening is that both of them were real easy going people, helpful, polite, and considerate. Yes, both of them. They get along real good with each other, and they gave me their full attention. And when you consider that they had just put in a full 8 hours teaching 2 different classes of pool students at a pool hall in town, well, I guess that's a real tribute to them both.

Wow, what a night!

Saturday, July 19, 2008

The Student Becomes The Teacher - Lesson One

Recently, a player asked me for help with his game. That caught me off guard because I have had the self-image of being a Student for the last 5 years. I was surprised that someone would think that I might be able to Teach something of value. But, hey, I've learned some good stuff from all the great player/teachers I've had... and I like to help. I'm a Giver, so I said OK, we'll take it one step at a time... let me see you shoot, and if there's something I think might be able to help, I'll let you know. So I watched him shoot some balls for a rack or two, and here's how the session went:

He was shooting fast and too hard, and missed a few shots, which seemed to get him shooting faster, and so it went until I stopped him to ask why he's nervous.

Of course it was because I was watching...

And so began **Lesson One**.

The game is only a little bit Physical, and a lot Mental.

The Physical game consists almost entirely with what happens when you hit the ball, at what speed, angle, spin, and stroke. Physical also includes equipment, and personal conditioning, the ability to endure long hours of competition and still stay sharp. The Physical game is, *at the most*, about 10-20% of what must be learned and perfected for success at a high level. Optimum results can be achieved if we focus on the 80-90% of the game. Therefore, we never discussed any of the Physical aspects of the game.

The Mental game consists of virtually everything else, including Focus, Concentration, Relaxation, Self Image, Self Talk, Strategy, Rules, Pre-shot routine, match preparation, etc. Here are the Mental things we discussed.

- **Relax.** Stress causes all sorts of problems, and solves very few. You are either in control, or out of control. Control your physical state and you will perform better. Relax by controlling your breathing, and by slowing down your actions. Walk around the table to help relax. It gives you time to breathe, and pays a dividend of better perspectives on your next shot, and position for the one after it, and the next, etc. Consistent pre-shot routine will help condition your mind, and establish the rhythm that builds confidence.
- **Focus.** There is no world other than what is on the table, there is never anyone watching, never any TV or other player, or spectators, or any other thing whatsoever. There is only the table, the balls on it, and especially the shot at hand. If some element of your environment breaks into your focus, (pretty girl, spectator talking, obnoxious drunk, TV too loud, etc), then you need to get back into focus before you shoot. If you think that some distraction is bothering you, then you

give yourself permission to fail, and you can not win with that attitude. Do not interact with your opponent in any way. Show no emotion, no reaction to either good or bad shots.

- **Positive Self Image.** When you are playing, you are not a "C" (or whatever) player anymore, you are not "in a slump", you are not "trying to figure out what is wrong". You must become your favorite pro player! Move like that player, chalk like that player. Use the same number of warm-up strokes. When your opponent is shooting, and you are in the chair, then sit in your chair the way your favorite pro player sits in their chair.
- **Positive Self Talk.** Speak to yourself only in positives. The student du jour missed a cut on a 4-ball, and said to me: "That's the angle I have trouble with, I almost always miss that shot." And of course, when you tell yourself such a thing enough times, and especially before you shoot at it, you are giving yourself permission to miss, permission to lose. So there is only one thing to say to yourself when faced with such a shot: "I love this shot! I love having this opportunity to play better than ever, an opportunity to make the shot, an opportunity to learn..." I reminded him of the words of Henry Ford: "**If you think you can, or if you think you can't... you're right!**"
- **Simplify:** 1. Limit cue ball travel. The farther it must go, the more it can go wrong. 2. Don't play for position if you already have it. This is a common costly mistake. 3. Take care of your trouble situations early. (clusters, railshots, loners, etc.). 4. Play 3 balls ahead. So you can set up the right angles.

Consider these 3 elements to success in this game:

- **Study.** This involves assuming the spirit of the Student, and to seek out all possible knowledge that will help your game. This includes learning from teachers, reading, videos, etc.
- **Practice.** Long hours of focused practice must be done in order to build the eye/hand coordination and muscle memory and to develop a personal style and rhythm and to confirm what is discovered by Study. Practice must consist of drills that test the skills and offer a way to quantify results. Records must be kept to demonstrate improvement. This builds confidence.
- **Competition.** Only competition provides the opportunity to put it all together. It gives you the reward for Study and Practice. You will learn what truly works, and what doesn't, and what you need to Study and Practice.

On the nature of the student/teacher relationship:

- **Take notes.** A student shows readiness to learn by carrying a pen and paper. It is an affront to the teacher for a student to appear without a pen and paper. Notes must be taken to be sure you remember what you need to Practice. If a student shows up the first time without pen and paper, I will give them a pen and some paper. If they do not take notes, I will tell them what notes to write. If notes are not taken, there will be no further lessons. Likewise, if lessons are not practiced,

there will be no further lessons. The reward for the teacher is that the student demonstrates that the lessons are learned. Behavior must be modified for success.

- One of my favorite quotes is: The danger of communication is the illusion it has been achieved. It would be easy for a Teacher to think that he has actually taught something, that the student has actually benefited from the teaching. It would be easy for the student to think that he has actually learned something that has been taught. In the great majority of student/teacher situations, both people are under the ILLUSION that the communication has been achieved. The fact is that the great majority of student/teacher situations are a waste of time, because of one simple fact: most students don't do the work needed to benefit from the lesson. In the words of Paramahansa Yogananda: "The results can not be achieved unless the experiment is made." There are very few students who want the result enough to do the work.

After I had written the above, I remembered that about 10 months prior I wrote the following thoughts about Teaching Pool, and how I *might* do it differently than any of the ways I have learned. I didn't publish any of this text, just put it aside for later. Now seemed to be the right time because I started thinking about what I would do if my first student ever came back for a second lesson, and we got into the Physical side of billiards.

It is said that those who can, Do. And those who can not, Teach. Tonight I was giving deep thought to how I might teach the game of pool, and I got to thinking that I would teach it as if it were The Way of the Sword, as it would have been taught to Samurai warriors.

I would start a student with a way to approach the table with respect and full commitment to a plan. Initially, the student uses only the cue, no balls. He learns how to approach a shot, the stance, how to hold the cue, the open hand bridge, and practices with these elements for thousands of strokes. All before even one ball is placed on the table.

The stroke is the most important thing, and it can be learned more easily if the outcome-orientation of pocketing is eliminated so focus can be on the *process* of stroking through the cue ball.

Just when the student gets to the point where they think they will never advance, they get their first shot at a cue ball. The student learns to stroke the cue ball in the center, with no regard for speed control, just focusing on center ball hit, a smooth easy stroke, and the basics of stance and bridge.

More thousands of shots like this, focusing only on mechanics of center ball hit and smooth stroke, all building on the previous foundation of stance, bridge, etc.

The student next learns a modified lag shot, how to stroke through the cue ball and move it to the foot rail, and directly back into the tip of the cue stick. This

gives visual feedback to prove the true center ball hit, and teaches speed control.

The first exercise: Line up 3 balls on the head string, each one opposite a diamond on the head rail. Lag each ball down table and back to the head rail. One point for each ball within a diamond of the rail. Do it until you can score 9 points in a row.

Next, same drill, except lag only from the head string to the foot rail.

Third drill, to lag 3 lengths, from head string to foot rail, back to the head rail, and back again to the foot rail.

All results are recorded. Progress is charted over several weeks.

Next, the basics of side spin (English). And then high and low hits. Exercises to hit low and have the ball stop spinning backwards at various chosen places on the table. Exercises to bank with center ball, then banks with English.

To this point might take several months, *all without an object ball*. This builds a strong foundation in fundamentals.

Eventually, an object ball is introduced. Short, straight in shots. Stop, draw, follow and English are learned again for their effects on the cue and object balls.

Short cuts, aiming, speed control, use of rails for position... all with only a cue ball and object ball, with emphasis on the process, not result, the stroke being fluid and relaxed.

Lots of video. Review of videos of the student's own performances, and review of videos of the great players.

I think I would have liked to learn this way. I would have had a strong foundation, and I would have had a lot less to un-learn.

The End

Just when you least expect it, things have a way of changing.

I had stopped doing serious competitions because I just didn't like the scene anymore. I don't drink when I shoot pool, and a lot of competitions occur in bars and pool halls that serve booze. And that leads to some rowdy behavior on the part of the opponents and spectators. Not my scene.

Without competition, there was really no driving force to practice regularly, and of course that leads to getting out of stroke, and that just doesn't feel good at all.

On top of that, I started getting some severe pains in my neck when I would play for a while. And the pain just kept getting worse. The doc took some MRI images that showed I have 5 bulging discs with stenosis in my neck. That's not the sort of thing that gets better.

So I just stopped and sold my beautiful Gold Crown IV table and all the stuff that goes with it, and haven't looked back.

I still have my trusty Samsara cue, and every once in a while I'll shoot of few racks with a friend, but I'm not the same player I used to be. I still have the knowledge and the strategy, but the stroke and the confidence are fading. A person can be Invincible for only so long, but Time is our ultimate master.

Acknowledgements

If I see farther, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants... (Isaac Newton)

Thank You to...

My ancient Irish ancestors who created the McCafferty Family crest, and our family motto: *Justicia et Fortitudo Invincibilia Sunt*. That's Latin for "Justice and Fortitude are Invincible". I always liked the idea of being Invincible!

Mom and Dad, who were both alive when I started this pool adventure, now they are gone. They always taught me that I could do anything I set my mind to, and that I should always try to be the best at whatever I chose to do.

My beautiful and talented children, Mike and Kendra, who show no interest in pool whatsoever. But I love them unreservedly anyway. Such is the great power of family.

Tony "El Maestro" Sorto, a genius and artist with a cue. He showed me the way.

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Those people who took the time to read, and comment, on my blog, Diary of a Pool Shooter – The Adventures of FastMikie including Samm "Cherry Bomb" Diep, Robert Johnson, "Pool Minnow", and the gang at AZbilliardsForum

My pool buddies, who seem to want to play just when my stroke needs it most, including Malve, Mike R., "Aunty Dan" Salzedo, and Dr. Mark Kalina

The many competitors I played in all those matches from 2004 through 2008, most of whom showed rather good manners when I won. And to the very few others who can claim a win over me, thank you for the lessons.

About the author



Michael McCafferty, during the Dark Ages of No Pool,
1997, in Paris, atop the Arc du Triomphe

For information about the author, please visit the website <http://MichaelMcCafferty.com>.

[Other books by Michael McCafferty.](#)

Email the author at FastMikie@gmail.com.

If you have enjoyed this little book, the author asks that you consider a donation to further research on a cure for paralysis caused by spinal injury, especially the good work being done at [Rutgers University, Spinal Cord Injury Project](#). Thank you.



Figure 2 The table at FastMikie's Fun House, Del Mar, California