

SIMPLY THE BEST

A BIOGRAPHY OF
RONNIE O'SULLIVAN



CLIVE EVERTON

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C L I V E E V E R T O N



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Chapter 1

[1991]

ON 12 October 1991, Ronnie O’Sullivan was playing in a tournament in Amsterdam while his father, Ronnie senior, was enjoying an increasingly raucous night out at Stocks, a nightclub in the King’s Road, Chelsea. It was the date on which his life was to change irrevocably.

‘Big Ronnie’, as he was sometimes known in reference not to his sleek figure but to his professional reputation, went to Stocks with Edward O’Brien. At a nearby table there was a birthday party for Angela Mills, a former girlfriend of Charlie Kray, brother of the notorious Kray twins, Reg and Ronnie, who had been locked away for many years for murder, extortion and various other crimes.

The trouble started, a court heard a year later, when Ronnie senior and O’Brien started singing football songs and making abusive comments that included racial taunts

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directed at Bruce Bryan, formerly Charlie Kray's driver, and his younger brother, Kelvin.

Kelvin Bryan was to state that he and his brother were out with four girls when, late in the evening, O'Sullivan and O'Brien approached their table, trying to chat up the girls and waving a £250 drinks bill 'under their noses to be flash'.

'Then they started getting nasty and called one of the girls a nigger lover and started taunting us with "you black cunts" and "nigger, nigger, nigger".'

'They said "who do you think you are, coming in here with four white girls? Do you think you're Nigel Benn or something?"'

'One of the girls was slapped in the face. There was a lot of panic and people started running away.'

'Then O'Sullivan produced a [six-inch] hunting knife and stabbed my brother. I smashed a [champagne] bottle over his head to get him away from Bruce. Then he stabbed me in the chest and stomach.'

'I could see Bruce was badly injured, there was blood everywhere. He staggered to the door to escape and when I got outside he was slumped to his knees. I screamed at him to run but he just looked at me and said: "I'm finished. I'm dying".'

'I held him in my arms. He shook his head one last time and died.'

'When O'Sullivan came out, he kicked Bruce in the head as he lay dead on the ground.'

The O'Sullivan family's version, as Ronnie was given to believe and as he described it in his first autobiography, was that Ronnie senior and O'Brien had been arguing over who would pay their bill and that the Bryan brothers misunderstood and thought they were refusing to pay at all. A row started in which one of the brothers picked up an ashtray. In protecting himself, two of Ronnie senior's fingers were severed by the ashtray as it broke and the other brother struck him with a champagne bottle.

'Dad then picked up a knife that was on the side of the bar and that was it,' Ronnie was quoted as saying.

This version of events was never to be tested in court because Ronnie senior declined to give evidence in his own defence, so what a six-inch hunting knife was doing on the side of the bar in the first place was a question that did not arise.

After the murder incident, Ronnie senior spent four days in hospital. Understandably, the family tried to shield young Ronnie from the unpalatable facts and sent him out to the World Amateur Championship in Bangkok a few days earlier than planned. Johnny O'Brien, Edward's brother, who had been sent along as Ronnie's minder, was no doubt worried about the trouble his brother was in and did not prove to be a source of emotional support when Maria O'Sullivan rang late one night to tell her son that Ronnie senior, as feared, had been arrested and charged with murder.

Young Ronnie was understandably shattered, although curiously it did not affect his game immediately. He was a

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hot favourite for the title and continued to brush aside all his opponents in his round-robin group. There was a Volvo on offer for a 147 break and he was not far from claiming it until he missed a double after potting 13 red/blacks.

Perhaps his matches were refuges in which he did not need to think about his father's situation but the dam of his emotions collapsed in the last 16, the first round of the knock-out phase. He could not keep his concentration together and from 4-2 up lost 5-4 to a capable but not outstanding Welshman David Bell. His dominant emotion was guilt that in some way he had let his father down. This was to be a recurrent theme during the 18 years' imprisonment to which he was to be sentenced. He wanted to win as much, probably more, to boost his father's morale than he did for his own sake.

Back in England, there was further trauma. Straight off the plane, he visited Brixton prison and there was his father in prison uniform looking as rough and unhealthy as any other inmate. Maria O'Sullivan held things together; Ronnie's school, Wanstead High, agreed to let him have time off. He was in his GCSE year but never went back. Snooker and the exhilaration of his relationship with his first real girlfriend kept his spirits up and overcame for a while the sense that a shadow was creeping over what had always been his normal, carefree life. Emotionally, this shadow was to become a darkness that he had never known existed.

Chapter 2

[1975–91]

THE O’Sullivans came from tough stock. Micky O’Sullivan, Ronnie’s grandfather, was a boxer, as were his brothers, Danny, who was British bantamweight champion from 1949–51, and Dickie, who was known as ‘The Toy Bulldog’. Boxing circles knew them as The Fighting O’Sullivans.

Ronnie’s father was a chef and his mother, Maria, a chalet maid when they met at Butlins. They were soon married, she at 17, he at 18. They lived in Dudley, West Midlands, near Maria’s family, the Catalanos, whose main business was ice cream. Maria Catalano, Ronnie’s cousin, has been one of the top female snooker players for several years.

Ronnie was born in Wordsley Hospital, Stourbridge on 5 December 1975. His parents wanted to be in London, put their names down for a council flat and secured one on a notoriously grim estate in Dalston. Both Ronnie senior and

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Maria cleaned cars in a car park in Wardour Street, Soho. Both soon had second jobs, Ronnie senior in a sex shop, Maria as a waitress. Until he was about seven years old, Ronnie himself saw little of his parents because they were always working. Often, he felt separation from them keenly, though this was to prove no preparation for the long, enforced absence of his father that was to come later.

When Ronnie senior opened his own sex shop, it turned over £360,000 in its first year. Financially, he was on his way. Through his company, Ballaction, he had built an empire of 20 shops by the time he was jailed in 1992.

Much of the stock was kept in the garage at home. 'When I was 11, I'd be in the garage saying: "What's this then? This is great.'" According to Ronnie, some tapes in luridly promising boxes were actually blank, whether by accident or design. These sold at £50 each but it was correctly assumed that embarrassment would deter purchasers from demanding refunds.

It did not strike Ronnie that this was an unorthodox childhood: 'My dad wasn't breaking any laws. All he was doing was putting dinner on the table for his kids. He just wanted to be a family man.'

As many players have, Ronnie took to snooker when he was given an undersized table for Christmas. When he was eight, his father, now flush with cash, built a snooker room for him at the bottom of the garden in the large house to which they had moved in Chigwell. He made his first century, 117, when he was ten, but regardless of his exceptional degree of

hand-eye co-ordination and instinct for the game, Ronnie has on occasion emphasised how hard he has still had to work on his craft.

Virtually every moment he was not at school, Ronnie could be found in snooker clubs in Barking and Ilford. His father made it clear that he was not there to mess about. If he was going to make something of his life through his exceptional natural talent, he would not do so by playing cards or the fruit machines.

From an early age, Ronnie bore a heavy burden of expectation: 'I was meant to be the youngest ever world champion from the age of 11 or 12,' he said in a BBC interview. The corollary that loomed large in Ronnie's mind was that anything less than this was failure: 'It was obsessive but I think you need to be.

'It was inbred, y'know, get up, go for a run, get down the club in the morning, bottle up and get on the table, because I wanted to feel I was putting my part in. When I had a bit of time and I could help brush tables, I did it. When the girls behind the bar needed helping out, I'd do it, so I started work a lot earlier than most people start. I started my career when I was eight.'

For parents of talented children, there is often a fine line between keeping them focused on the field in which they excel and force-feeding them to the extent that they want to give it up. The O'Sullivans seem to have handled it about right and young Ronnie, of course, would never have persisted unless he had been fascinated by the game and the promise

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of what it could deliver, not only financially but in terms of fame and satisfaction.

The only problem he had with his father that was to have long-lasting effects was that he was extremely sparing with his praise. Victories were immediately brushed aside: the next match was always more important than the last; not a bad maxim up to a point, except that it seemed to breed an excessively self-critical attitude in Ronnie. He was to set himself virtually impossible standards, even for him, and punish himself with criticism if he fell short of them.

When he was ten, Ronnie was selected to play for England in the Junior Home Internationals at Pontins, Prestatyn in a week that also hosted open and junior events, attracting the better part of a thousand entries in all. Ronnie was lively, cheeky, naughty, certainly not above flicking beans off his plate or throwing bread rolls. Getting into an altercation with an older boy, he threw a glass of coke over him and ran. He threw the glass on the floor to slow down his pursuer but was reported by an elderly lady, who thought he had thrown the glass at her. Ronnie was expelled from the site forthwith and suffered his first but by no means last official disciplinary sanction, suspended for a year by the English national governing body. Eloquently represented by his father, he appealed and the ban was reduced to six months.

The precocity of his talent soon meant that Ronnie tended to have few friends his own age. He won his first pro-am – an event held in a single day, often with a late-night finish, in which amateurs and low-ranked professionals competed –

when he was 12. Not much later, his prize money earnings were annually well into five figures. The best times were when his father, as fathers do, ferried him here, there and everywhere. At other times, he was with 'mates', all older than him.

When Neal Foulds, then a top-eight player, first saw him at Pontins he thought he was 'ridiculously good' and was not looking forward to playing him in the tournament: 'I didn't want to lose to a 12-year-old, even giving him 21 start.' In fact, Foulds won 4-1.

Ronnie senior realised as his son grew up that he needed the best quality of practice opponent he could find. Ken Doherty, six years older than Ronnie, was Irish amateur, world under-21 and world amateur champion. In 1997, he was to become world champion at the Crucible. His heart was in Dublin but he too needed better day-to-day practice opposition and moved with some less talented Irish hopefuls to Ilford, where he and Ronnie frequently practised together.

Sometimes Ronnie senior would send a taxi to pick him up to be driven to the O'Sullivan home to play on Ronnie's table. One day, when Ken beat him 10-2, Ronnie said that he had had enough and had to do his homework. Ken went outside to his taxi but returned when he realised he had forgotten his cue towel. There was Ronnie practising, homework or not.

'He hadn't liked losing but he couldn't stop playing,' Ken recalled.

The 12-year-old Ronnie was, Ken said, 'spoilt rotten'. Everything was laid on a plate for him, except his father's

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praise. In a few years, Ronnie and Ken drifted apart and later became rivals. 'He got in with the wrong people, got into drugs and wasn't a very nice person for a while. I didn't speak to him for a couple of years over an incident with a girlfriend of mine but we eventually patched it up.'

Ken found Ronnie senior, as most did, a mixture; 'flash and cocky but also funny and warm, the sort of person you'd be a bit wary of but also happy to be friends with and have him looking out for you'. Very generous with money, Ronnie senior helped out many a young snooker hopeful without wanting to be repaid, although violence sometimes came to the surface.

Mark King, who was to achieve a career-best ranking of eleventh, was another Essex boy, 18 months older than Ronnie, hoping to make it in snooker. His father, Bill, once admonished Ronnie for some misdemeanour or other and was promptly knocked to the floor by Ronnie senior.

One day, Ronnie came home from school with a bloodied nose from a playground scrap. Next day, his father was waiting with a baseball bat for the boy who had inflicted it. He did not use it but it nevertheless sent a message.

Ronnie was naturally bright, often producing a vivid turn of phrase, but school interested him only sporadically. Beyond the basics, and like many others, he could not immediately see what education was for since he was going to be a professional snooker player anyway. He was a moderately talented footballer, good enough to train later with Tottenham Hotspur and Leyton Orient without making a fool of himself, and at the instigation of his father,

who appreciated the importance of fitness even for a not very aerobic sport like snooker, he was a dedicated runner.

One of his school friends, two years ahead of him, was Andy Goldstein, a useful player himself and subsequently a talented television and radio sports presenter.

‘When he was about 15, I used to drive Ronnie to Ilford [Snooker Club]. One night, he was on a maximum. He got to 140, finished straight on the black, about nine inches behind it – and started pulling the balls out of the pockets for the next frame.’ What was he doing? What about the 147?

‘Not boastfully at all but just very matter of fact, Ronnie said, “I wasn’t going to miss it, was I?”’

In February 1991, Barry Hearn promoted a £1m World Masters tournament that included a world under-16 Junior Masters. Its field of 32 included three future world champions, Ronnie, John Higgins and Mark Williams, and several others who became respected professionals. Ronnie almost did not get to the starting line. He was sitting at home believing that his first match was the next day when a phone call abruptly convinced him otherwise. In best Formula One fashion, his father drove his Mercedes to the National Exhibition Centre on the south side of Birmingham so that Ronnie made the deadline with just a few minutes to spare. Only 38 minutes later, he was rounding off his 3-0 first-round win with a break of 106, the highest of the competition. Foreshadowing the countless battles they were to have as professionals, he lost 5-4 in the quarter-finals to Higgins, who beat Williams 6-1 in the final.

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Shortly afterwards, in the quarter-finals of the Southern section of the English Amateur Championship at Aldershot, while still only 15, Ronnie became the youngest player and only the third amateur to make a 147 in competition.

When he won the tournament, *Snooker Scene* wrote: 'Twice British under-16 champion, it has become apparent since his first appearance on the scene at the age of nine that O'Sullivan is in the [Stephen] Hendry/[Jimmy] White class for natural ability. That does not make it certain that he will emulate their achievements but he is certainly proceeding well on schedule and appears to have the necessary attitude and commitment.'

It was widely assumed that Ronnie would beat Steve Judd, the Northern section winner, in the national final at Leeds and thus, at 15 years six months, supersede White as the youngest ever amateur champion, but it did not work out that way.

As a professional, Judd never made the top 100 but in that two-day final he potted like a demon and went 5-1 up. It was 8-8 going into the final session but Judd won its first two frames, was always at least a frame in front thereafter and clinched victory at 13-10.

'I didn't think I could get beat before the final,' Ronnie admitted. '[But] every time I left Steve a pot, he knocked it in. I couldn't get in front the whole match. I'm not too down about the record.'

'I've got a lifetime ahead of me. I've had a lot more good days than bad.'

On his way to Leeds for that final, Ronnie had called in at the Crucible, where the World Championship was under way. Such was his air of confidence and maturity that it was difficult to believe that he was only 15. One incident did strike me, though. Ronnie picked out 15 first-round winners in an accumulator. Common sense argued that he would still win quite heavily if he laid off his selection for the last match, but he let everything ride on it and lost the lot. It was perhaps a demonstration of Ronnie's all-or-nothing temperament, which on the snooker table could be satisfied only by peak performance, not just by winning.

Just before that final, Barry Hearn signed Ronnie to a three-year management contract. The World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA) had announced that the professional ranks would be open to all for the 1991/92 season but, with a minimum age limit of 16, Ronnie was not among the new intake of 443 aspirants.

In the meantime, Ronnie became the youngest ever world under-21 champion in Bangalore, outclassing the opposition in every match except for a tight 5-4 in the last 16 against a New Zealander, Mark Canovan.

Back home and still an amateur, there were tournaments to compete in every weekend. Ronnie won first prizes of £800 at Stevenage and £2,500 at Pontins, Prestatyn and on his form in the early rounds of the World Amateur Championship in Bangkok, Ronnie would have become its youngest ever champion but for real life intervening in the form of his father's arrest.