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SNOOKER'S BAD BOYS

The Feuds, Fist Fights and Fixes

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THE HURRICANE AND FRIENDS

ON SUNDAY nights, with a return to school or work only a sleep away, there was one way to raise a smile.

Spitting Image hit ITV screens at ten o'clock and for half an hour this very adult puppet show pointed a rubbery finger of ridicule at politicians, sportsmen – anyone who deserved it.

One episode featured a letter that read: 'Why can't there be more snooker on television?

'PS: I am mad.'

This was at a time when it was estimated there was more than 80 days' coverage of snooker on the major television channels – and it was popular with viewers.

Only soap opera *Coronation Street* and comedians Morecambe and Wise kept snooker off the top of the television ratings and in July 1987, the *New York Times* described snooker as 'by far the most widely watched sport in Britain'.

Steve Davis explained the appeal. He said: 'It was new on TV. Once they started showing it as a storyline it sucked people into the rest of it. We had a trapped audience.

'No Sunday shopping, nowhere near as many people going out for meals, no internet, no PlayStation. People watched television quite a lot more.'

Until November 1982 there were only three television channels to choose from and viewers had to get off the sofa to change channels.

The Sunday trading laws kept shops shut on the Sabbath, when tournaments usually came to a conclusion, and faced with a choice between an old movie, soap opera and snooker on Sunday afternoons, millions chose snooker.

SNOOKER WAS first seen on television in 1937 when Sydney Lee gave a demonstration at the BBC's studios in Alexandra Palace and later that year, a match between Horace Lindrum and Willie Smith was screened.

The *Radio Times* wrote around that time that over the previous five years, there had been a shift from billiards to snooker in the public's affections.

The feature read: 'It was the custom of the well-known professionals to play an occasional game of snooker after a long session of billiards.

'The game was seldom contested in a really serious spirit, and it seemed merely to act as a sedative after the tenseness of the game that had gone before. Frequently half the onlookers would file out of the hall when the marker announced a snooker match would be played.

'A visit to your local club or hall would have revealed that nine out of every ten tables were devoted to billiards. There was a professional snooker championship, but it was soon over and attracted comparatively little attention.'

The turning point in snooker's fortunes was said to be the introduction of a national amateur competition run on a handicap basis, in 1933. The feature continued: 'To the surprise of everybody concerned, especially the organisers,

there was an entry of no fewer than 5,000, which brought the realisation that snooker had begun to take root.'

Professional snooker still struggled, the writer observing it was 'a periodic game … Without the aid of frequent matches between the well-known players it was impossible to popularise snooker and the game was almost at a standstill until a year or two later when the necessary impetus came in a most unexpected fashion.

'A certain amount of publicity attended the visit to this country of the famous Canadian snooker player, Conrad Stanbury.

'Stanbury was above all a colourful player and as such was a godsend, in that his personality drew attention to the game. In the matter of breaks he was not as good as our own Joe Davis, but his unique strokeplay was all that was necessary to bring in spectators.'

DAVIS WAS born in Whitwell, Derbyshire in April 1901 and learned to play billiards at his family's pub, the Queen's Hotel in Whittington Moor, where he would play before school, during lunch breaks and after school.

His billiards education included coaching sessions with Ernest Rudge in the billiard room he had built at the bottom of his garden, along with hours spent studying Charles Dawson's *Practical Billiards* book. The work paid off and aged 12, Joe made his first century.

Davis took more interest in snooker after taking over the management of a billiard hall in Chesterfield. Although initially unwilling to embrace a sport that he referred to as 'slapdash' in a newspaper article, Davis noticed snooker becoming more popular with his customers.

A pair of billiard traders, George Nelson from Leeds and Bill Camkin from Birmingham, also recognised snooker's possibilities and with their backing, Joe asked the sport's governing body to give their support to the first World Snooker Championship.

Davis won the inaugural event in 1927 – even though he couldn't see properly. He had a lazy right eye, meaning he had to rest his cue on the left-hand side of his chin and line up shots with his left eye.

Encouraged by his world title success, Davis set about raising snooker's standards. Tom Newman's break of 89 in 1919 had stood as snooker's highest recorded break for six years until Davis bettered it with a 96 and by 1933, Davis had raised that to 114, changing the way snooker was played by building breaks around the black ball.

Walter Lindrum, the Australian who had proved to be Davis's master at billiards, was beaten on the snooker table and another challenger came from the same family …

Horace Lindrum, a nephew of Walter, had a vociferous backer in mother Clara, and in 1934 she took her chance to set up a challenge match with Davis.

Joe had lost the World Billiards Championship Final to Walter Lindrum in Australia and was set to return home when Clara challenged him to a snooker match on her son Horace's behalf, saying Davis was 'a phoney' and that even she could beat him.

Davis slapped down a £300 stake that she matched and in front of sell-out crowds in Melbourne, Joe confirmed he was the world's No. 1 with a 42-22 win.

Horace was more competitive in the World Snooker Championship Final in 1936 and edged ahead 27-24. Davis

responded by winning the next ten frames to retain the title and for good measure, he went on to beat Lindrum in the next year's final as well.

Another challenge to Joe's snooker dominance came from his own family.

Joe beat younger brother Fred in the semi-finals in 1939 and in the following year's final, sealed a nail-biting 37-35 win with a break of 101.

Davis found another rival in the North East of England.

THE FIRST 'People's Champion' of cue sports was born in Darlington in January 1886.

Willie Smith would say 'working classes' or the 'average chap' were his biggest supporters.

He played billiards and snooker at a fast pace, had spats with his rivals and took his exhibitions to the country's working men's clubs at a time when most were held at exclusive clubs in London.

But he got it wrong when he claimed the public would never warm to snooker the way they warmed to billiards.

Both sports were a pastime of the elite – to have a table at home was a sign of wealth – and those at the opposite end of the social spectrum who gambled and hustled in smoky taverns and clubs.

The 1969 *Personna Year Book of Sports* referred to the practice of what was known as 'giving a mug a game' in billiard halls during the 1930s.

The book said talented cuemen would 'take on a stranger, assessing his skill, letting him win a good lead, then offer to play for a side bet and the cost of the table hire.

'The stranger usually had a fair run for his money, but if he happened to win, there was liable to be a rough-house between him and the loser's mates. But many a man learned to play billiards this hard way.'

The roots of snooker and billiards are found in the French aristocracy.

Louis XI of France is believed to be the first to have taken balls off the lawn and on to the table in the 15th century, but snooker as we know it first took shape around 400 years later.

In 1875, Sir Neville Chamberlain was an officer in the British Army based in India and would spend rainy afternoons playing variations of billiards, including pyramids, a game which had a pack of 15 reds.

Chamberlain said it was his idea to add more coloured balls and he stumbled upon a name for this new game after a conversation with a fellow officer.

He used the term 'snooker' to describe a first-year cadet lacking in military know-how and after one of his colleagues missed a simple pot, Chamberlain called him, jokingly, 'a snooker'.

To save his friend's embarrassment, Chamberlain decided every one of his group was 'a snooker' because they were all new to the game and quite hopeless at it.

Stories of snooker reached England and billiards champion John Roberts met Chamberlain in India, found out about the new game and took the rules home with him.

It would take time for snooker to replace billiards in the public's affections and Smith became a star of billiards when he handed Australian George Gray a rare defeat in a billiards match in Stockton in 1911.

The press reported it was Gray's first defeat in England, a fact that would have surprised Smith.

He said Gray was 'not a billiards player at all' after beating him.

Smith did things his way. Clive Everton, the esteemed journalist and commentator, wrote that Smith had little regard for the establishment after the billiards authorities declared him a professional at 15, having discovered he accepted expenses for playing at Middlesbrough Conservative Club.

Smith also played the game his way, as Stanley Newman, who twice reached the last four of the World Snooker Championship, recognised in his book *How to Play Snooker.*

Newman observed that Smith 'is the only player in the front rank that cues two or three inches away from the cue ball. That is to say, when he is addressing the ball, the tip of the cue is a ball or more away from the cue ball on the stroke. That is a very unusual idiosyncrasy, but in Smith's case, effective.

'But Willie Smith is a law unto himself, everybody in the world of professional billiards and snooker realises.'

Smith started playing cue sports after his parents took over running the Golden Cock pub in Darlington when he was a boy. Legend has it, Smith was hustling drinkers by the age of ten and he won the World Billiards Championship in 1920.

Melbourne Inman had won the championship six times previously (1908, 1909, 1912, 1913, 1914 and 1919), but in 1920 he didn't enter and was there when Smith won the title to remind him he was 'the undefeated champion'.

Smith retorted, 'Of course you are. If you don't enter, you can't be beaten.'

That was followed by an exchange of views that ended with the players arranging a money match at Thurston's.

From Twickenham, north London, Inman was a character who knew how to get under the skin of his opponents.

He was an aggressive competitor and in the rather more patient and measured Tom Reece, he found a rival.

Reece, previously a promising swimmer, spent five weeks between 3 June and 6 July 1907 compiling a world record break of 499,135. He played an astonishing 249,522 consecutive cannons and there were stories that W. Chapman, his opponent, left days, possibly weeks, before Reece finished his marathon at Burroughes and Watts club in Soho Square.

The public couldn't bear to watch either.

Reece remembered, 'I generally used to play until the audience had gone. One day, though, a fellow played me a dirty trick. He got in the far corner of the room and I went on making hundred after hundred and kept having a look at him, but he never offered to go. At last I felt too tired to go on and so put my cue down and as he still did not move I went and had a look at him. I found him fast asleep.'

Three times Reece met Inman in the final of the World Billiards Championship (1912–14) and each time, Inman won, benefitting from several flukes along the way.

'How did you do that?' asked Reece after he was on the receiving end.

Inman answered, 'I believe you know my terms for tuition, Mr Reece.'

Such exchanges were common during their matches and after them as well.

Following the 1919 final, Lord Alverston, president of the Billiards Association, was about to present Inman with the trophy, days after sentencing Dr Crippen to death for murdering his wife.

Reece piped up: 'Excuse me, My Lord, but if you knew as much as I do about Inman, you would have given Crippen the cup and sentenced Inman to death.'

Inman often upset those he shared a road with as well. He was known as an erratic driver and on one occasion, Inman was driving home from an exhibition and mowed down a row of red lamps.

The nightwatchman went to confront Inman and Inman said, 'I've taken all the reds, where are the bloody colours?'

The possibility of a match between Inman and Smith created huge interest. The public wanted to know whether the current champion or the undefeated champion who preceded him was No. 1 – and they wanted to bet on the outcome as well.

The match was played at Thurston's and they took £1,800, a huge amount for the time.

Inman started as the 11/10 favourite and took a 1,000-point lead – because Smith allowed him to.

Once Smith's supporters had all placed their bets, he started to play to his best and ran out a convincing winner.

This was common in money matches at the time.

The thrashing of Inman made Smith the No. 1 in the eyes of the public, but he chose not to defend his title in 1921.

He felt the championship should be moved to a larger venue. Thurston's only had room for 172 spectators and Smith wanted to fill more seats, more affordably priced for his supporters.

Smith also knew he could make more money playing exhibitions and arranging money matches on his own terms.

Perhaps the greatest rewards would be in a match against his successor as world champion.

Tom Newman was crowned world champion in 1921 in Smith's absence and the public wanted to see them meet to determine the true No. 1.

Smith and Newman faced each other in a series of matches held over a week and presumably both earned well from them.

The one player Smith couldn't beat was Walter Lindrum, who could compile points twice as quickly as Smith using close cannons, nudging his cue ball off the other two for hour after hour.

Smith drifted away from competitions, became embittered and had spats with several players, including Joe Davis.

Davis beat him when they met on the billiards table and the outcome was the same when they met in the final of the World Snooker Championship in both 1933 and 1935.

Davis and Smith became friends and in January 1955, Davis made the first recorded 147 against Smith at Leicester Square Hall.

Smith lived to be 96 years old and never changed his opinion of snooker. Two years before his death in 1982 he was asked about the sport and said, 'They should change the rules – all of them.'

Smith had played exhibitions into his seventies and entertained audiences with stories from his colourful past.

He remembered an exhibition tour with a player called Diggle, who was convinced he was being followed.

Diggle always kept a gun by the side of his bed and one night, Smith was woken by Diggle shouting, 'They're here, Willie, they're here,' and he fired two shots through the bedroom door before going back to sleep.

Smith stopped playing in 1966, giving his cue to a doctor and never striking a ball again.

JOE DAVIS kept winning the World Snooker Championship until 1946, when he retired.

In retirement, he remained snooker's biggest – and most influential – character. As the head of the Professional Billiards Players' Association, Davis effectively ran snooker and when he fancied it and the rewards were there, he would come out of retirement.

He decided who could turn professional and to preserve snooker's image, he kept out colourful rogues like Pat Houlihan and Dickie Laws, who earned their reputations playing in money matches.

Legend has it, Houlihan was once woken by an associate of the Krays and taken to play Tommy Smithson in a money match. Smithson was later murdered in what the press recorded as 'a gangland slaying'.

The Krays had an interest in snooker after buying the Regal Billiard Hall on Eric Street in Mile End in the east end of London in 1954.

John Pearson wrote of the Regal in his book *The Profession of Violence*: 'Most thieves require a well-run base if they can find it, somewhere they can relax, talk freely, pick up the latest gossip and know they are safe. For them, the billiard hall was perfect …

'Thieves could leave the tools of their trade on the premises; in an emergency the twins might even look after a thief's takings for him … before long the billiard hall was offering criminals a genuine service.

'It was all carefully organised.

'There were lock-up cubicles under the seats for the thieves' tools, stolen goods could be left round the back of the hall …

'The billiard hall was a good receiving ground for criminal information, a word from a fence, a tip-off from a taxi driver, a telephone call from a barman.'

In such places, Houlihan made his living.

Jean Rafferty wrote in *The Cruel Game*: 'In the days before television made snooker a game people actually knew about, Pat was a hustler, who travelled all round the country pretending to be a worse player than he was and relieving people of the trouble of having to carry their money around with them.'

Houlihan, from Deptford in south-east London, said: 'What I used to do was walk in, go up to the counter and say: "Cup of tea please and I'll have a roll." And then all I'd do was pull out a few quid and all of a sudden you've got people coming up to you going: "All right? Fancy a game?" And I'd say: "Nah" and I'd sit down and have my tea and then some fella would say: "Anybody else?" and I'd say: "All right, then."

'I'd let them win for not a lot of money and then they're thinking, "This is all right," and then I'd start coming back. Once a fella said to me: "Want two quid on it? I'll give you a 16-point start." I ended up getting £140 off him, which was a lot of money in those days.'

There was no money to be made in professional snooker and anyway, they wouldn't have Houlihan.

His wasn't the image Davis wanted for his sport. 'It was very hard to turn pro,' said Houlihan. 'It was sewn up in them days.

'Joe Davis was kingpin and his word was bond. When he said "Yes" or "No" that was it.'

Such was his approach to snooker, Houlihan was only ever going to hear 'No'.

He looked to make money from snooker when there was no money to be made. 'You can't eat trophies,' he said once and Houlihan had a family to feed.

He knew that sometimes, losing was good for business. One promoter described Houlihan as 'crooked as a donkey's hind leg' after he lost 'deliberately'.

Houlihan would practise missing, but when he played to win, he could be unstoppable. He was recorded making a century in under four minutes and told *The Observer* in 2002: 'I gave them 100-plus starts, played left-handed, one-handed … I played a fella for money with the bottom of my cue.

'I had the flair. I was very fast.'

Everyone wanted to watch him. 'I was the draw in them days,' said Houlihan. 'I remember once playing in the Burroughes Hall in Soho Square. They had to have two police cars to control the crowds. I couldn't even get myself in. I had to force my way through the crowd. I always got a good living then. If I didn't in London, I went elsewhere.

'Once, someone suggested going to Jersey, but when I got there, I was known. There was nothing for me in Jersey, but I used to have a good life going around. You always ended up in the pub. You'd play snooker in the afternoon and then have a nice drink in the evening.'

Contemporaries remembered Houlihan would drink and seldom eat.

ASKED IN 1959 about the future of professional snooker, Fred Davis replied: 'It has no future.'

At the time there were only a handful of professional players – and most of them didn't need snooker.

Fred got an income from the family farm, Rex Williams had a share in the family's printing business and Jack Rea brought in money as a comedian.

As world champion for 11 years, John Pulman was able to scrape a living from exhibitions, but from 1957 to 1964 he went unchallenged as world champion.

Pulman, a tall, bespectacled Devonian, was a character, as Fred Davis remembered in his book *Talking Snooker*.

He wrote: 'Fiery and temperamental in that his language was inclined to go over the edge if things were not going well … some spectators found John more entertaining when things were going badly than well because they were more likely to see fireworks.

'He was never slow to show his displeasure at any distraction: a spectator moving, blowing his nose, whispering to a friend or – surely a case for the death penalty – eating a bag of crisps.

'As a young player, he was inclined to be impetuous. Many was the time when, having been 40 or 50 in front with three or four reds left, he would chance a pot with the odds more in favour of fencing for a better opening, only to miss the pot and leave his opponent the opportunity to clear the table.

'On top of his natural impatience, then, would be the fury and frustration of having lost a frame he knew he should have won.'

Pulman responded: 'I am convinced that [to succeed at snooker] you must have the temperament whereby you will get annoyed with yourself when you are not playing as well as you should.

'The player who gets annoyed with himself will tend to force himself to play better through sheer grit and

determination. I am sure that only such a person can be a champion.'

Nobody knew Pulman better than Davis, on the table at least.

They contested five World Championship finals. Pulman won three, including the classic 1965 final, played over the best of 73 frames over six days at Burroughes Hall in Soho Square.

At 36-35 behind, Pulman was only one frame from defeat, but he sent the match into a deciding 73rd frame with breaks of 27 and 23.

Davis made the first mistake in the decider, letting Pulman in for a break of 32. Another run of 33 took Pulman 40 points clear and with only four colours remaining, the World Championship was his.

The result barely made any newspaper headlines and didn't make Pulman much money either.

Once he played an impressive shot at an exhibition and someone said: 'He isn't world champion for nothing.'

'Next to nothing,' quipped Pulman instantly.

Pulman was known for his wit.

Up against a slow player, he would say, 'If you played him in a week's match, he'd take a fortnight,' and if Pulman was on the receiving end of a fluke he would say, 'If he tossed up a penny, it'd come down half a crown.'

He put down one opponent by saying: 'The last time he beat me, a star appeared in the East.'

Pulman was also happy to criticise the playing conditions, saying once: 'You need a map from the AA to play on this table.'

No wonder Alex Higgins would sneak into a pub in the Royal Arcade in Belfast when underage whenever Pulman was playing on television and watch.

Television appearances were rare, however.

ITV expressed an interest in snooker in 1961, screening a tournament that brought together four amateurs and four professionals, and three years later, coverage of the Northern final of the English Amateur Championships gave the public their first sight of future world champion John Spencer.

In an attempt to ensure continued television coverage, the amateur sport's governing body encouraged players to ensure matches went to a deciding frame to guarantee excitement and that revelation damaged snooker's credibility and led to the sport disappearing from ITV's schedules.

Joe Davis negotiated with the BBC and they would screen him playing frames against fellow professionals. On other occasions, the balls would be spread invitingly and Davis would be asked to make the biggest break possible in two minutes.

Pulman was once filmed making a century break, but mostly, his talents went unrecognised.

Pulman had come to prominence in snooker circles when winning the English Amateur Championship in 1946 at the first attempt at the age of 22.

That secured the support of Bill Lampard, a baker and confectioner who built a billiard room at his house, where Pulman stayed. The relationship apparently broke down after Lampard found Pulman in bed with his wife.

Pulman was known as a womaniser and drinker and following his divorce in the late 1970s, he was declared bankrupt with debts of £5,916.

He was left living in a hotel and spent six months in hospital after being knocked down by a London bus.