

A close-up photograph of a man with glasses and a cigarette in his mouth, leaning over a snooker table. He is holding a cue stick, and the background is blurred, showing a dimly lit room. The overall color palette is dark with a greenish tint.

THE NATURAL

The Story of
PATSY HOULIHAN

the Greatest
Snooker Player
You Never Saw

Foreword by
Jimmy White MBE

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Chapter 1

It's time

WHERE DO obsessions begin?

For me it was in 1998. The source? A single sentence in Jimmy White's newly released autobiography *Behind the White Ball* in which my beloved 'Whirlwind' declared, 'I rate Charlie Poole, Patsy Houlihan and Alex Higgins as the three greatest snooker players I've ever seen.'

I was intrigued. Alex Higgins – of course – I knew. But Charlie Poole? Patsy Houlihan? As a child of the 1980s I'd spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours watching snooker on television – most of them Jimmy White matches – and I'd never heard of either of these players. The Internet was somewhat primitive and limited back then and searches for 'Patsy Houlihan' and 'Charlie Poole' returned scant information. I did manage to get hold of a second-hand copy of a snooker coaching book that Jimmy had written with Charlie Poole though. Truth be told, it was informative but a bit dry. If his prose was a reflection of Poole then he wasn't for me. (Later I'd discover Charlie was a great character in his own right, but that's a story for another day.)

My sporting affections have always tended towards creative and maverick talents – one reason among many why Jimmy was my hero. From the romantic, Celtic undertones of his name, Patsy Houlihan sounded to me like he would be just such a maverick too, and probably a hard-living one at that. Patsy's unknown visage soon inhabited my subconscious. When I played snooker at Jono's in Camberwell Green or in the Archway snooker centre he was a frequent fantasy opponent

on those days when I played alone, idling away sleepy weekends or lonely week nights, stumbling home half drunk, lungs burning as the sunlight began to pierce the horizon, illuminating the early morning detritus of the inner city.

Of the real Houlihan, however, I could find no information, no trace. Perhaps, I pondered, he didn't even exist. Perhaps, like Keyser Soze, he was more myth than man. Or maybe his existence was a wheeze, a practical joke inserted into his book by Jimmy – like the story of him making a century with a walking stick. Nevertheless, I filed the name of 'Patsy Houlihan' away for further use and reference – perhaps in some future pub quiz I attended there might be a question about which three snooker players Jimmy White rated as the best ever. Granted, it would be quite an obscure question, but you never know with pub quizzes.

Four years later – on Sunday 5, May 2002 to be exact – cigarette hanging from my mouth and morning coffee steaming on my desk, I was idly browsing through the day's papers when I came across an article by one of my favourite writers, Jonathan Rendall, in the much-missed *Observer Sports Monthly*. 'The Great Unknown' it was titled. With a gasp of recognition, I realised it was a whole feature about Patsy Houlihan. Or maybe it was spelt 'Hoolihan'? That's how Rendall and *The Observer* spelt it anyway.

Rendall had been told about Houlihan/Hoolihan by Jimmy White and had tracked him down to a pub in Deptford. Deptford! Just down the road from Camberwell where I had lived all my life! This was momentous news. Maybe I'd sat on the same bus as Houlihan, or even played him without knowing it on one of my youthful forays to the New Cross Inn to play pool. Wasn't there an old geezer there that night when I was in untouchable form and won ten matches on the spin? The night when my mate Row announced to the pub that I was from King's Lynn and I was nicknamed 'The Norfolk Hustler' (I've never been to King's Lynn in my life, of course)? The night I'd staggered home feeling invincible, thinking that maybe I could make my living as a pool hustler?

Houlihan and his life story – as recounted in Rendall's spare but romantic prose – did not disappoint. Here was a maverick par

excellence, just my type. A brilliant amateur in the 1950s and '60s, Houlihan had won every honour going in the unpaid ranks, while working in the Deptford docks by day. However, he'd been blocked from turning pro by the tyrannical Joe Davis, the 15-time world snooker champion who controlled professional snooker for decades.

So – to make ends meet – Houlihan became a hustler. The fastest cue man in the north, east, south or west, capable of knocking in a century in less than four minutes. He'd travelled up and down the country playing for money, leaving a trail of bewildered punters in his wake when he departed, pound notes stuffed into his pockets. His name was spoken of in hushed whispers at bars, pubs and snooker halls across the land and his exploits recounted with awe. He'd also picked up a criminal record at some point, which hadn't done his chances of being accepted in the puritanical world of professional snooker much good. By the time he was finally admitted to the pros in the 1970s he was past his best and plagued with eyesight problems.

By a quirk of fate, reading Rendall's article coincided with me starting to write a snooker book with my friend Paul Gadsby. Entitled *Masters of the Baize*, it was a series of potted biographies of former snooker world champions. As part of my research, I began frequenting the British Newspaper Library in Colindale and when I should have been searching for newspaper clippings about Terry Griffiths or Walter Donaldson I instead found myself scouring back issues of *The Billiard Player* for mentions of Patsy Houlihan. I found reports of his sensational dominance of the London section of the English Amateur Championship in the 1950s and '60s. I found details of his wins against future world champions Ray Reardon and John Spencer en route to winning the national amateur title in 1965. I even found photos of Patsy, who turned out to be a slim, almost diminutive figure with matinee idol looks, immaculately groomed hair and a wry, cheeky smile.

After *Masters of the Baize* was published my plan was to write a social history of the south London snooker scene. Such a book would enable me to write about Jimmy White and Patsy, you see. So I made it my mission to track both men down. Jimmy was a straightforward find. I grabbed a few words with him at a media event on the Haymarket

where he was playing an exhibition frame against Paul Hunter. I asked him about Houlihan as he sat playing cards after his media duties were complete.

For a moment, Jimmy stopped rifling through his hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades and – with a look of utter sincerity on his face – looked me dead in the eyes.

‘Patsy Houlihan,’ he intoned, ‘was the greatest snooker player I’ve ever seen in my life.’

Next I tried to find Houlihan himself. Rendall had great trouble tracking him down – relying on a shadowy trail over several weeks gleaned from chatting to contacts in various Deptford boozers. For me it proved somewhat easier. I opened the local phone book and found there was just one ‘P. Houlihan’ listed living in Deptford. (Maybe Rendall never looked in the phone book? Perhaps that was too prosaic a route for such a romantic.)

I rang the number and held my breath. To my surprise, a pleasant female voice, earthy in its south London tones, answered.

‘Hello?’ the voice said.

Sensing a dead end, I recited my pre-prepared patter. ‘My name’s Luke Williams. I’m a local writer and I’m trying to trace a Mr Patrick Houlihan who was a snooker player. This might not be the right number ...’

‘Oh, it is, this is his number,’ the voice replied, matter-of-fact, but still polite.

‘Great. Well, I was hoping it might be possible to arrange a meeting with Mr Houlihan. I’m writing a book you see and ...’

‘Well, the thing is he’s in bed, you see. Has been for over a year.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’ll see what he says though. He’s got a phone in there. Hang on.’

A pause of a few seconds. Then another voice, equally earthy.

‘How can I help you?’

‘My name’s Luke Williams and I’m a local writer. I’ve been researching your career for a book I’m writing about snooker in south London. I wondered if you might like to meet me to talk about your career?’

‘Well, I’d love to, mate, but the thing is I’m laid up in bed.’

'I understand,' I replied. Then, feeling shamefully intrusive and pushy, I persevered. 'Maybe if I wrote to you and sent you some questions?'

'Yeah, all right drop me a line, that'll be grand.'

Patsy dictated his address. I had it already from the phone book but I recorded it carefully in my notebook anyway.

'Thanks very much, Mr Houlihan. You might be interested to know that I spoke to Jimmy White last year and he told me you were the greatest snooker player he's ever seen.'

There was a pause.

'My old friend Jimmy,' Patsy said, seeming to clear a lump from his throat. 'He's a good lad.'

'Thanks again for speaking to me Mr Houlihan. Goodbye.'

'Ta-da.'

I photocopied the pile of clippings I'd found about Patsy's career in Colindale. I posted them to him, along with a letter and list of questions I wanted to ask him.

Nothing came back.

A few weeks later I decided to call on Patsy at home. Say hello. See if he had received the clippings. I rang the doorbell of his flat on the ground floor of a small four-storey block of flats made of sandy brickwork in Deptford. I had the impression that someone was at home. But no one answered.

I trudged home, disappointed.

A few weeks later I heard the news.

On 8 November 2006, the day after his 77th birthday, Patsy Houlihan had died.

* * *

I didn't get to meet Patsy Houlihan, but I couldn't let his death go unnoticed. I called Jimmy White who talked to me about his memories of Patsy. And then, through Patsy's phone number, I got hold of his daughter, Patricia, known to all and sundry as Patsy Girl. She agreed to meet me in a pub she ran in Charlton called the White Horse.

Full of life, colour and character and no gastrogrub in sight, the White Horse was what my old man would have called a 'proper pub'.

Patsy Girl and I sat and we talked. Initially I sensed she was a bit suspicious. I was a journalist after all and the family had been stung by an article by Ian Wooldridge in the *Daily Mail* about Patsy's death which claimed he was once imprisoned for house-breaking. He'd never have done that. It's against the old south-east London code.

Her brother Patsy Boy also joined us. He was initially wary too, but we all warmed up after a few drinks and a few stories, and in between sips of vodka and drags on my roll-ups I spoke animatedly and – OK, yes – a bit drunkenly about how amazing Patsy's life story was, how he deserved more recognition. How we couldn't let his death pass without trying to make a bit of a fuss.

In the next few weeks *The Guardian* ran a short obituary I'd written of Patsy and Clive Everton published an appreciation I'd written in *Snooker Scene* magazine. Mission accomplished? Not really. Two articles – one barely 300 words long – to mark Patsy's life seemed all too scant considering the things he achieved, the scrapes he was involved in, the stories everyone has to tell about him and the esteem so many held him in.

One day, I told myself, I'll write a whole book about Patsy Houlihan. And then everyone will know how special he was.

* * *

Fourteen years pass. I move from Camberwell in the inner city to where the south London suburbs meet rural Surrey. One day I'm unpacking some old boxes. Out of one of them my Patsy Houlihan file comes tumbling out, along with a whole host of memories of days long gone.

I'm now 44. No longer a young man entranced by the whispers and myths surrounding a snooker legend, but a middle-aged man aware of his own mortality and the rapidly diminishing sands of time.

It's time, I tell myself.

I track down Patsy Girl via Facebook. We talk like old friends. Another writer has been sniffing around, she admits, so it's fortunate that I got in touch when I did.

'Go with me and I'll do your dad justice,' I promise her.

'My heart is telling me to go with you,' she tells me.

IT'S TIME

I wouldn't do it without her blessing, you see, and once she gives it, I sit down and start writing.

And I vow I won't stop until the story of Patsy Houlihan – the greatest snooker player most people never saw – is written in full.