



Brian Watson: Stuff of inspiration found at Salem pool hall

Brian T. Watson

I'm a barely passable pool player.

For two years during junior high school, I played the game nearly every afternoon on a beautiful, dead-level, tournament-grade table that my best friend's father had purchased from a drug store that had gone out of business. I had just begun to be proficient when my family moved, thus ending my pool career and denying me the opportunity to fully develop a misspent youth.

Last year, after a four-decade hiatus — prodded by my college-age son and his delighted discovery of the game — I resumed my efforts at the tables.

I had been practicing regularly for a few months at Bay State Billiards in Salem when I met Wayne Armstrong, the owner of the place. His story was compelling, and it has much to say about pool, character, goals, diligence and the pursuit of excellence.

Armstrong grew up on Ward Street, practically right across the way from the Cue and Billiard Lounge, a 15-table pool hall then located on Lafayette Street. As a teenager he would sweep the floors and clean the tables in return for free time with a cue stick. By the time he graduated from Salem High in 1975, he was a solidly average player with a bug for the game and a clear grasp of the skills he needed to master.

Impressed by the career path that military service offered, Armstrong enlisted in the Marines and spent four years stationed at Camp Geiger, adjacent to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. During that time, every evening for four or five hours, he shot pool and honed his play at a local club just off the base.

Armstrong became a student of the game. He practiced spins, carom shots and breaks, and learned the myriad of ways the balls interact on a pool table. He mastered the various games played and developed flawless strategy skills.

Armstrong became so good and so confident that he started playing for money. Gambling for \$8 or \$10 per game of 9-ball, eventually he was making a steady \$200 to \$400 per week. On a big night, he might pull in \$300. And those were 1978 dollars.

He told me that he typically played five to seven people a night. Sometimes they knew his reputation, sometimes not. Civilians saw his flat-top, presumed he was an easy mark — as soldiers often are — and figured they'd win. He had stamina: He could play 15 games an hour for five hours.

The middle two years of his service stint, he was the pool champion of the entire 2nd Marine Division. He probably would have won his last year there too, but was away on maneuvers.

Armstrong might have stayed longer in the service, but suffered a serious ankle injury at the end of his tour. Facing assignment to a new unit, he decided to return to Salem where the owner of the pool hall that he had learned in was willing to sell him the business.

The six years that Armstrong owned the Cue and Billiard were, by his own admission, the peak of his pool career. Coming off four years of non-stop play and physically at his sharpest, he could have dedicated himself to turning professional.

But he wanted to run the pool room, and its operation required attention that precluded the pro circuit. When he got married in 1983 and had a son, he realized that he needed more security and regular hours than the hall afforded, so in 1985 he sold it and became a letter carrier in Lynn.

Seventeen years later, his family grown, circumstances permitted him to repurchase what had become Bay State Billiards. Since 2002, he has been running the place, hosting local tournaments and dispensing helpful pointers if asked.

To see Armstrong shoot pool today is to witness something special.

At 52 he is quiet, modest, and composed, but clearly possessed of the exceptional athlete's drive for excellence and achievement.

Competing most with himself, his concentration and his high expectations for his game are obvious when he is playing seriously.

Pool is a game of touch, control, experience, and confidence. Where the cue ball rolls after it strikes the object ball is as important as its original target. More often than not the cue ball is hit very lightly, with English, and made to stop at a desired spot.

It is having this command of the cue ball that allows a player to "run the table" repeatedly.

I watched Armstrong win in two recent matches. He defeated one opponent eight games to one, needing only 16 shots to do it.

It is clear that he honors every challenger by bringing his utmost focus and craftsmanship to the table. He conveys respect for the discipline needed to excel at the game.

The passion and diligence behind his artistry are inspiring. They are the same qualities that we can apply to all that we aspire to be and do.

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