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CUE MAKER'S CORNER

BY FRED AGNIR

JOHN MADDEN

PROFESSIONAL PLAYER, PROFESSIONAL CUE



There are only a handful of professional-caliber pool players who have made the career transition to cue makers. John "Jack" Madden is one of those few. Although he had a full-time job, he supplemented his income by gambling and entering pool tournaments up and down the western United States.

Born in Staten Island, NY, in 1946 to John and Mary Madden, Jack moved to the Phoenix, AZ, area in 1950. When business at his father's insurance company went sour in New York, the family opted for a change to the west.

Jack met his wife Beverly in 1965 while they were both working at the same restaurant. "She finally agreed to go out with me after I bugged her enough times," he jokes. They married in 1968 and had three children. Their

daughter Chris is an assistant principal in the Phoenix area, their son David is a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles, and their other son, Mark, is a biologist currently on the Phoenix police force. None of them plays pool.

"Their education was very important to me," Jack shares. "I wanted them to have more than what I had."

POOL COMES EARLY

The local Boys Club introduced Jack to the world of pool. "The big boys



got to play on a beautiful Brunswick-Balke-Collander, but they said I was too little to play with them," Jack recalls. He was relegated to play on a smaller cardboard pool table. But after hours, he was allowed to hit the balls around on the fancier tables as long as none of the bigger boys was around. Jack was so fascinated by the game that

great players. I just worked on my ability until I was eighteen. When I got older, I decided to pursue pool playing," he says.

After high school, Jack went to a trade school and became an electrician. He worked for the local union. When work dried up in Phoenix, Jack would travel to other job sites in different states. "I would send my paycheck home to Beverly, so I would have to play pool for money so I could live," Jack says. "Bev would keep an eye out on the job market in Phoenix while I worked on the road."

PROFESSIONAL PLAYER ON THE ROAD

His days of playing pool on the road are replete with gambling stories. He reminisces about "Toupee" Jay Helfert, who would come into a pool hall in disguise. "He'd have a disguise complete with a toupee, and then he'd leave and come back in a completely different disguise."

He also described a run-in with legendary player U.J. Puckett. U.J had come into the poolroom wearing bib

at the tender age of 10, he decided to build his first cue. With the help of the manager of the Club, Jack spent the summer building a cue using the Boys Club's wood shop.

There were plenty of good-to-great players that frequented the local Phoenix pool hall. Every weekend, Jack would spend both days absorbing as much as he could. Willie Mosconi was one of those frequent players, although he resided in New Jersey. "I had a good basis to start and was always around



overalls and a handkerchief soaked in whiskey hanging out his back pocket. He would dab his mouth with that handkerchief to give the illusion that he was drunk. He also had a hundred-dollar bill coming out of his bib pocket with the corner of the bill stapled to his overalls. In a session that Jack was up on him, the much larger U.J. went belly-to-belly with Jack and challenged him

to a higher stake match. Almost succumbing to bravado, Jack noticed U.J.'s shoes: clean and pristine, not a pair meant to be on such a country bumpkin. "Mister," Jack said, "you almost got me!" Twenty-five years later, U.J. would recall the meeting, much to Jack's surprise.

Jack's renowned skills earned him a verbal recommendation from famed Babe Thomson to Terry

Stonier to enter Tony's World 9-Ball Championship in Sacramento, CA, a tournament filled with the world's greatest 9-ball players. His biggest tournament accomplishment, Jack played and finished third behind The "Iceman" Larry Hubbart and "Earthquake" Keith McCready, who won the event. Because of his showing, Jack was invited to Barry Behrman's U.S.

Open 9-Ball Championships in Virginia, where Jack would eventually meet with most of the East Coast professionals, such as Mike Sigel and Ray Martin.

After years on and off the professional pool player's road, Bev reported to Jack that work in Phoenix was picking back up and that it was time Jack spent more time at home. And so Jack went home, never to return to the road life.

SETTLING INTO CUE-MAKING

He still played pool often, as he had a table in the house and he had joined a pool league. Wanting to do some minor tip and shaft work at home, Jack bought a precision lathe to more readily accomplish those tasks. Soon, league members began hiring him to install tips. It snowballed from there.

He began purchasing additional equipment as repair orders advanced. Deciding to put an effort into building as well as repairing cues, Jack sought to buy equipment to taper shafts. He visited cue maker John Robinson with hopes of buying the equipment from him. When Robinson realized that Jack had intentions of becoming a cue maker, he quickly locked up the

shop, refusing to show Jack anything. But Jack charmed him into further discussion, and John agreed to sell a shaft-turning setup for \$800. Madden, in turn, gave Robinson a check for \$1,200, several hundred more than what Robinson has asked. Upon discovering that Madden had given him too much money, Robinson asked him about it. "I told him it seemed worth that much, and I wasn't too smart like that," jokes Jack, "and that if I ran into any



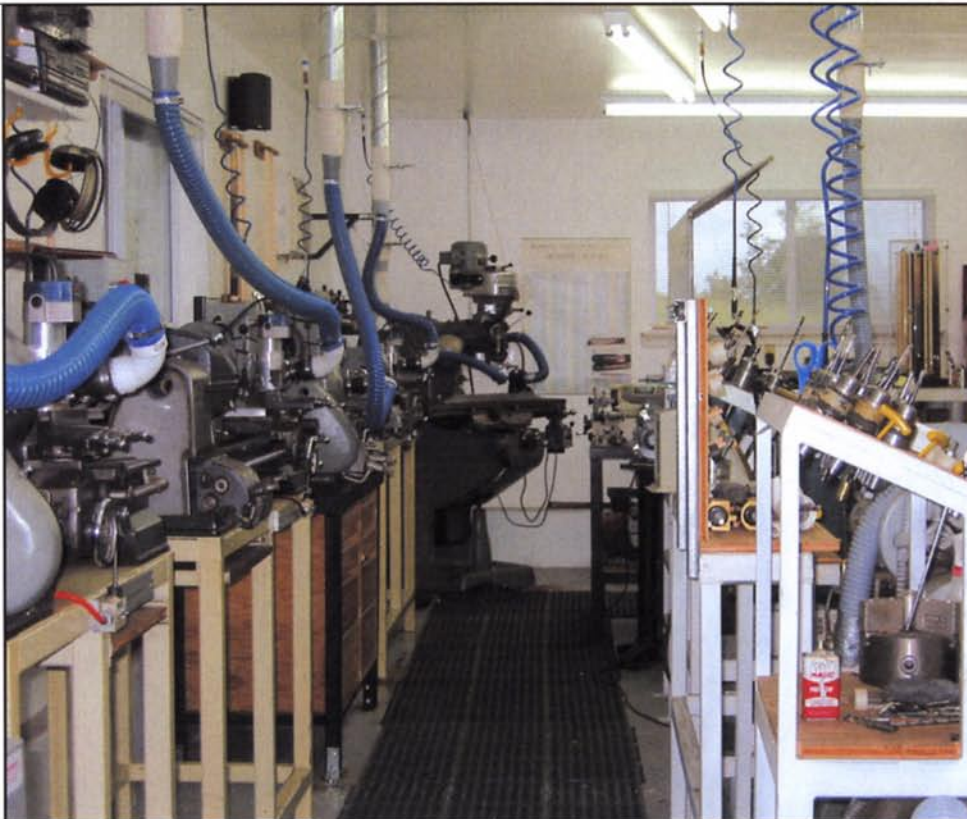
trouble or had some question that maybe I could call if I didn't bug him too much." Robinson agreed to the proposal.

Today, Jack has a large shop with a dozen lathes, along with a Bridgeport mill and various saws. Beverly does all of the inlay work. They used to use a pantograph but have switched to a CNC router for the inlays. The CNC is in its own special room, reminiscent of a private sewing room.

"In my early years of playing, I bought a cue here and there, but most of the cues I owned were won during gambling sessions," Jack says. "People would run out of money and would put up their cue." He was convinced by cue collector Pete Glenn that his playing skill demanded that he order the best cue being made at the time: a Gus Szamboti. Jack spent much time on the phone with Gus in creating his cue, as Gus had taken a liking to Madden. "He said, 'You're not snot-nosed like those other pro players!'" Jack says. That cue has since passed through several hands and now resides, coincidentally, in the Glenn Collection.

PROFESSIONAL CUE MAKER AT HOME

"I like to make a cue with the player in mind," continues Jack. Madden



"If a player likes to play nine-ball, I like to build him a cue that has balance and taper that's more suited to the nine-ball stroke. If a player likes to play straight pool, I'll build a cue that's more of a straight pool cue." In the end, quality materials, precision fits, and the ever-elusive "hit" that a player desires are Jack's main goals. It's his ability to discuss and truly understand a player's wants

well, we're building a few cues, we eat good, have fun, we get to argue with each other ... we're happy in these years and happy in what we're doing."

Jack took an early retirement from electrical union about seven years ago. He and Beverly have been full-time cue makers ever since. They recently moved their shop to St. Ignatius, Montana, where they build 60-75 cues a year, all orders except for cues they build for trade shows. "Valley Forge [Super Billiards Expo] was our first show that we had a booth. It was good to see some of my old [pool playing] friends. We plan to do those more often," Jack adds.

For the future, Jack plans to play a bit more but will be sure to have Beverly in tow. He plans to do more trade shows and get back into the middle of the action. But he stresses that his life now revolves around cue-making, with inspiration drawn from his family. With that, Jack has a message to the cue-buying public. "There's an awful lot of work and an awful lot of love in each hand-crafted custom cue. We hope [players] will be able to appreciate it." They should. ♦



cues are half-spliced for the pointed cues. Jack is now opting for the more demanding re-cut points. He stays away from materials that he feels may lessen the quality and integrity of the cue. He is also a cue maker that can execute either a flat-face joint or a piloted stainless steel joint.

and needs as a player and translate those ideas into the construction of his cues that separate him from many other cue makers.

"I thought at one time that I had a big enough shop that I could hire seven or eight people, but I really didn't want that," Jack says. "It's just the two of us, and I like what we're doing. We're together, we're living