

“Beyond a Game”

by Jim Parker
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In 1987 what little existed of the professional side of American billiards (all cue games) was nearing the close of another decade. Pool players touting professionalism were then, as they are today, still found gambling in dark corners and back rooms of taverns and pool halls as the games ancestors did a hundred years earlier. Aside from cigarette manufactures under fire from the Surgeon General, high profile potential sponsors showed the same lack of interest in investing in billiards as pool players had in growing up and building the game into a popular professional sport. Instead of using it simply as a gaming pastime for adults still living out their adolescence.

A national trade organization known as the Billiard Congress of America (BCA) retreated from hosting professional events and geared up to service amateur pool activities. Combining team events with masses of taverns bonded by alcohol instead of a billiard ball proved far more productive and manageable than simply eking out an existence of national mediocrity servicing the needs of pool halls and selling billiard balls.

Once again, as it did some twenty-five years earlier Hollywood sent billiard balls spinning and with it, set into motion perhaps the largest ongoing sales of two-piece pool cues in the recorded history of American billiards. While five, to eight player teams didn't play the game quite as well as professionals there was nonetheless an increasing interest in using a professional style cue so they could at least look, feel and travel about in a somewhat professional style.

If in 1987 one single act was to become synonymous with successfully promoting American billiards more genteel and highly professional potential it was found within one man that traveled half way across the world transporting his gift to our nation. The man's name was Mr. Sang Chun Lee and his gift was teaching Americans its long lost art of championship three-cushion billiards. A lost art that until the middle of the twentieth century and within a worldwide professional sports market was dominated by a unique breed of Americans that have long since become departed legends.

I first learned of Mr. Lee and his extraordinary three-cushion talents in late October of 1987. At the time, Lee spoke little if any English and required a translator. In hopes of promoting our game of three-cushion billiards and meeting Lee I immediately made arrangements with an associate of a new Korean billiard room (Olympic Billiards) located on Chicago's North side. The room was clean, well lighted and extremely unique by its housing some eighteen, 4' x 8' carom billiard tables. All of which made it the cleanest, largest, public carom billiards room in America. By invitation, on one October evening and on schedule to the minute, both Lee and his translator arrived at our

IBC's Southside Chicago headquarters where we first met. Immediately after an informal meeting Lee began practicing on one of our clubs four carom tables (picture right). I still recall his faint smile and how pleased he was after scoring four consecutive five cushion shots within minutes after first testing the table. In the mid 1970's with the support of my wife Bonnie I began pioneering the rebirth of three-cushion billiards in the Chicagoland area when hosting ground breaking national tournaments with the best players in the country. With this experience it took all of ten minutes to see that this quiet, polite, little man well might suddenly become the very best of the best.

Without wasting a single minute I began mapping

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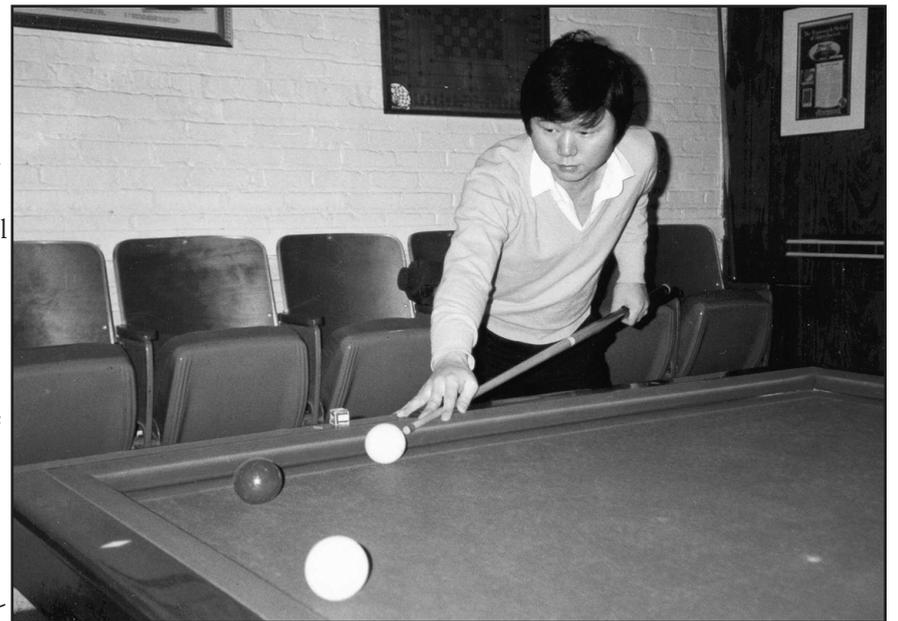
out a marketing plan that would give Lee an opportunity to stylishly perform in public when competing in invitational challenge matches with other top national players. Initially the concept was to provide a small prize fund (slightly less than one thousand dollars)



left to right: Lee, Parker and Ashby

without Lee or any of his future contenders posting a dime. Bonnie and I along with several IBC members and Lee's associate representing Chicago's Olympic Billiards, all in various amounts shared the responsibility of financing a prize fund. Therefore, without any

A Tribute to Sang Lee



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financial investment from either contender is was predetermined that two-thirds of the prize fund would be paid to the winner and one-third to the loser. Later, even a travel fund was established to encourage East and West Coast players to travel to Chicago and compete in one single day of high-end competition.

The first contender that came to mind was an old reliable friend that used to travel to the IBC's national events for more than a decade. He was a three-cushion child prodigy by the name of Mr. George Ashby who had already become national champion eight times and for eight years represented the United States in a string of World tournaments. George was a handsome young man that always represented the game with style and integrity. Knowing this and living relatively close in southern Illinois made George my first choice. After contacting him and explaining the situation he anxiously agreed to compete with our new Korean contender.

Aside from financing our share of the prize fund Bonnie and I assumed all other financial and marketing obligations. Which among other things included advertising and payments to an announcer and referee. We also funded the video recording of the event in hopes of some day using it as a three-cushion educational tool. The match was hosted in our clubs exhibition room. A large, stylishly decorated room complete with fireplace and elevated lounge area that comfortably seated one hundred guests. At 1:30 p.m. on the afternoon of December 13, 1987 the IBC's first and last “East meets the West” three-cushion challenge match between Sang Chun Lee and George Ashby left the drawing board and became a reality (picture left). It was a glowing event hosted in a stylish fashion that I'll remember always. Both men were handsomely dressed in black slacks and monogrammed sweaters that together and with dignity, represented carom

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billiards with the style and charm characteristic of American Billiard Championships hosted so many lost years ago.

Mr. Jose Diaz, (picture right) a Chicago resident and lifetime national three-cushion contender and promoter with sensitivity to the well being of both the game and those learning it, was acting referee. Mr. Gale Johnson (picture right) of Elgin Illinois, three-cushion billiards ambassador of goodwill who throughout his life recruited thousands into the world of three-cushion billiards (I know, I was one of his appreciative students) was acting score and inning keeper. Mr. Don Feeney, resident of Naperville Illinois and long time promoter of all forms of billiard games where integrity was a requisite, acted as the event



Mr. Gale Johnson and Mr. Jose Diaz

announcer. The match was played to 100 points in two blocks divided by when either player reached 50 points before his opponent. An exciting concept devised nearly a century earlier and common place in three-cushion cross-country matches of the 1940's. By ending the first half of the match at 50 points provided a well-needed intermission for both players and spectators alike. In addition, it created drama when spreading hopes of the trailing contender to resume play in the second half with a revitalized effort allowing the trailing contender to eventually overcome his opponent and go on to win the match.

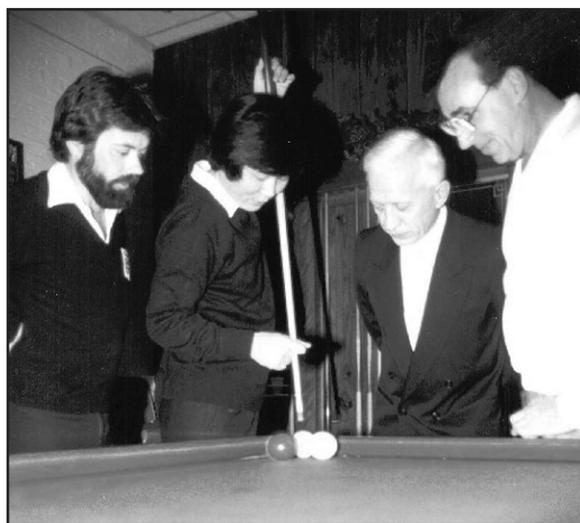
After formal introductions by Don Feeney, Jose Diaz briefly reviewed rules and protocol, then after positioning the balls for an opening lag, officially announced the beginning of this unique afternoon in December of 1987. An afternoon that would become a well remembered historical event for billiards in America when Mr. Sang Chun Lee was video recorded stylishly competing in his premier, publicly promoted challenge match in the United States.

Sang Lee won the lag for the games opening break shot. Some ninety minutes later the first block ended when on a run, Lee accumulated 52 points, with Ashby trailing with a score of 31 points. After an intermission Lee kept the offensive and scored another four points that boosted the score to an overbalancing, Lee 56 / Ashby 32. But George, known for his determination only toughened-up when scoring 21 points in his next 17 innings. By the 75th inning Gale Johnson announced his recorded score of Sang Lee, 85 and George Ashby, 68. While George's rally of 50 points in the second block out bested Lee's 48, it was obvious Ashby's slow start in the first block proved to be his undoing when by the 90th inning Sang Lee scored the games final 100th point. The entire event, including a half-time intermission, photo's and a short Straight Rail demonstration by Sang Lee (Picture right: from left: Ashby, Lee, Feeney and Parker) lasted a total of some five hours.

The match resulted in Sang Lee averaging 1.11 and George Ashby's 82 points reflected a .92 average. The IBC's carom table used in the match was a Brunswick Balke Collender Company's 19th century design, as 26 December/January

were the professional tables used in American billiards traditional years that ended in the 1950's. I'm mentioning this as an educational note to help enlighten well meaning billiards enthusiasts that are forever unknowingly and unjustifiably pitting today's averages and other various achievements against averages and achievements attained within billiards traditional years. There are simply no grounds for comparison. Since the early 1960's when European billiard equipment manufactures mechanically out-designed and out-classed American billiard equipment manufactures, the scoring rate in all carom games vastly improved by use of superior European technology. Ironically, technology that was brought about through what American manufactures wastefully discarded and European manufactures found and cultivated ... sensitivity to the betterment of carom billiards.

In retrospect, had Lee and Ashby used today's state of the art European equipment their averages could have resulted in some 20% to 30% increases? However, with his powerful, thundering like stroke, ever since Mexico's Ampilio Gonzalez scored 22 consecutive points in a game of three-cushion billiards using the IBC's 19th century equipment, the tables continually keep proving themselves beyond replacement and more



**Straight Rail Demonstration by Sang Lee
left to right: Ashby, Lee, Feeney and Parker**

than adequate.

The following several years proved difficult for Lee to satisfy his driving desire to compete in both U.S. national, and world tournaments. Before coming to America with eight Korean national titles already behind him he nonetheless had little chance of entering a world tournament at that time because of the strength of such Japanese players as Komori and Kobayashi, who were in the same tournament division with Korea. After arriving to the United States and then without citizenship and unable to compete in national events he painfully suffered world ineligibility until later establishing residence in the United States.

By 1990 Sang Lee's billiards career began taking form as many had expected. Now eligible to compete in national events he went on to win his first U.S national title. An achievement he repeated for the next consecutive eleven years. In between his pearl-like string of national titles he also went on to win the 1993 World title, the first for America's carom players in over thirty years! In billiards modern era that began in the early 1960's when equipment technology vastly improved and ivory billiard balls were officially replaced with far superior grades of cast phonologic balls, Sang Chun Lee proved to be the greatest American carom billiard player of this modern era. But in my mind all of this was far from his greatest achievement.

In many respects Sang Lee represented a text book example of people from other nations who for centuries have come to America in hopes of finding a better quality of life. And be given an opportunity to fulfill their dreams within the most generous country in the world. Like our ancestors, Sang Lee traveled from another continent far beyond the oceans, carrying with him his treasured idea of popularizing his craft throughout our land. He worked hard at what he did best, and to a large extent fulfilled his desires and appeared to have achieved most all of what he set out to do. How very fortunate for all of us that knew him that he began his journey so early in life, since life was taken from him when so young. Mr. Lee departed from our world of human endeavors on October 19, 2004. He was just 51 years old. Sang Chun Lee shall be fondly remembered for so very many good things and the gifts he's left behind. But in my mind, his greatest gift of all is not what he did to benefit billiards, but rather, what he did to benefit humanity.