

"In loving memory of an All American cue maker"

By Jim Parker

Now in the fall of my life, the perpetual flowing rivers of wisdom and benevolence of our heavenly father, God Almighty, never, ever, ceases to astonish me. My wife Bonnie and I had recently driven to Arlington Heights IL to express our sympathy to Mrs. Cathy Schuler and her family for the loss of her husband and her children's father, Mr. Raymond Schuler. When driving home that evening Bonnie and I began talking about Ray and how quickly the years we've known the Schulers have quietly slipped away.

Ray was a longtime friend, and a profoundly respected American cue maker. While designing and building the finest billiard cues in the world was Ray's passion, promoting three-cushion billiards was his life's desire. ...And he labored equally hard at both. On Monday evening November 4, 2002, the angels came for Ray, guiding him through the cold darkness of night into the warm glowing heavens of eternity.

I first met Ray Schuler some 30 years ago. My wife Bonnie and I had recently launched a promotional three-cushion billiard campaign that among other activities included live challenge matches between top ranked national players. During a Saturday event, shortly before introducing the day's contenders, our front door opened and in walked, three, well-dressed, tall, broad shouldered men, that at first glance, I thought might have been three linebackers from the Green Bay Packers. The Packers were in town that weekend to play the Chicago Bears. One of the men was wearing a tan sport coat and whose voice resonated with the authority of an appellate court judge. After welcoming them to the club and introducing myself, they began explaining how they each enjoyed playing three-cushion billiards at the Chicago based, Illinois Athletic Club. While I fail to remember the names of the two quieter gentlemen, little did I realize at the time that their colleague, Ray Schuler, would eventually become a lifetime friend of not only myself, but a friend to literally legions of billiard enthusiasts throughout the entire world.

A year or so later, Ray contacted me and went on to explain how he and his endeared wife Cathy, had invested in the manufacturing of their newly, self-designed billiard cue. At the time, Bonnie and I, after purchasing an enormous building on Chicago's Southside had begun a series of national three-cushion and pocket billiard tournaments. To help boost Ray's never exhausting enthusiasm for his cues and three-cushion billiards, I suggested we set up a booth in our exhibition room during the national events. To this day I've yet seen a more handsome, well-spoken man selling billiard cues... while at the same time building lifetime friendships that have ironically become even more revered and enduring than the profound integrity of his own cues.

For all too many years to remember, when the rest of the world was celebrating New Year's Eve in the lavish hotels, nightclubs and restaurants around the world, the lights in Ray's little cue factory remained on, well into the night. The inside of his workshop glowed

with the brilliance and warmth Ray and Cathy Schuler made possible after weeks of preparation and expressing invitations to many of us to share with them, the celebration of the coming new year. Soundly faithful to his unique tradition, each year Ray made arrangements with top ranked billiard players to compete within the very workshop that gave birth to the artist's own billiard cues. Cathy at the same time with sensitivity and compassion found only in a woman's love for her man, would prepare an enormous menu for their expected, and hungry guests. I recall for a year or two, video recording a few of these all too precious moments, and later sent the tapes to Ray and Cathy that they might be added to their treasure chest of memories.

A month or so ago the handsome couple stopped in to visit all of us during one of our IBC's father and son tournaments. Ray picked up where he left off on his last visit, adding a few new ideas and showing another billiard icon, Gale Johnson, something he recently learned about three-cushion. Cathy, always interested in people and whatever their personal interests or stations in life, was entertainingly delighted with her visit and musical performance by our pianist and ever talented, Blair Nuccio. Little did anyone of us realize this was to become our last visit with three-cushion billiards handsome and inspiring line-backer, Ray Schuler.

On the evening Bonnie and I returned home from Ray's wake, I retreated to the office to continue an earlier writing assignment. When scanning my Email I noticed a letter from a gentleman living in Finland. Upon reading his letter I was touched by his words and sincere concern for the welfare of Ray Schuler's game of three-cushion billiards. The gentleman's name is Mr. Sauli Solhagen, president of The Finnish Caroms Association. Sauli (excuse my informality) suggests his FCA is perhaps the smallest billiards organization in the world. Mr. Solhagen went on to express his concern for the future of three-cushion billiards in Finland. Among other reasons, carom billiards in his country has been negatively affected as the result of the growing popularity in pocket billiards. ...Seemingly the same way as our nations longest surviving and now retired organization, the National Billiards Association of America was affected some eighty years ago.

Sauli is seeking answers to questions that the public side of carom billiards in America has yet to soundly answer ever since our nations vaudeville singer, Al Jolson, stared in our countries first 1927 "talkie" motion picture. While our nations billiards enthusiasts have in the past, to present date, maintained interest in boosting their games popularity with similar spirit as the crusaders of the 11th century holy wars, they continually use outdated marketing methods seemingly of the same century as the wars themselves. With heartfelt concern for the growth of all varieties of billiards, I'll over the next several months address Mr. Solhagen's, and America's 80-year old 20th century questions, with hopefully enlightening and encouraging 21st century



Twenty-five years ago they were young men wanting to give us their dreams. Today, their icons that have given us their inspiring memories. Left to right: The late Ray Schuler and billiards ever thoughtful Joe Diaz.



To teach we must learn twice. First we learn our topic, next, how to express it. Left to right: Gale Johnson learning from Ray Schuler how Ray won the USA three-cushion Senior Championships.

answers.

Shortly before falling asleep that night, I couldn't stop pondering on one indecisive thought. How is it, that today, the very day I knelt in prayer over the coffin of a friend, Ray Schuler, I receive a message from a man I've never met, that lives in a country half way around the world, seeking help in building Ray's game of three-cushion billiards? Is this coincidence or an act of sheer chance? Perhaps. But for those of us that still believe in miracles, and see the world through the eyes of love, and feel it, with compassion of the heart, to us, we sense more than just chance, or the simplicity of coincidence.

What we see is this. Ray Schuler had brilliantly finished his work in this world, and God called him home. Yet not passing through the gates of heaven five day's, he's already set into motion ways of having others carry on his earthly wishes. Today, perhaps through the voice of our neighbor in Finland, Ray's

brought together two nations, each with a billiard society of similar needs and goals. Societies that would otherwise appear so distant from one another that either group, regardless of their size, might have never considered the other a counterpart in the whole scheme of things.

I for one, yet I don't think the only one, am going to choose this as the reason that our inspiring president of The Finnish Carom Association has made contact. And as surely as tomorrow's sun will rise in the East, Mr. Sauli Solhagen shall receive my relentless support to further his cause, along with an immediate copy of this small tribute to one enormously talented American cue maker. An American cue maker that through the undying love and understanding of his benevolent wife Cathy, have together made all of our life's journeys a more pleasant and rewarding experience.