

Bar Box to Billiards

What lured us in night after night weren't the slightly watered down drinks, draft beer, or gravy covered home fries. Not Hank Williams proclaiming his indestructible Ten Foot Tall and Bullet Proof persona for the 15th time that night. Not even the water sipping Boot Scootin' Line Dancers, strutting their stuff in perfectly choreographed swirls, kicks and stomps to the latest Brooks and Dunn hit of the week. What drew us in, like fireflies to a campfire, stood just a few feet away, steadfast and proud, along the back wall near the rear exit. The objects of our affection (or was it obsession?) were worn out, quarter eating, 7 Ft Bar Boxes. There were three of them, but anyone who had set foot near those tables knew there was one chosen table. The one that would soon hold stacks of shiny, bright quarters, determining the next "victim" of the night.

The bouncer remained poised on his bar stool overlooking the tables. The stool was strategically placed near the rear exit door, reducing the distance needed to "escort" the occasional unruly "Cowboy" out for the night. Keep in mind that it wasn't the bouncer's massive girth that caught one's eye, but rather the large, Bull Bronkin' belt buckle he wore. Looking back, I'd swear that thing was large enough to hold a 20 Oz T-bone steak and steaming baked potato.... I bought one just like it. Much like a mother hen watching over her young in the barnyard, our bouncer friend kept us all honest (for the most part) and only rarely threatened to close down the tables if we didn't behave.

Bar rules dominated those old 7 Ft tables back then. Chastised and teased were those attempting to invade the good ole boys' rules of "real" pool; you called every pocket, a scratched cue ball was played from behind the break line, and a defensive shot meant you were snookering your opponent. But one slow, rainy Saturday night, a clean shaven, soft-spoken fellow placed his quarters on the table. There weren't many regulars there that night (must have been a Nascar race that evening) so I welcomed the challenge. As I proceeded to run my rack down to the eight, I decided to give the guy a break. Feeling kind of sorry for the new comer, and not fully focused on making the eight ball, I missed. As he approached the table, he shot, missing the obvious intended ball, but making one of the many others he had left on the table. I watched shocked and amazed as he began setting up for his next shot. "Hold on there" I exclaimed, you missed! He then started explaining the APA way. He needn't call his shots to keep his turn?? And the whole Ball in Hand thing just seemed like cheating. I can't even remember the guy's name, but he spoke so highly of the APA, I gave it a shot and I joined a team. I still played the bars, but adjusted slowly to the APA rules.

Some time passed, but as is the case when we get older, I had less time (and money) to invest in the game. Come to think of it, I wish I had a nickel for every quarter I dropped in one of those old bar boxes! With age comes responsibility; mortgages and car payments, grass cutting and weed eating, and a full time job with benefits (you think you don't need all that medical stuff until you walk into a hospital one day and realize they just charged you \$60 for a Tylenol!). So for a while, I did stray from the tables. But my love of the game never wavered. Then I met Lo.

Lorenzo was the best player I'd seen in a long time. He explained the intricacies of defense shots, the strategies of handicap play, and most of all, the pride in being part of a team. But what finally won me over was the fact that we could play pool on just \$8/night. I was hooked.

I started playing regularly, one night a week at first, then more as I met others with the same love of the game. The diversity of the members intrigued me. Husbands and wives, doctors and lawyers, even good ole boys like me were welcome. Unable to contain the renewed excitement for the game, it became almost contagious. I recruited those around me; my girlfriend, my son, my brother and nephew are all APA members now. I had no idea in those early days what the APA had to offer. League nights weren't only about camaraderie and fun. The APA represented much more, symbolizing true sportsmanship and honor, respect for all others, and most of all, the genuine love of the game.

Once in a while, I'll dig out those old Snake Skinned Boots with the pointy toes. It takes only a few minutes of tugging and struggling (all the while trying to convince myself that the darn things really are comfortable once you get them on) to inevitably toss them aside for my comfortable, broken in tennis shoes. And if I'm feeling exceptionally nostalgic, I'll place that big Stetson atop my head, but end up removing it upon the realization that the thing hangs down below my eyebrows, probably due to the inexplicable disappearance of thick, dark hair I used to have (the good news is that it does a pretty good job of covering up this baffling expansion of a forehead that I have somehow acquired over the years.) I may even throw out a quarter or two at one of the local watering holes in town, but times (and I) have changed. Perhaps the greatest lesson learned in my transformation from Bar Box to Billiards is that there are bigger rewards to playing pool than just table dominance and bragging rights. The privilege and rewards of being an APA member are quite simple; admiration and respect, loyalty and dedication to the team, and an unwavering appreciation of the game.

True story written by Dora Robertson, as told by long time APA member Michael Morse, proud member of Central Virginia's travel team "Put Up or Shut Up" (playing out of Highlights/Murphy's in Richmond Virginia).

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Viva Las Vegas!!!