

Elephant Balls Found in Ohio

© 1999 by Tom Simpson

It was Winter 1994. I was home with strep throat and a 104 degree fever. I was nearly hallucinating from the fever, but I was happy to get a chance to lie around and catch up on some pool reading.

Jack Koehler's excellent work, *The Science of Pocket Billiards*, was the book du jour. I was reading about the subtleties of collision-induced throw, spin-induced throw, cushion-induced throw, and so on, and really enjoying it. How unfortunate, I thought, that most players will never really get this useful pool knowledge, because hardly anyone is going to read a physics book about pool.

A light bulb went off in my fever-addled brain. I had re-defined the problem, and the answer had become obvious. The game is really about understanding and controlling the behavior of the cueball. The cueball is always rolling, sliding, spinning, or some combination of those – the problem is that the cueball is *white*, and you can't really see what it is doing. Over the course of many years of practice and play, your body comes to understand what the ball is doing, and you learn to control the ball. What I realized, in that fateful instant, was that if the cueball had the right kinds of markings on it, players could see what the ball was doing, and learn *much* more quickly.

I was getting excited. I started listing other things that would make interesting ball designs – a baseball look, a yin-yang ball, special 8-balls and 9-balls. Within about 20 minutes I had a list of possible products. Then, the company name hit me: Elephant Balls, Ltd. Go fever!

I loved the company name instantly. It's funny, memorable, and I could always say the reason for the name was to honor the humble elephant, provider of ivory for all the world's billiard balls for several centuries.

The next evening, I shot pool with my good friend and "A" player, Joe Oshins. We had been talking about doing something fun in the pool world, a t-shirt perhaps. I told him about my idea, and he instantly responded with "Let's do it." He rounded up investors and I went to work on product development. I bought all the rubber balls Wal-Mart had and began marking them up with stripes, spots, and various designs. We focused on developing the Practice Balls product first. I rolled, spun, and collided the decorated balls for two months to see what we could actually see and do well enough to build an instructional product around. Gradually, two ball designs emerged (cueball and object ball).

I got lucky and found probably the only US manufacturer capable of making the balls. But even they were stumped by our first design. It was not going to be possible. Back to the drawing board, we clarified

and simplified until we had the Practice Balls design that's still in use today.

We had never intended for this to become a big deal. We both had real businesses to run. But it was fun working on this stuff, and soon we had the idea for the Beautiful Balls (the marbled balls they use on ESPN sometimes), and from there, we quickly had special, marbled 8-balls and 9-balls too.

Production of the prototypes was difficult. As we prepared for the big once-a-year BCA Int'l Trade Show in Vegas, we still had no products and no prototypes. On the way to the plane to go to Vegas, I stopped at the UPS terminal and picked up our prototypes. We didn't even have time to open the boxes.

At the Show, we were very well received, and sales dramatically exceeded our expectations. One of our big goals was to meet Bob Byrne and pitch him on endorsing the Practice Balls. He immediately loved the product and offered his endorsement. We were having fun. Now, we were going to have to go home and make it all happen.

The business took over my wife, most of my home, and most of my life for the next few years. We introduced the Ghostball Aim Trainer, got products in catalogs and on TV, improved the products and packaging, and built distribution. It finally got to where it had to get out of my house, and I had to focus on my "real" business more fully.

We found Pierre Deveaux. Pierre wanted to run the business and take it as far as it could go. We made him President, rented an office and got busy. A year later, Joe unexpectedly passed away. Pierre bought the business in 1999, and is now on his own. He has continued to bring out new products and make industry alliances. You can now buy Elephant Balls hats, t-shirts, pool tables, furniture, and cue sticks. Joe and I had planned another ball set, way back at the beginning, and had not gotten it developed. That product has been beautifully produced by Pierre, and has come to market as the *Stars & Stripes* ball set. Instead of the traditional circle with a number in it, this ball set uses stars, and comes in a special case the shape of a folded flag. The case has a handle, for those who would like to take their balls to the poolroom and play with the best possible equipment.

With Elephant Balls, Ltd.'s Beautiful Balls being used in all of ESPN Ultimate 9-Ball Challenge matches, and the continuing success of the products, Elephant Balls has become a fixture in the industry.

To get a catalog, place an order, or check out upcoming products, call Elephant Balls at 800-840-8833 or visit their website at www.elephantballs.com.