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Billiards Resume

I began playing at age 12 in 1963, and loved it immediately. I got a cheap 8' table for Christmas. It was the best present I'd ever gotten. I played a lot by myself, but hadn't ever seen a good player. By the time I was 14, I began playing on coin-op tables in local hangouts. By age 16, I discovered the local pool room, Q-Ball (Vineland, NJ).

Years later I realized how fortunate I had been to grow up shooting in what was no doubt the best room in South Jersey. It was owned and run by a retired pro. His name was Zip D'Orio. He was a gentleman, and ran an impeccable room. We had mostly serious players. No alcohol, no music, no fighting. Just serious pool.

The great value was I got to watch very high-level players in action all the time. I would watch "the old guys," who made beautiful play look easy. I can still see some of them today. Their demeanor, their concentration, & their strokes are still with me. I saw Willie Mosconi at my room when I was 17. I saw Cueball Kelly, Jersey Red, and other outstanding players come through. I played with a kid who started when he was 13 and was a natural. Within a year, he was beating everyone, and the older guys were taking him to Philly on weekends, hustling. I moved away to Ohio to go to college. A few years ago, I saw my old friend on ESPN, playing in the semi-finals of a 9-ball championship on the pro tour. His name is Jose "Hosie" Garcia. I've seen him since. I asked him what got him over the final hump, how did he lift himself to the pro level. He answered, "I started taking every shot seriously." Good stuff.

I remember the impact the movie "The Hustler" had. It gave the sport some definition. It solidified the "coolness" factor for us.

At college in Ohio, I was shocked to learn that while I was only a C+ player in my room in NJ, at Ohio State I was an A player. That's when I began to realize I had had an unusual experience.

I paid my way through grad school shooting pool. I got a part-time job clerking a pool room, which gave me free table time and time to shoot. The paltry couple of bucks an hour I made for working barely mattered. I got to shoot all day, mostly small stakes 9-ball. Fortunately for me, this was not the "A" pool room, so I could make a modest living.

I have never hustled anyone. Sure, I played for money, but I never misrepresented my skills. Today, when someone asks if I'd like to play for money, I say "I'd rather play for beauty." I get some puzzled looks, and I often wind up giving an informal lesson.

I've never cared much about competition. I'm not motivated by the idea of "beating" someone. I'm far more captivated by the lure of being in the zone, of impeccable play, of outdoing myself.

I didn't play much after college, until about 1990. Then, I discovered that there were now books & videos! When I was younger, nobody told you anything. I remember when I was 17 or 18, an old guy took pity on me and told me about throw. I would never have figured it out. Today, things are different. Much is now known. Lessons are becoming "OK". In 1992, I finally made the clear, overt, personal commitment to become a good player. After much practice and reading, I became "a good player" in 1994. That meant, for the first time, I was willing to say "I am a good player." Hal Mix expressed it perfectly with his phrase "playing with dignity." After 30 years, I finally got to where I would feel comfortable playing in any room in the world. I'm no longer embarrassed by my level of play.

In 1994, I had a fever of 104 one day, and had to lie around for the day. I was reading Jack Koehler's wonderful "Science of Pocket Billiards" and was thinking how helpful it would be to be able to actually see how the cueball was behaving, rather than just relying on my knowledge and what I *thought* it was doing. I realized graphic elements on the ball could provide a wide variety of visual feedback. In about 15 minutes, I had come up with the core idea behind Practice Balls, and also had the company name – Elephant Balls, Ltd. The next evening, I was shooting with my friend Joe Oshins. We had previously discussed the idea of producing some kind of a simple product for the billiards world – a T-shirt perhaps. Just something fun to do within the industry. I told him the idea, and he immediately said "Let's do it."

We spent the next few months experimenting with various graphic elements painted on rubber balls to learn what we could show, and how. Eventually, we had a design we liked. It turned out that that design was far too complex to manufacture. We went back to the drawing board, simplified and refined, and designed the Elephant Practice Balls system still marketed today. We make a great team.

The Aim Trainer first came to us as a very crude prototype of the basic idea of the product. I developed it into a marketable product, while Joe wrote the instructional booklet. Bob Byrne, our technical advisor, contributed the idea for the notch.

As of this writing (September 1996), I'm 44, I continue to practice & learn, and I'm playing the best pool of my life. I enjoy being in the billiards industry, and look forward to many years and many new products. I love the game. Becoming a BCA Certified Instructor was a rite of passage that initiated me deeply into the industry. I'm getting to know a lot of the other industry folks: pros, writers, Master Instructors, living legends, and assorted colorful characters. I'm amused to realize I'm now one of those "old guys" I used to admire when I was a teenager. I see those younger players watching me sometimes, and hope I don't dog a ball and shatter their illusion.

Update (2004): My partner Joe passed away in 1998, so we sold the Elephant Balls business. It continues to prosper today. I became a BCA Advanced Instructor in 2001 and then a BCA Master Instructor in 2004, and have been having a very gratifying experience teaching – and learning.