





# KING OF THE HUSTLERS

The billiards champion of the world lives quietly in Somerville with his mother and a dog named Sport

It is nine o'clock on a Wednesday night here at Boston Billiards in Kenmore Square, the city's largest poolroom, and the regulars are at it again. The feisty, loud-mouthed Italian is railing at the three-hundred-pound gypsy. The pock-marked, muscle-bound youngster is picking a fight with the Greek, the only one dumb enough to fight back ("dead from the asshole up," one regular said). Others are just hanging around checking out the competition: the guy who looks like an undertaker, thin as a cue stick and missing two front teeth, the bald-headed fatso everyone calls Kojak, and other, plainer types—Billy, Walshie, Wizzer, and the rest.

Ever since the city's pool scene moved from the Olympia, a smoky cellar in the Combat Zone known as the Mines, to the bright, wall-to-wall-carpeted Boston Billiards, a different sort of pool player sometimes turns up among the regulars: college kids out on the town, a few with dates; executives with the vests of their three-piece suits unbuttoned. These people would never have ventured into the Mines, it was so dirty, smelly, and criminal-infested. ("The only clean thing in it," said a former patron, "was the Coke in the Coke machine.") Finally too many prostitutes were caught on the premises, a couple of customers were stabbed to death, and Boston Billiards was able to buy out the Mines. Boston Billiards, then located in Somerville, moved to its present quarters in Kenmore Square next to a disco called Kix and began to operate a poolroom where the entire family could play. Only they don't. They leave the place to the regulars.

By far the most prominent of the regulars is the man universally known as Boston Shorty. He is down at Boston Billiards now. Shorty is short, with a thin frame and a large belly. His derby hat looks funny above his rough, unshaven face, but the cue stick in the leather case nestled between his legs is to be taken seriously. Boston Shorty is the champion of the poolroom, maybe of the world.

*John Sedgwick is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Esquire, Harvard Magazine, the Boston Phoenix, and the New York Times.*

By John Sedgwick

Photography by Jeff Albertson

## KING OF THE HUSTLERS

He sits by himself on the far side of the room, by the manager's counter, watching the action with a vacant, tired expression. In front of him, a sharpie named Randy plays one-pocket with the deaf-mute. As Randy lines up his shot, the deaf-mute gives out a strangled groan—"Gmffit!"—to put him off. But the five ball goes skimming across the blue-green cloth and into the corner pocket. Game. The deaf-mute glumly pulls a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and leaves it on the table's end rail. That is the poolroom custom. Randy sweeps casually by to pick it up.

Presently, a newcomer to Boston Billiards, who is already acquainted with the champ's reputation, comes up to Shorty.

"Going to play tonight?" he asks eagerly.

Shorty doesn't look at him. "I never know," he says.

An hour later, a young cab driver in blue jeans and cowboy boots, eager to improve his game, asks Shorty to play. Three-cushion billiards. Twenty-five points. Five bucks a game. Shorty wants to up the ante, but he settles for five. He digs into his pocket for a cigar, licks it all over, and lights up. Then he takes off his derby, revealing a bald head as smooth and shiny as a billiard ball, unzips his Rambow from the cue case, and goes to work.

The cab driver, Charlie, is good, but a little unsure of himself. Shorty plays with complete confidence. He casts a quick look around the table to calculate his shot, plants his feet, left foot pointing in, and leans over the table. With his right arm hanging limp from the elbow, like a pendulum, and the stick resting lightly in his grasp, Shorty runs his cue stick once or twice through the fingers of his left hand—his "bridge"—measuring his stroke. Then a surge of energy ripples down from his shoulder, the hand plunges forward, the stick flicks out across the blue-green cloth to grip the ball for an instant and send it hurtling on its way.

Charlie is no match for him, and before long Shorty has picked up twenty dollars. But it was an effort. Near the end of the final game Shorty had to climb up on the table to reach his cue ball in the far corner. Only five feet two, Shorty often has to do this. He sprawled himself out with surprising grace for a paunchy forty-eight-year-old, careful to keep his shoes off the cloth. The cue ball rebounded sharply off the end rail and

Shorty jumped back hastily to the floor to get out of the way. He must have banged a rib, for he rubbed his chest in pain when he was on his feet again. "You're gettin' old, Shorty," somebody said, and soon the whole room was ringing with it: "Gettin' old, Shorty. Gettin' old." Shorty paid no attention. "That's just it, fellas," he said in his high, raspy voice. "I'm still gettin'. I ain't old yet."

Boston Shorty makes his living at this kind of thing. He's a hustler. He is, in fact, one of the best hustlers in the country—maybe the best. Still, he doesn't make that much at it, probably less than \$10,000 a year. Shorty isn't eager to disclose his income. He's even less eager to disclose his profession, because hustling, like all forms of gambling, is illegal. He lives quietly in Somerville with his mother and a dog named Sport.

Besides being illegal, hustling is frowned on these days by the billiard industry. Equipment manufacturers and poolroom owners would like to clean up the game's image, supposedly in order to broaden its appeal. (The policy seems somewhat misguided, however, since the popularity of the sport peaked when the movie *The Hustler* was released in 1961, detailing all sorts of sordid poolroom activities.) The new image means no smoky pool halls, no cigar-chomping pool sharks, and especially no hustling. It means that when CBS aired the last match of the World Pocket Billiards Championship, a tournament between notorious hustlers Luther "Wimpy" Lasser and Eddie "Knoxville Bear" Taylor, "hustler" was never mentioned in the course of the broadcast. It means that when asked about gambling at his place, the president of Boston Billiards will give you a hard look and say there isn't any.

There is, of course. Practically everyone down there bets something, if not on pool then on the horses, the dogs, and the professional teams. They even play the Massachusetts Lottery. But as far as pool goes, five dollars a game is about tops.

Except for Shorty's games, that is. He once played for \$1,500, and won. He'll play for anything. He's what they call a "money player": \$5 or \$1,500, he plays the same way. As another hustler said, "The guy kisses ice water. He don't frighten out."

While most players specialize in one game—straight pool, eight ball, rotation or whatever—Shorty plays them all and is an absolute master of three-cushion billiards, one-pocket, and nine-ball. When a sociologist named Ned Polsky interviewed hustlers across the country in

1967 for a study of pool players, he found that "by unanimous agreement, Boston Shorty is our country's best 'all around' hustler."

Recently, Shorty has been concentrating on his three-cushion game in preparation for the world championship tournament to be held in Las Vegas this spring. Three-cushion is unique among pool games. The billiard table it's played on is larger than a pocket billiard table. (Boston Billiards, incidentally, has only the highest quality tables, each with three inch-thick slabs of slate, sealed with beeswax and covered with cloth, and weighing upwards of 1,500 pounds.) There are only three balls, two white—one of which is distinguished by a tiny circle—and one red. They are slightly larger than pool balls and heavier, so three-cushion billiards players have a slightly longer and firmer stroke than pool players. In three-cushion, the object is to shoot the cue ball (one of the two white balls, as decided at the start of the match) so as to hit, in one shot, three of the cushions, or "rails," as well as the two other balls. A successful shot is called a billiard and counts one point. Each player continues his turn, or "inning," until he misses, whereupon the other player takes over. Any combination of rails and balls is permissible—three rails, then the two balls; or one rail, then one ball, then two more rails, then the other ball; or whatever. It's not an easy proposition. Even the best billiards players, including Shorty, make barely half their shots, averaging only a little over a billiard an inning. In straight pool, by contrast, the best players average over ten times that.

Hard as it is, Shorty is a brilliant billiards player. He's a brilliant pool player too. Yet it is impossible to judge just how brilliant, because the sport's official organizations, unlike those of almost any other sport in America, keep scanty records and virtually no statistics. Shorty has played in hundreds of tournaments in the last twenty years, but no one knows how many of them he has won. Ask the Billiard Congress of America or the American Billiards Association, and they say ask Shorty. Ask Shorty, and he says ask the BCA or the ABA because he doesn't remember. He stores his trophies in six cardboard boxes in his basement and forgets about them.

A few things are certain. Shorty won the one-pocket tournament at the World's All-Round Championships at Las Vegas in 1966 and in Johnston City,

## KING OF THE HUSTLERS

Illinois, in '67 and '68. He took the Professional Round Robin in Columbus, Ohio, in '67. After he won the U.S. Open two years in a row, in '68 and '69, he was banned from the tournament because other players refused to enter against him. He swept the nine-ball and the all-around tournaments in Johnston City again in '72 and the eight-ball and the all-around at Las Vegas in '73.

Shorty has beaten all the best players in the game: Wimpy Lassiter, Irving Crane, Jersey Red, Joe Balsis, Jimmy Moore. Posters of them all hang on the walls at Boston Billiards. Shorty has never played Minnesota Fats, familiar to most people thanks to Jackie Gleason's portrayal of him in *The Hustler*. Fats wouldn't dare play Shorty. Fats is not a championship caliber player; he's just a showman, and he knows he'd lose.

Shorty once took on Steve Mizerak for a game of straight pool in the ballroom of Boston's Copley Plaza Hotel. The match was televised in the Boston area on Don Gillis's program, "Five on Sports." Mizerak had just won the U.S. Open, establishing himself as the best straight pool player in the country, if not the world. Shorty hadn't played straight pool in months because he had been concentrating, as he is now, on his three-cushion billiards game. Shorty creamed Mizerak anyway, 125 to 40. Dick Iumplik, one of the owners of Boston Billiards, racked up the balls for the match. He remembers that when the game was almost over, Mizerak turned to him and whispered, "Shorty's embarrassing me." TV audiences were so pleased to see the local boy win that Channel 5 broadcast the program three times.

Because the players themselves put up most of the prize money in entrance fees, tournament competition isn't all that different from hustling. Still, it is surprising that Shorty gets involved in tournaments at all. In tournament play he has to show just how good he is, and this goes against one of the hustler's basic rules: Don't show your real speed. The better a hustler is known to be, the worse his "action"—the number of people willing to play him and the amount of money they are willing to bet. But Shorty's talent is already so widely respected, and his name and appearance so well known, that his fame could scarcely be increased. His income could, though. So Shorty enters tournaments.

There was a time when tournaments could make a player a lot of money. Willie Hoppe, the best of the previous generation of pool players, used to say that winning the championship was worth at least \$50,000 in prize money, endorsements, and public relations appearances. But that was in the 1920s, the heyday of pool, when four times as many people played pool as play today and billiard matches outsold football games. Pool champions in the seventies are lucky to make a quarter of that. Shorty plays about a half-dozen tournaments a year and wins a good many of them, but he doesn't have much money to show for it. In fact, Shorty made so little in prize money last year that the ABA has officially classified him as an amateur pool player. If Boston Shorty is an amateur, it's hard to imagine a professional.

Boston Shorty's real name is Larry Johnson. Born in Cambridge near Central Square, he started playing pool at fourteen when he got work as a pinsetter in a nearby bowling alley with a few tables in the back. Larry played them in his spare time. An extremely athletic youngster, he picked up the game quickly. Shorty's eyes light up as he remembers the athlete he used to be. "I played everything," he says. "Baseball, basketball—short as I was—bowling. You name it, I was good at it. Would you believe I played fullback? I weighed 129 and I was short, but I could run like a deer. Yeah! And we used to win, win, win, win, win, win, win. I played good. I played everything good." Shorty takes a puff on his cigar, a Sports Optimo, and adds, "I guess I had a good team in front of me too. You can bet on that."

But when he started pool he stopped everything else—including high school, much to his mother's regret. He loved pool. "I could've played twenty-four hours a day and loved every minute of it," he says. "I dreamed about pool at night. You could take all the beautiful girls in the world and you could *hang 'em!* I was going to play pool. I didn't want to know nothin', just pool, pool, and some more pool."

And so it went. By his mid-twenties Larry Johnson got so good that nobody around Boston wanted to play him. So he went to New York, or as he puts it, he "invaded" New York. That's where he got his nickname. A house manager took one look at him and asked him where he was from, and Larry Johnson has been Boston Shorty ever since. (Except to his mother, who calls him by his middle name, Henry.)

Before long, nobody in New York would play him either, so Shorty had to manage a couple of pool halls for a while to make a living. Then he went west. It was in Detroit that Shorty got into what he claims was the only tight spot of his hustling career. He was playing a bookie and some of the bookie's friends, among them an out-of-work actor named Sammy. Shorty was hot, the stakes were high, and by three in the morning he had \$4,000 in his pocket. It was time to go home, but first he had to use the men's room. Someone was standing at the urinal so Shorty went into the toilet stall. Suddenly he felt a knife at his throat. It was Sammy. Shorty figured that was the end of the \$4,000. But Sammy demanded only the \$50 he'd lost. He was mad that his friends had let him get taken by a hustler. Shorty reached into his pocket, carefully peeled a fifty from his wad of bills, and handed it over. Then Sammy left as quietly as he'd come.

By this time Shorty was so good he surprised even himself. "When I was coming up," he says, "I just hoped I'd get good enough to play with the top players. But when I got to be around twenty-six or twenty-seven I figured I could beat anybody in the world. I *never* thought I'd get that good."

But he got even better. "Let's put it this way," he says. "When you're in sports, any sport, things come to you. And things came to me. And they stuck in my head. That's all."

He entered his first tournament almost by accident. It was in Johnston City, Illinois, population 3,900, "a town so small," says Shorty, "you gotta have eighty seeing eye dogs to find it." Shorty was thirty-two, and he wasn't interested in the tournament prize money at all; he had come for the action. Hustlers from all over had converged on Johnston City like ants on a lump of sugar. "Never mind about sitting, you couldn't *stand* and watch, the place was so crowded. Twenty-four hours a day. Oh!" A hustler's dream. Shorty won the tournament, but the trophy was stolen before it could be presented to him. He refused the replacement, figuring that he'd never win another, so why have just one?

More tournaments did, of course, fol-

(Continued on page 118)

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## King of the Hustlers

(Continued from page 69)

low, and more trophies. But the winning has never been easy. And it was especially tough at the three-cushion billiards tournament Shorty played last year in New Jersey. He drove, as he always does if he's going only a thousand miles or so. (Sometimes he takes his mother with him, "if it's a good place." But there aren't many of those.) He shared a motel room with another player to keep expenses down. The tournament went four days, and Shorty had to play noon to midnight every day. Finally he was up against Jimmy "The Cat" Cattrano in the finals. "Now, Cattrano is tough," Shorty says, "but only in his own joint, JC's. It's really his father's place. His equipment, his tables, his cloth. Outside of there, though, it's a different story." The match didn't start until after midnight, and Shorty was tired. He had a lead of about fifteen points in a fifty point match but then he started blowing easy shots while Cattrano was making runs of three, four, five, balls. Soon it was dead even. The match wasn't over till two in the morning but Shorty finally took it, 50 to 47. As the hustler said, the guy kisses ice water.

Now forty-eight, Shorty wonders if his thirty-four-year career in pool has been worth it. "If I'd been in any other sport," he says, "I'da been a millionaire twenty years ago." Now he thinks he should have finished high school and gone to college. "Then I would have *been* something." As it is, pool, he says, "is all I know."

Shorty is still good enough that on any given day he can beat anyone in the world—if, that is, he is "in stroke," on top of his game. The trouble is that sometimes his stroke just goes. He loses his touch, his timing is off, something. Recently, for example, he has been having trouble with his short angle shots (in which the cue ball hits the object ball practically straight on). "I couldn't hit one of them to *save my life!*" Shorty says. "I was ready to break the cue stick into a thousand pieces! But I knew it wasn't the cue. It was me. I just couldn't make those shots. I don't know what happened. I just couldn't play for a while..." His voice trails off.

"I tell you," he continues, "when you're young, playin' pool's nothin'. I loved it. I don't love it anymore. When that's all you've done all your life. Just keep playin'. Till you can't play no more."

When will that be for Shorty? "You got a telephone?" he says, suddenly brightening. "We'll call up God and ask."

It is a Thursday night at Boston Billiards, and the place is dark and quiet. The lights are out over most of the tables; only a few strangers are playing. All the

regulars are watching the action on the corner table, which is a forty-year-old Brunswick that came from the Mines. Billy, Wizzer, hang-jawed Tony, and the others look on from the shadows. After the noise of the previous nights, the silence is eerie. Two of Boston Billiards's best are playing it out. Boston Shorty against Paul Melnichek.

Some people say Shorty doesn't like Melnichek. He feels Melnichek is small-time because he's always fussing to keep the odds in his favor. He never takes risks, and Shorty doesn't like that.

Melnichek is younger than Shorty and bigger. He moves about the table with muscle-bound grace, like a halfback. He wears a sweatshirt, construction pants, high-top sneakers, and an expression that is almost beatific until he leans over the table and stares down his cue stick at the ball. Then everything changes. When Melnichek shoots, he shoots to kill.

Shorty has on a tight jersey with oversized lapels. It emphasizes his narrow shoulders and his beer belly. A ragged cigar is clenched between his teeth. His bald head gleams under the light. He looks jaunty, confident. Shorty once said he "gets in a fog" when he plays. He is in a fog now. Nothing exists for him except the three balls on the green cloth of the billiard table.

The beads strung on a wire over the table show that Melnichek holds a narrow lead over Shorty in the fifty-point match, 32 to 29. The two trade misses, then Melnichek goes on a tear. He nurses the cue ball back and forth along the end rail, or he slams it around the table. "Three... four... five," he says under his breath, keeping track of his string. He gets another billiard out from the corner. "Six." End to end for one more: "Seven." Several of the onlookers whistle and shake their heads. Billy looks worried. He has twenty dollars riding on this game. Shorty looks on impassively, sucking his cigar. Melnichek makes another—"Eight"—a lucky kiss. Shorty taps the floor twice with the butt of his cue stick. Melnichek connects for two more before he finally misses and sits down. He's up 43 to 29.

Shorty has come back from worse. Now it's his inning. He strides up to the table and pauses a moment while he chalks up his cue tip. He runs his stick between his fingers a few times to get the feel of his stroke. Then he shoots. The cue banks off the red ball to the side rail, caroms slowly around the far corner, and comes inching up to the white ball. The crowd freezes. The ball stops, a fraction of an inch short. Shorty blows out some smoke and sits back down.

Melnichek runs out the game 50 to 31. As he connects for the last point, Shorty pulls out two twenties and a ten and lays them on the end rail without changing his expression. As Melnichek picks them up, Shorty asks if he wants to play for a hun-

dred this time. Shorty knows that Melnichek is playing well and that he will be tempted to make as much out of it as possible. He also knows that Melnichek is unnerved by big money. Melnichek doesn't go for it. Fifty bucks, fifty points, he insists. Just like before.

They lag for the break. Shorty's ball stops closer to the head rail, so he starts. He makes one billiard off the break formation, then two more. He looks more imperious than ever. The best. But Melnichek won't quit. He climbs onto the table for a shot into the corner and makes it. Moments later he has the score tied up at five. He flicks the beads across the wire with his cue stick, a strange half-smile playing over his lips, and he goes to the Coke machine for a Fanta orange soda. Using extreme english, Shorty makes one along the side rail that has the crowd murmuring in amazement. He goes up by a couple before he sits down. Again Melnichek comes back and soon the score is tied at eight. Shorty can't respond and Melnichek pulls ahead by cracking two more around the table. Shorty misses again. Melnichek gets three more. There's that smile again. He's up by five. This time Shorty won't be denied. The balls are dancing for him, and he makes five in a row to tie the score at seventeen. A spectator moves too close to the table, and Melnichek clears him away with a shout.

Now the game tightens up. The two play cautiously, each leaving the other nothing but tough shots. Shorty is beginning to wear. Melnichek seems as intent as ever. He makes a brilliant shot out from the corner and follows it up with two more. Shorty's shot comes up wide. Melnichek widens his lead with a string of four more to go up 27 to 20. Shorty is in a hole. He lights another cigar and gets up slowly. He takes a long look at the balls. Then he shoots. Miscue. He looks disgusted, as if he wants to break the cue stick into a thousand pieces, but he says nothing and sits down.

Melnichek runs another four. Shorty tries to come back with a shot catching the red ball on the side rail, but the cue sneaks past without touching. Melnichek is charged up. He continues to run balls, two, three, four at a time. Shorty's cigar droops from his mouth; he rests his chin on his hand and watches.

A touch shot along the rail and the match is over.

"You win," Shorty says and drops his cigar into the ashtray.

"Play some more?" Melnichek says. He's pumped up, ready.

"I'll save myself some money and go to bed," Shorty says.

Some guys say they can't believe it as Shorty and Melnichek go to the counter to settle up. Then Boston Shorty puts on his coat and his derby hat, walks through the doors, down the long corridor, and out into Kenmore Square. □

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