

profile



Photo by Steve Boerner

Paul Gerni, world pocket billiards trickshot champion.

Gerni not just another pool shark

by Rex Henderson

Students stood awe-struck around a pool table last Thursday in the Nebraska Union, mumbling comments:

"It can't be done. It defies the laws of physics."

The man they were watching was Paul Gerni, the reigning world pocket billiards trick shot champion.

Gerni has been playing pool nearly his entire life. He moves effortlessly around a pool table, and with a stroke of his cue the balls spin, dance, bounce around the table and then drop into the pockets as if he had some psychic control.

Gerni is not just a great pool player, he is also a showman, a gamesman and a gentleman.

Between shots he chatters with the crowd telling anecdotes about the game to keep the people laughing while they aren't gaping in disbelief at his last shot.

"I love to see people laugh," Gerni said. He said he has developed several different shows to please different audiences.

Gerni said he is a student of human nature.

"I always have been fascinated just watching people," he said. And I've used a lot of what I've learned in my shows."

Gerni grew up in Orange, N.J. and Logan's Port, Ind., the son of a Lutheran minister. Ironically, his father's church introduced Gerni to the game popularly associated with hustlers and bar rooms.

Gerni stroked his first cue ball when he was six years old.

It was at a social event in his father's church, Gerni recalled, when he wandered down the hall to the church recreation room.

An old man smoking a cigar was playing. The old man lifted him to the edge of the table, and Gerni said he developed an immediate attraction for the game.

Just a year later he won his first tournament.

The table Gerni took his first shot on has been roped off in that church basement as a memorial to him, Gerni said.

Now 29, Gerni has been playing pool for 23 years, touring the world giving trick shot exhibitions, playing

in professional tournaments and teaching billiards clinics for the past six years.

He spends about 300 days a year on the road where his appearances range from the glamorous to the dull.

Gerni has appeared on television, where he "gets just like a little kid. I'm up there with Fred Astaire."

It was a little less exciting the day he gave a show in a convent.

"At least I didn't get into any bad habits," he quipped.

An ambassador for the game, Gerni tries to promote a gentleman's image for the game, he said.

No one could be better qualified. He has a kind of wholesome, all-American look. His only vices, in a game notorious for hard drinking and smoke-filled rooms, are cashew nuts and a love for children.

His only goals for the future are to get married and father two little girls, he said.

He could evoke jealousy from normal, fallible people. Nothing seems to go wrong for him, and when it does, a missed shot during an exhibition, he laughs and shrugs it off. He is smooth, controlled, handsome and makes a lot of money playing his favorite game.

Six years ago Gerni gave up a \$40,000 a year job as a marketing executive to play pool full time.

Today, he said in "no brag, just fact" tone, he said he makes three times as much, and is the highest paid pool professional in the world, a fact that irritates some of his competitors.

Gerni admitted he isn't the world's best pool player. Raymond Cealemans is the greatest three cushion billiards player, he said, and Steve Mizerak and Willie Masconi he rated as the greatest straight pool players.

But the greatest trick shot artist—Paul Gerni.

"I haven't lost a trick shot tournament in three years," he said without a hint of doubt, or modesty. "I do the best trick shots in the world."

Gerni claimed he could shoot 180 trick shots. Most pool players recognize about 150 trick shots, he said, but he has invented a few.

He described pool as a game that is "easy to play but hard to master." There are 230 members of the Billiard's Congress of America, he said, but less than 10 great players.

The game's physical skills are essential, but relatively easy: The most difficult aspect is the intense concentration the game requires.

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