



## DIVERSIONS

Doug Carroll/Diversions

And there were the signs, ragged left, towards the back of the bar: "NO SPITTING, CUSSING OR GAMBLING" and "NO SMOKING BY THE POOL TABLE." I always get a kick out of such prophetic commands — they seem to be terminally ingored. Placed there for posterity, as it were.

Half-full and empty packages of Marlboro "red box" litter the small, round bar tables. An assorted number of the chosen elite — the pool players — drink pop. The majority are well into their fourth pitcher. The older of the bunch are deep into their shots, on the way to a drunk that would pickle the most experienced connoisseur of cheap whiskey.

That, however, is one of the things that sets pool aside from other recreational sports. You can be directly in the eye of a raving drunk and still play a flawless game of Eight Ball. In fact, sometimes the alcohol lends a well-needed hand... it seems that pool tables and liquor form a workable coalition.

Such is the initial setting for an average meeting of the cues — a local pool-league tournament.

The festivities kick off at 7:30. Each player tosses in a couple of bucks to plug the table. Those who don't sport custom-made pool cues select from the warped ones available from the host bar.

The teams this evening are Cee Gees versus Harry's Wonder Bar. The ages of the players run from 31 to 70.

No national anthem. No formal introductions. They are there to play pool, not to glorify the barside pastime.

Jeff, my source, and I sit at one of the round tables awaiting his game.

While waiting, we delve into the technical aspects of league pool. There are a number of different leagues, each with their own interpretation of how Eight Ball should be played. In this particular league, a group of six players play a set of three games each — the total is the match. Some of the leagues use the "game" as the common denominator for acquiring the win. Jeff's league uses a system of points based on the number of balls the opponent has left on the table when the victor sinks the Eight Ball.

Despite one fanatical outburst from one of the Harry's Wonder Bar players over a scratch, the atmosphere remains placid. Word (and scoresheet) has it that Harry's shouldn't be that hard to beat. As well, some of Cee Gee's best players have turned out for this game, the second to last of the season.

More pitchers, more pop, more whiskey. Signs of a vicious drunk now stand out in a few of the players' eyes and stances.

"For some of these guys it's their only night

out," Jeff explains. "Next week we're at home. That should be a real party."

"Definitely have to be there for that one," I reply.

Onlookers sit at the bar. The tables are, by squatters rights, reserved for those involved with the players or the game. A small group of college transients attempt to commandeer a table and are ostracized from the rest of the clientele. They remain only a few minutes.

One of the Cee Gee's cohorts approaches Jeff and rambles off a story about getting arrested for DWI, possession of a controlled substance and assaulting an officer. His nonchalant attitude was, to say the least, commendable. Anybody who's in that much trouble and can still laugh is either a chronic sociopath or severely confused. Still, there are times when ignorant bliss would be a welcome friend.

Toward the middle of the third series, the match is close but not close enough to warrant a fervor from either team. Harry's team, with passive fatalism, seemed to be sliding down the tubes.

All final thoughts of winning are put to rest as Chris, Cee Gee's best, runs the table — sealing the tournament. Jeff won the first two of his games and was brutally beaten in the third.

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BY  
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"Must have made him mad," Jeff remarks. Such is the life of a live-on-the-razor's-edge local pool tournament.

Much of the talk, toward the end, centered on next week's home game. Reminiscing about the alcohol-frenzied pool games, building up to a night that would end with a slight burp rather than a mighty belch.

I was on my way to Cee Gees after having my brain scrambled from seeing "Platoon." Some simple conversation and several hundred beers offered a much-needed escape from the movie's intensity.

Within the walls of Cee Gees were only a handful of people. I recognized three of them from last week's "night out."

A quick inquiry to the bartender told me that no decent party would happen this evening.

"I think they're going to forfeit," said the bartender.

This made no sense to me at all. The hype had been so omnipresent last week; I saw no way in which a devout drunk could be avoided. As fate would have it, a phone call to Cee Gees from another bar confirmed the worst of my fears — forfeit because of a "no show" by the home team.

Which, I guess, completes the circle of the nature of a local pool league — their creed — "Sworn to fun, loyal to none."