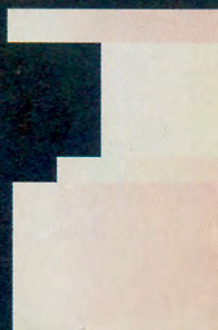




Part luck, part skill, all obsession when your nose is three inches from the table, pool is the great social leveller. Everyone's playing it right now, some of us with our last two-rand coin. Kevin Rose asks why.





The River Club, Cape Town.

# the Good the Bad and the Lucky

**P**OOLO IS A GAME OF SKILL. As in all games, the winner is decided as that player who exerts the highest mastery over the cue, the balls, the game itself. But every game has its nexus of uncertainty. The freak shot. The Joker's pale grin. Nothing expresses this as plainly as the fluctuating face of a pool table.

"There is an element of fate in the game – something religious in the split second you take the shot," says 21-year-old Capetonian Dave Tuck. "But really ... the object of the game is to win." In other words, leave luck to the lucky, and pool to the skilled.

Dave is a "serious" player. He plays a regimented, controlled game, using his own cue of Canadian maple. "Too heavy," he complains, "and the tip's too big." He plays in a beat pool bar called Ruby's. Every night. He claims pool is not an obsession.

Stellenbosch student Nick Hamman, 29, plays a different kind of game. He has the standard attraction to pool: "The bright colours, the sound of the balls clicking, the randomness which can be brought under control." But for Nick, "winning is only the basic level.

"To an extent, I'm outside the game," he says. "I like to watch my opponents as we play. In pool, total strangers can reveal more of themselves than they would in ordinary conversation.

"I don't care whether I win or lose. What I get from playing pool means I win every time."

In a similar vein, photographer Christina Lewis says: "I like to watch my opponents as objects – playing styles, body language, the unique ways they hold their cues." But for Christina, there is another side: "You know you're also being watched. It's almost a threat sometimes, when someone puts down a coin, and watches how you play. You know they're sussing you out for the next game."

For pool deals with more than a steady hand and a good eye. As one player observes: "Pool is less a game than a social event."

The barflies, the hustlers, the ▶

**"It is the comprehension of the moment ... instantaneous, here now, suddenly there ... showing us how quickly the world can be changed."** *Carlos Fuentes*



There is a place where all the good things in life converge. A place where worries disappear in a blur of good friends, good music, good food and cold beers. A place quite unlike any other. A place called...

## THE GREEN MAN

Turning other bars brown with jealousy.



The Green Man, Torringtons, Cavendish Close, Warwick Street, Claremont. Tel: 021-683 4437.

aficionados with their custom-made cues, young posers who play by probability, randomly meeting, challenging, passing through the night. One player at least has found a correspondence between the game and the people who play it.

"Most games of pool are erotic-esoteric, where both aspects deal with a synchronicity of bodily relations."

Gerhard Schoeman, pool player and masters student of Philosophy, doesn't hesitate to meld his chosen realms of profundity. He says: "The esoteric exists in the contemplation of balls on the table, the erotic in the body's relation to other bodies."

Pool is rife with the esoteric: hidden knowledge, positions and angles, trick shots. This is the "skill" part of pool – how to limit the luck factor, and stay the Joker's hand. Stun shots, screw shots, the half-masse.

Striking the cue ball just below centre is a "stun" – the cue ball will stop immediately after hitting the object ball. Striking the cue ball as low as possible, without pointing the cue downwards, will cause the ball to rotate backwards – a "screw". In both cases, squeeze the cue slightly at the moment of contact, which must be sharp, with no follow-through.

Either shot is useful in keeping the cue ball from following its objects down the pocket.

Tips don't come easy from the hard-core pool elite. Hidden knowledge is a hidden edge, and more. Such advantages distinguish the player, which is important. Reputation is the only real benefit of winning, league players and hustlers excepted.

The cue is also a sign. A good cue is as much a mark of distinction as an aid to the game.

Cues are available from R25 to R750, the most popular being a 57", 7½ ounce ashwood, sold at around R220. But in selecting a cue, the only rule seems to be "whatever feels good." The cue should be suited to the player's own hand.

But either way – learning the shots or choosing a cue, pool is a game to be dealt with in the actual playing. Only the rich own private tables. For the rest, it's the local pool bar. You want to learn? Slot in a

coin and take your blows.

And that is the beauty of the game – pool cannot be taken out of social context. The banter of the players, warped cues, cheap whisky, hazy light and rock guitars – every distraction is a part of the game.



The Stag's Head, Cape Town.

Pool is an amalgam of the abstract and the social – erotic and esoteric – and regarding the latter, Gerhard says: "Pool is a hedonistic, narcissistic game."


"Pool has everything to do with the body and movement. The way I play depends on who I play – it's a reaction to other people's characters."

"Consider: you're playing a woman. You'd like to beat her – that's the game. But since she's a woman, you start flirting with her. Games arise out of the game."

And one can imagine playing the game of a big man, showing some little lady the swerve or half-masse – cue held down with a shortened grip. The bridge-hand is raised to support the cue, which must stop sharply at the moment of contact. Striking the ball left or right of centre causes the ball to swerve – handy for escaping snookers, but only after a great deal of practice.

The following week you play her again. She hammers you. Such is pool. Such is life. The Joker grins.

But for every game lost and won, there are strangers meeting, interweaving, moving much like balls on the break, connecting by design or by fate.

Skill. Luck. And perhaps also magic. "There's a word I use," says Christina, "my voodoo charm to keep my opponent from sinking the black. When he takes the shot, I whisper, 'Jabberwocky', and that ball stays on the table. It's the best trick I know." 

**"The player can play eight trick-shots in a row, blow the nine, and lose. Or the player can sink the nine on the break ... and win. Which is to say, luck plays a part. But for some players, luck is everything."** Tom Cruise in *The Colour of Money*