

The Lost Tribe

By Peter Tankard

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A long time ago in a land far, far away...

When the First World War broke out in 1914 the nation of Canada was only 47 years old and her sons answered the call from Britain in large numbers. More than 600,000 Canadians served with distinction on the Western Front, more than one third of those volunteers were killed or wounded. Like many of the colonial regiments The Canada Corps was filled with intrepid frontiersmen and they often took the brunt of enemy attacks and suffered disproportionate casualties, particularly at the battles of Vimy Ridge and at Paschendale.

When the returning soldiers were finally repatriated they brought back with them a knowledge of English Billiards. Like returning warriors everywhere they felt the need to congregate together to share their joys and their sorrows. Across Canada Veterans Clubs were established to provide the opportunity for a meal together, a chance to share stories, to remember those who never made it back, a few drinks and some recreation.

In one city, Winnipeg in Manitoba (population 778,000), smack bang in the middle of the country that recreation included English Billiards. The local men had served with distinction in the legendary Fort Garry Horse Regiment, the original name of the settlement which became Winnipeg. The Winnipeg Veterans English Billiards League was established in 1921 and operates to this day.

Why the game survived in this city, a sophisticated island in a sea of more basic American pool games may be down to four things, the passions of the players themselves, the organisational abilities of the men running the league, a dedicated coach who took a personal interest in each new player and also perhaps Winnipeg's isolation.

The nearest big city is a flight way and back in those early days , without airports, the Trans-Canada Highway and an incomplete rail network the Gentlemen Players of Manitoba were forced to keep pretty much to themselves. They were aware that the sport existed elsewhere and they suspected that they were not alone but where and how to make contact was not clear and why would they even bother when travel was so impractical.

In fact English Billiards had been played for some years before the returning veterans established their league. Records at the stately Manitoba Club, (home to 6 full-sized tables in an oak panelled shrine to Billiards and later Snooker) date back to 1907, but it was the exceptional passion that the WVEBL players brought to the sport which saw it grow and prosper.

Even within the cue-sports community in Winnipeg the existence of the League was not well known as it was played in private membership based Veteran's clubs. The League's top player Fraser Durham, had played pool for more than a decade before he even heard about English Billiards in his city.

From 1971 comprehensive hand written records have been maintained for every match and every player. During that time new players were indoctrinated into the arts by "The Coach" Ray Trinder, who personally instructed each new player entering the league. He was a strong cannon player and red ball loser player so the accepted wisdom was about keeping the balls moving in the centre of the table. 30 and 40 breaks were the order of the day, centuries were very rare and as at 2017 the top

break in the 96 years history of the league is 143 (Al Senkiw) recorded in 1998-1999 season. According to Jon Miller current President of the WVEBL potting was “rather frowned upon”.

Coach would travel at his own expense across town by bus and by train to reveal the arts to each new player. The focus was on the half ball angles, position and pace control. To this day there is not a Canadian player who is not strong in these essential elements of the game.

Coach owned a couple of grainy old VHS videos of Jack Karnhem and of Walter Lindrum running close cannons, but as Grant Thiessen said: “They were certainly not good enough to learn from, especially Lindrum's nursery cannons. You could see he was scoring, and scoring fast, but technique was impossible to discern... Now the internet has shrunk the world, and Billiards is as easy to locate as going to Youtube.”

Play continued in splendid isolation for more than 80 years without any contact with the outside world until in 2006 (current world #1) Peter Gilchrist visited Canada. He had secured an exhibition at the Calgary Ranchmen's Club and when he was there he heard vague rumours of a group of players in Winnipeg, more than 1300 kms away across the vast Canadian prairie.

Just one year prior the WVEBL had established a website and Peter made contact with the Secretary of the League, Ron Liberty. Not quite knowing who or what this fellow with the strange accent wanted Ron put him in touch with the leagues' leading player, Fraser Durham.

Fraser emailed the guy back. “So you are from Calgary then and play a little Billiards?” was his first question. “Ummm no.”

Peter asked if they had a Canadian Championship and if so, was it open to other players? Fraser was not sure if Billiards was played anywhere else in Canada so a National Championship seemed like an outlandish idea.

Peter reported back to Phil Mumford of EBOS (and later WBL) about this group from somewhere called Winnipeg. Phil again contacted Fraser with the same questions, “is there a championship and if not would you be prepared to organise one?” Fraser was perplexed... “Who are these guys and what do they want?”

During these initial contacts Fraser heard that there were competitions elsewhere and as the lowest marker in the league resolved to find out if these guys were any good at the sport he had played all his adult life.

After some consideration Fraser decided to enter the 2008 Jersey EBOS tournament where he figured to combine a holiday in England with a little reconnaissance. He says he felt welcome and made many new friends “right from the get-go” and resolved to return the following year and enter along with the second lowest marker from the Winnipeg League, Rick Kendall.

Fraser and Rick had every reason to feel confident, they were the clear cut top players in Winnipeg and between them held more than 20 Lockwood Trophies, the annual invitation tournament for the Top 16 in the League.

2009 in Jersey was a tough field as Billiards was going global and Fraser and Rick were exposed for the first time to some of the top level players. Fraser's first match was against the eventual winner Rob Hall. “ Holy Crap, what is going on here? These guys were potting balls and herding the white up to the top of the table. Pot cannon pot cannon, pot, pot, cannon. Coach Trinder never told us about that!”

To their credit both Fraser and Rick went on to win matches with their elegant floating all round game, but it was the rapid and seemingly effortless scoring at the top which bedazzled them.

“Rick and I sat there watching the final between Roxton Chapman and Rob Hall. The entire time Rick was just muttering under his breath “Unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable”

“Early on Roxton made a run of 234 and Rob fired straight back with 199 then immediately again 196. There it was, in three visits they had compiled runs which were bigger than anyone had ever done in the then 88 years history of our league”

“We came home and spoke to the guys in the league “Boys we are playing the wrong game””.

Three years prior the World had discovered Winnipeg, now Winnipeg had discovered the world.

Quickly local interest was piqued, there were online videos now to watch, and there were names to be learned and a whole new language to pick up.

“Have you guys seen the videos of this Mike Russell? Can these guys really run 500? What’s this baulkline crossing thing? How about those Indians, how do you pronounce their names? “

After more contact and more visits from a number of players the idea of not just a national but an international tournament on Canadian soil began to take shape. It was a giant leap for players who had never competed in their own Canadian Championship to be inviting the world’s best into their home.

A committee was formed to do fundraising, to endorse referees to international standard to liaise with World Billiards and to plan out the first ever America’s Cup for 2013.

Al Senkiw a talented graphic and product designer came up with logos, signage and promotional materials. Raffles were held, social nights with wives, “spud and steak events”, Texas Hold ‘Em tournaments, barbeques, and lotteries. Big-hearted sponsors came forward, memorabilia was sold and those who were able gave generously to bring the top players in the world to Winnipeg Manitoba.

Long-time Canadian supporter Rob Hall agreed to play as did Guy Heys from Jersey. Phil Mumford, Chris Taylor and Martin Goodwill from the WBL signed up, so too did Nalin Patel and notable Indian players Dhruv Sitwala and Devendra Joshi. Carl Walter Steiner became the first player from Continental Europe to cross the Atlantic to play English Billiards. Surprisingly too Calgary professional Dan Scullion came out of the woodwork to play...there was another Canadian!

Billy Bousfield agreed to play and in a major coup for the locals so too did the King Himself, Mike Russell, described by the locals, with their highest accolade, as “the Wayne Gretzky of Billiards”.

The event was held in the historic Manitoba Club rented at significant cost especially for the occasion. The tables were brought up to International standard with rework, levelling and new cloths guided by resident Club Professional Greg Harder who also acted as Tournament director, assisted by Jon Miller.

The tournament was a huge success both for the locals and for the internationals and established a new and prestigious Regional Major event on the worldwide calendar. Jon Miller WVEBL President reported “we were all in awe of the first event” which by all reports was a huge success.

Both Mike and Rob stayed on after the tournament to do group and individual coaching with local league players and from that time onwards standards have leapt ahead as Canada has become more fully integrated into the community of World Billiards.

Later in 2013 Fraser attended his first World Billiards Championships in Leeds. After a 40 year apprenticeship he had finally arrived and was a popular figure with his quick fire action and friendly open nature and typically offbeat Canadian sense of humour. He was to be followed in later years by Rick Kendall, Dave Blacklaw, Greg Harder, Don Senkiw, Al Senkiw and Jon Miller.

The 2015 Americas cup was even bigger, with over CAD\$34000 raised and established a number of new firsts. In addition to the return of Russell, Hall, Patel and Sitwala, Indian up-and comer Siddarth Parikh made his debut. "CW" Steiner made a repeat appearance for Austria.

Gaye Jones became the first lady to play in the Western Hemisphere in a pro Billiards tournament. Ironically for Gaye she was also on the receiving end on another world first: Dhruv Sitwala running out 400unf against the hapless Ms Jones in a match to 400. A first anywhere in the world. The players were spellbound.

Dan Lewis, at the behest of WBL, consented to attend and assist Jon Miller to share his many years of experience in organising and running top level tournaments and took local Don Senkiw under his wing as Assistant TD to pass on the knowledge.

In a sign that Canada had truly arrived it was Kevin Augusta who recorded the first ever century from anyone from the Western Hemisphere at a WBL sanctioned tournament, the 2015 Americas Cup.

Canada now has 16 referees qualified to World standard and a growing expertise in tournament hosting and management.

For the third running of the Americas cup Billiards in 2017 Dan Lewis swapped places with Don Senkiw as the Apprentice became the Master. The Canadians have demonstrated a great capacity for pragmatism, organisational flair and fundraising. For the 2017 event they raised over CAD\$25,000 under the astute commercial leadership of Kevin Augusta and Garry Marshall, much of it spent on preparing beautiful playing conditions in two venues.

Guy Smith coordinated the successful efforts to secure corporate sponsorships with passion and enthusiasm. It was primarily through his efforts and doggedness that funds were raised by selling the raffle tickets and by attracting business sponsorships. His 'can-do' attitude kept other Committee members excited during lulls in the campaigns.

Jeff Corley and his wife Claire became the major sponsors through their company All About Windows. Jeff has pioneered and refined a uniquely Canadian solution for defogging and cleaning windows and has encouraged others Billiards players to become distributors of his system with a commitment to reinvest into Billiards tournaments.

Also enlisted to the cause was Rick Thain whose interests lie more on the administration and refereeing side of the sport rather than as a player. Rick was instrumental in championing the equipment upgrades at the main venue, Anavets Unit 283, including bringing together several groups to convince them to replace the cushions at their own expense. Rick also assisted in corporate fundraising, and served as one of the main referees at the tournaments. These efforts are especially commendable as Rick is not even a member of the WVEBL.

What is most impressive with this long list of names who pitch in and do their part is that it is a long list. In most corners of the world tournaments are cobbled together by a tiny group of individuals

who have so much to do that it is impossible to do everything well. The community based approach and camaraderie of the Winnipeggers divides the tasks among many willing hands and minds.

The 2017 WVEBL league results reflect the great improvements in the standard and style of play in Canada. From when records started to be maintained in 1971, the first recorded Century break was a 103 and with only 11 more Centuries throughout the three decades of the 70's, 80's and 90's. For the first time ever in 2017 five centuries were recorded in one season, a feat unimaginable a few years back.

The real test of any competition is the international players, talk to them and they will say this is their favourite tournament. The tables are superbly presented, running fast and true on new 6811 cloth. However while tables are important it is the people that make any tournament. The players of the WVEBL are gracious, generous, open and unpretentious. They know there is much to learn and they are interested to learn about the sport as it is played elsewhere.

The excitement is tangible, there is a sense of awakening and interest which is completely infectious and inspires everyone, both locals and visitors to work harder and improve their games. Everyone wants coaching, everyone shares their shots and their knowledge. The WVEBL are the group of enthusiasts we all strive to be.

Ironically Coach Trinder passed in 2013, right on the eve of the very first Winnipeg based International tournament, his death perhaps signalling the end of the era of isolation, his work was done. But it also marked the start of a bright new era when players from Winnipeg and Canada earn respect and honour with a seat at the world table.

Coach would be very proud of his boys.

Editor's note: The America's Cup in a biennial event and if you decide to only visit one tournament overseas, make it this one. You will never feel more welcome.

Canada is considering celebrating the 100th anniversary of the WVEBL by bidding to host the 2021 World Billiards Championships. That idea should find support amongst all players.

About the Winnipeg Veterans English Billiards League with Jon Miller, President and Webmaster at WVEBL.com

Q When was the WVEBL established?

A in 1921, vets stationed in the UK from the Fort Garry Horse Regiment brought the game back to Winnipeg.

Q. Were you aware before 2006 that there was a World Billiards championships?

No

Q. Did you know of any of the famous names of the past or the history of the sport?

A. Some guys might have but if you are asking me then no.

Q Did you know if Billiards was played in Australia?

A We did not know if Billiards was played in Toronto, so no

Q. How many players have played or are active in the League

A. Since we have been keeping records from 1971 there have been around 600 players of which around 80 are active right now. For the fifty years before that many more so well over one thousand. One of our guys Jim Simm has been an active player for 60 seasons.

Q What is the average age of players in the League.

A. I would guess around 60 or so, it takes a long time to learn this game

Q How long does the season run?

A. We play in winter when the Vets Clubs stay open later so we are usually 26 or 27 weeks of the year. It's a great night out in those dark winter months. In years gone by wives would always come out too and sit and watch and have a few drinks while the boys battled it out on the tables. Even today a lot of the ladies come along and meet up.

Q What is the match format?

A. We play to 200 off handicaps which can range from plus 50 to minus anything.

Q. How do handicaps work?

A. We have a plus 5 minus 5 system. Win a match and you go down, lose a match and you go up. New players come in on plus 30 so they have the opportunity to win a lot before the handicap catches up with them, unless they work hard and keep improving.

Q What about "stars". Say Rob Hall or Nalin Patel move to Winnipeg how do you handle that?

A. Well it just does not happen we are pretty isolated here and it is tough to learn for even great pool players coming in, but if they did firstly we would welcome them and then perhaps have a meeting to talk about it, but generally it works pretty well. Everyone knows the new guys will record

a lot of wins. The handicap catches them in the end. It takes many many years to get to the lowest score in the League

Q Who is the low marker

A Fraser is at minus 395 and is still tough to beat off that mark, Rick Kendall is not too far behind.

Q How do fees work?

A. We have a budget of a bit less than \$5000 a year which is a team fee of \$500 . We usually have nine or ten teams and that pays for trophies and a big presentation dinner.

Q I see the tables have coin slots to pay for lights

A Yes the club gets that income and it helps them to pay for maintaining the tables. They give us great support in the Veterans Clubs

Q What trophies do you play for?

The big event is the teams event, the WVEBL Shield. Lots of players who do really well have never won a shield so it is a big deal. We record the most shields players have won as well as the longest droughts between shields. Some guys have played 27 seasons and never won a shield.

We also contest the individual Lockwood Trophy for the lowest 16 markers in the League. Fraser has won 14 Lockwood's and I think Rick has won half a dozen or more.

We also play for the Bardal which is for middle markers and the McLean and Trinder trophies which are more for the novices and high handicappers.

Q So I guess the Lockwood is effectively the Canadian National championship?

A Well yes I guess it is when you put it that way.

Q Your league is very active, how do you keep it alive?

A Well they are all great guys. We enjoy each other's company as much as we enjoy the Billiards. It is not a chore because we actually like getting together and the games are full of banter and quite a bit of cursing. We really had to clean up our act for the WBL crowd. Don't worry we do not cuss the visitors, but watch the Canadians play each other and it is all backchat and teasing.

Q I see in your stats you have a "most feared" what does a guy have to do to win that?

A Well nothing too nasty, it's just about who you are not looking forward to playing, it's a mark of respect and its voted on.

Q Your stats are astonishing, with team and individual records for every single game since 1971.

A Yes and they are all done by hand by Addie our record keeper, and Secretary/Treasurer. He sits down every night and writes it all up. He must not like talking to his wife. Each team also maintains their own records which are checked against the master binder.

Then we publish the lists on the website at <http://www.wvebl.com/records/records.html> but only after they are double checked.

Q. Well Jon congratulations on a highly successful League, surely one of the oldest continuous leagues in the world and on running the WBL International events in Winnipeg.

A Yep, it's a lot of work, we start again raising funds the day after you guys leave, but we just love it.

Appendix

A Canadian Glossary

Like all isolated tribes the player of Winnipeg developed their own language, much of it drawn from the tribes around them, especially the American pool scene but with a Billiards twist.

“So I lost the lag, and he sent me in, but the red caught the horn, leaving an easy scratch.”

“Came to the table hooked behind the horn so played 3 rails with big siding and made the St James Cannon for a 24 run”

Horn = Knuckle

Hooked = Snookered or Angled

Run = break as is in “Al’s high run is 143”

Rail = cushion

Siding = side

Give = penalty

Follow = top spin

Draw = back spin

Lag= String (as in string for break)

Scratch = in-off or losing hazard

St James Cannon = fluke (St James is one of the clubs in the league)