

PRO PEER REVIEW

The cream of the crop pick the top players in 12 categories, and then share their tips for reaching superstar speed. —By Mason King

EFREN REYES. He's the best. Hand's down. Nobody else comes close. Anyone surprised?

We had to get that one out of the way before moving on to meatier discoveries in *BD*'s first skills survey in 20 years, in which we asked a critical mass of pool pros to name the top players in a dozen categories. You can settle up those bar bets now — although there was no Best Player category, Reyes received the most votes overall by a wide margin (see opposite page). He's not the four-time winner of the Derby City Classic Master of the Table Award for nothing.

There are more intriguing questions to ponder. Who is the toughest guy to beat in a final? Who would you pick to spear that eight-foot cut shot for the cash? Who will break your heart with a jump shot after you play a great safe? Who can keep it together with a world championship on the line? And who's going to pick up the check after dinner?

Nobody knows better than the pros themselves. We asked more than two-dozen current players to answer the survey, which included a mix of physical skills and some more intangible qualities (see opposite page). Respondents could choose up to three candidates for each category. For good measure, we also asked a handful of seen-it-all industry veterans to weigh in, including U.S. Open promoter Barry Behrman,

and international pool commentator Jim Wych. We culled results from 32 respondents in all.

For fun, we also threw in a few categories related to social skills: Most Generous, Best Dressed, and Best Chirper, i.e. most entertaining chatterbox at the table. (Strangely, the Worst Dressed category stumped everybody, apparently due to so many qualified candidates.)

Admittedly, the results aren't quite up to the standards of "Scientific American." Although a healthy chunk of the respondents hailed from the Philippines and Europe, the survey sample and results are still slanted a bit toward the U.S. — Reyes excepted. It was also evident that a few players received votes based more on reputation than current performance.

But the results and subsequent interviews with many of the winners provide a fascinating look into why certain players excel at different areas of the game. And as a bonus for readers, we asked several of the winners to share pointers on their particular talents, so you can bring your skill set up to their speed. So, that'll help with the perennial question: "How can I become as good as Efren?"

- MASTER STROKE - Larry Nevel

The pros interpreted the Best Stroke category in a variety of ways, rewarding

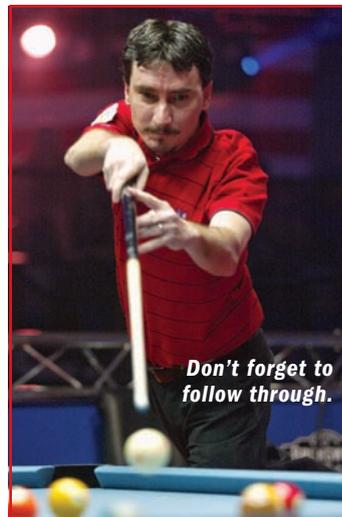
the technically flawless (Ralf Souquet), the silky stinger (Alex Pagulayan) and the distorted but beautifully effective (Efren Reyes). With 17 players named overall, one thing was apparent: Just about everyone at this level has a potent stroke. So, the majority of respondents went with the most impressive power stroke with wicked action. And that belonged to Wisconsin strongman Nevel.

"I've seen him do some crazy stuff on a pool table," said Rodney Morris, describing one of Nevel's signature stunts. "I've seen him do a one-handed jacked-up shot where the cue ball is frozen on the end rail and the object ball is all the way on the other rail, and he jacks up with one hand and pounds the cue ball. He makes the ball straight in the corner up table, and the cue ball draws all the way back to the other end of the table. It's unbelievable."

Gabe Owen thinks that Nevel has a future on the trick-shot circuit.

"It's just the way he draws the ball and effortlessly moves the ball around the table," Owen said. "The only stroke I've seen that you can compare to his stroke is Mike Massey. And Larry Nevel might be as good or better."

Nevel isn't exactly sure how he developed such a powerful weapon. "I've just always had it," he said. "I used to practice it all the time — crazy draw strokes and stuff like that. I guess maybe the dif-



Don't forget to follow through.

The Best Break: See Johnny Joust

+ TIPS +

NOT ONLY does Johnny Archer have the most controlled break, according to the pros, he has the best break overall. Here are his keys to an effective opening salvo:

- **Cue-ball delivery:** "The key is hitting the 1 ball as solid as possible. Whatever side you break on, and whatever angle you're going at, it needs to hit the fattest part of the 1 ball. There is no favorite side, no right side, no nothing. If you do that, hit it solid, there's only two ways it can go — forward or backwards, it can't glance off."

- **Power vs. control:** "What I try to do is hit them as hard as possible where I still can control the cue ball. And it might be different speeds every day. It may be 60 percent of my total power, it may be 70 percent, it could be 80 percent. Each day is different."

- **Use of English:** "I aim a little above center, but my stroke always comes down and adjusts to that. It's not that I try to do it. I just know my break. So if the cue ball is going forward a little on the break, I'll aim a little bit lower. To be honest with you, if the cue ball is going forward [after rack impact], a lot of times I'll aim even a little higher, because that makes me come down more. I kind of trick myself."

- **Follow-through:** "If I'm not breaking well, most of the time I'm not following through very well. I'm not really that strong, so I have to get power from a big follow-through and weight transfer. I have to get everything going at once, so my timing has to be pretty good. But follow-through to me is a big key, and it gives you just that little bit of extra 'oomph' on it. And it helps you shoot straighter."

BD SKILLS SURVEY RESULTS

- 32 respondents
- Each could name up to three players per category.
- Players with 2+ votes listed

STROKE



LARRY NEVEL (7)
Efren Reyes (6);
Rodney Morris (4);
Ralf Souquet,
Alex Pagulayan (3);
Dennis Orcollo,
Mike Massey (2)

"As far as stroking the ball and drawing it around four rails, Larry has that. He's on a different level."
— Gabe Owen

JUMPING



SHAWN PUTNAM (11)
Earl Strickland (5);
Yang Ching-Shun (4);
Johnny Archer (3);
Choa Fong-Pang,
Mika Immonen,
Thorsten Hohmann (2)

"With phenolic tips today, anybody can jump balls. It's with the leather tip that you need technique and skill."
— Putnam

BREAK (POWER)



FRANCISCO BUSTAMANTE (11)
Larry Nevel (8);
Charlie Bryant (5);
Wu Chia-Ching,
Jeff DeLuna (2).

"No one has timing action on the cue ball like he does. You have to coordinate like 10 different body movements."
— Charlie Williams

HEART



NICK VARNER (5)
Alex Pagulayan,
Efren Reyes,
Johnny Archer,
Ralf Souquet,
Jose Parica (3);
Francisco Bustamante,
Buddy Hall (2).

"I grew up watching Nick [on video] and just the way he grinded and tried hard, no matter what the score was."
— Gabe Owen

BREAK (CONTROL)



JOHNNY ARCHER (20)
Francisco Bustamante (4),
Ralf Souquet,
Cory Deuel, Wu Chia-Ching (2).

"For as hard as he's hitting them, his cue-ball control is fantastic. That's hard to do at the same time."
— John Schmidt

MENTAL GAME



RALF SOUQUET (13)
Efren Reyes (8);
Johnny Archer (6);
Nick Varner (2).

"He's one of those players who can be focused every time. He only thinks positively about what he has to do."
— Thomas Engert

POSITION



EFREN REYES (17)
Buddy Hall (6);
Nick Varner (3);
Johnny Archer,
Alex Pagulayan,
Thorsten Hohmann (2).

"He's the king when it comes to working out angles and getting through very small openings."
— Jim Wych

BEST IN FINAL



JOHNNY ARCHER (15)
Efren Reyes (8);
Ralf Souquet,
Earl Strickland (3);
Thorsten Hohmann,
Francisco Bustamante (2).

"When I play in the finals, I know there's just one match left to win now, and I guess that loosens me up a bit."
— Archer

KICKING



EFREN REYES (29)
Jose Parica (2).

"When I first came to the U.S., everybody just chance-kicked. I knew how to kick properly, and they were shocked."
— Reyes

Top Vote-getters In All 12 Skill Categories



1. EFREN REYES (89)
2. Johnny Archer (54)
3. Ralf Souquet (28)
4. Francisco Bustamante (23)
5. Earl Strickland (18)
6. Larry Nevel (16)
7. (tie) Nick Varner (14)
8. Mika Immonen (14)
9. Alex Pagulayan (14)
10. Shawn Putnam (11)

BANKING



JASON MILLER (8)
Efren Reyes (6);
Shannon Daulton (5);
Brian Gregg,
Mika Immonen (4);
Nick Varner,
John Brumback,
Tony Fargo (2).

"Most of it is feel, because conditions change. Some players use systems, but I don't think they hold up too well."
— Miller

SAFETY PLAY



EFREN REYES (22)
Francisco Bustamante,
Jose Parica,
Nick Varner,
Johnny Archer,
Mike Sigel,
Alex Pagulayan (2).

"Three-cushion billiards and balkline — he mastered those games, and that gives him an edge in safeties."
— John Schmidt

SHOTMAKING



EARL STRICKLAND (7)
Mika Immonen (4);
John Schmidt (3);
Alex Pagulayan,
Jose Parica,
Efren Reyes,
Cory Deuel,
Rodney Morris (2).

"In his prime, there was no hard shot. ... He always hits the ball firm, he hits it true and follows through."
— Rodney Morris

Most Generous



RODNEY MORRIS (8)
Efren Reyes (5);
Thorsten Hohmann,
Alex Pagulayan (3);
Mike Massey,
Ralf Souquet (2).

"It's from growing up in Hawaii. Everybody over there will do anything to help someone out."
— Morris

Best Dresser



THORSTEN HOHMANN (8)
Rodney Morris (5);
Mika Immonen,
Alex Pagulayan (4);
Stevie Moore (3);
Kim Davenport,
Mike Sigel (2).

"I have reinvested some of the money in some nice, custom-made shirts."
— Hohmann, after \$350,000 IPT win

Best Chirping/Table Banter



KEITH MCCREEDY (16)
Earl Strickland (12);
Mike Sigel (3);
Alex Pagulayan (2).

"He's so much fun to watch. You just don't know what he's going to do or say next."
— Corey Harper

SOCIAL SKILLS

PRO PEER REVIEW

ference was, when I played growing up, I always used extreme English on every shot. Anytime I use right-hand English, I never use a cue-tip of right-hand English, I use extreme English. ... Of course, it's having the accuracy to do it, as well as the power. Most people are not used to shooting with that much English."

- BOMBS AWAY -

Francisco Bustamante

Nevel has a ballistic break to go with that big stroke, but no one brings the pain

on the 1 ball like Francisco Bustamante. His break is less a power stroke than a full-body salute — a hip-thrusting surge that ends with a balletic back kick.

"He's a small guy, but his timing is so strong, he gets the maximum force out of his movement on the break," said Charlie Williams. "That's why he can outbreak guys three times his size. It's kind of like Tiger Woods when he drives."

The thing is, if the cue ball doesn't hit the 1 ball squarely, it's likely to take an ill-fated trip around the rails. Bustamante

didn't really become a great breaker until he added a measure of control to his stroke. He always aims one tip below center, with no side English, to squat the cue ball.

"I spot low," Bustamante told *BD*. "Most of the time, the cue ball hits the rack, jumps up from the table but stays in the middle. And you have to hit it right in the middle of the 1 ball, because if you hit it on one side, you might scratch, or you might jump the cue ball off the table."

- CONTROL FREAK -

Johnny Archer

You'll get no argument from Johnny Archer, who dominated the category of Most Controlled Break. For that matter, the six-time Player of the Year is likely the Most Controlled Player. Longtime sweaters know that "The Scorpion" can become a tad, um, *deliberate* when he's really focused. "I might be on there for Slowest Player," Archer joked before taking the survey.

But why mess with success? Not only did Archer get the nod for best control, but several players singled him out for best overall break as well.

"His cue ball control, for as hard as he's hitting them, is fantastic," said John Schmidt. "It's pretty easy to just squat your ball, and it's pretty easy to just hit them real hard — I can do both — but it's hard for me to do both at the same time. It's hard for anybody to do both at the same time, and I think he has mastered it — and that's from the box or the rail."

Archer knows the importance of the opening salvo. "A lot of guys take it for granted," he said. "They just get up and hit as hard as they can. I concentrate so much on the break, to try to hit that 1 ball as solid as possible, that I probably take more time and more strokes on the break than on any other shot." [See Archer's sidebar on page 36 for further detail.]

- TABLETOP VIRTUOSO -

Efren Reyes

Reyes owned the middle section of the survey — the classifications dealing with cue-ball control, position play and manipulating object balls. He ran away with three nuts-and-bolts categories — Position, Kicking, and Safety Play.

The pros pointed to Reyes' extensive background in other games, painting the beloved "Bata" as a sort of Olympic-level cross-trainer in cue sports. Specifically, Reyes' prowess in carom-billiard games such as three-cushion and balkline has given him an edge in pocket games




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when it comes to controlling traffic on the table.

“He’s at a world-class level in [billiards], and that is all kicking,” said Morris. “It’s all using rails and going around the table. He sees the stuff that three-cushion players see, but that us 9-ball players don’t. And he knows what speed to hit balls and at what angle to hit them to see the best results.”

When Reyes first arrived in the U.S. in the mid-1980s, his forethought and touch on kick shots caused jaws to drop on the men’s circuit. At that point, most guys weren’t interested in more than making contact. Reyes excelled at — and still excels at — finding the creative kick and then accounting for Plan B.

“When I kick, my main thought is safety play; where can I put the cue ball, and where exactly is the object ball going,” Reyes said. “If I miss, I make sure to miss on the side of the ball that allows me the best safety play. Making a ball on a kick shot is luck, so you have to anticipate where the balls will go if you miss.”

With a crafty stroke that applies surprising amounts of action, Reyes can go just about anywhere on the table he wants.

“Reyes is the king when it comes to working out angles and getting to areas of the table, and especially when there are very small openings to get there,” Jim Wych said. “Nobody in the world that I’ve ever seen has been in his class.”

Reyes is creative enough that he can take unusual chances on his runouts. When a move fails, he’ll beat you by ducking.

“All of us on tour know where we want to put the cue ball to hide the guy, but most of us are a few inches off,” Schmidt said. “Efren gets it right more times than not and locks you up. And then, if you lock him up, he is so good at kicking and hitting the ball, he gets out of it. So it’s double tough.”

Want to be like “Bata”? Try the position and safety drills Nick Varner has suggested at right.

-MONEY IN THE BANK- Jason Miller

Not surprisingly, Reyes nearly snapped off Best Banker as well. But a slim majority rewarded Miller, who stole Reyes’ thunder in 2006 by winning the Derby City Master of the Table distinction on the strength of his 9-ball banks title.

Miller, a sports-bar owner in Dayton, Ohio, is one of several talented bankers who matriculated in the Midwest. Guys like Shannon Daulton and John Brumback

+ DRILLS +

Nick Picks Skill Shots

In addition to having the most heart among pros, BD columnist Nick Varner has hundreds of drills to help you hone your skills. Try these exercises to improve your banking, kicking and safety play.



Nick Varner’s Bank Drill:

- Set up balls between the side pockets and, using ball in hand, bank each to the opposite corner.

For Best Results:

- Use a center-ball hit.
- Vary your speed to determine which works best.
- Move the object balls farther away to increase difficulty.

Nick Varner’s Kicking Drill:

- Set up your cue ball along the long rail and practice kicking an object ball that sits an inch off the rail. Once you’ve mastered it from each cue-ball position, move the object ball laterally to different positions along the long rail.
- You’ll need to use right English from the first cue-ball position to sink the 1 ball. From the second cue-ball position on, use center-ball.
- Keep your speed consistent and your cue level.

Nick Varner’s Safety Exercise:

- This drill is for two people.
- This is the game of 9-ball, but the object is to shoot a safety so that your opponent cannot sink the next ball.
- Break the balls as you would in 9-ball; if you make one, shoot again.
- If a player elects to pocket the ball off of his opponent’s defensive shot and he is successful, he receives a point.
- Once a ball is pocketed, the player has to shoot defensively on the next ball.
- You can play to a specified number of points or racks.



Immonen: Straight Talk on Shooting

MIKA IMMONEN is one of the game's foremost shotmakers. Here's why:

•**Cross-training:** "As part of my background, I played snooker and pyramid. The difference between the ball and the pocket is so narrow, you really have to bear down and follow straight through. I think that helped my technique, because in those kinds of shots, with those kind of tables and balls, you start seeing the exact point. You start feeling it, and you know it's going."

•**Confidence:** "When I'm on and playing confident and instinctively, I can make any ball. The only way to miss it is to have doubts or second-guess yourself. I'm a first-sight player. When I go down on the shot, I know this is it. Every once in a while, you're like, 'Hmm, this may not be it,'

and then sure enough it's not. You have to get up and adjust."

•**English:** "The key really is to play as much center ball as possible, because that is always the most accurate shot. The key is getting the right angle on the shot so you can hit center ball or close to center ball. If you're a beginner, start with center ball. Gradually, when you get confidence, start playing English."

DRILL 1: "I'm always checking my alignment. I shoot the cue ball up and down the table and try to make it land on my tip. Sometimes your head is not right, and you are doing something sub-consciously wrong. If the cue ball doesn't come back, then you make adjustments. This also is a good way to make sure you have a nice smooth follow-through. You cannot poke the ball."

Drill 1

Diagnose your alignment: Kick the cue ball off the end rail and see if it returns to your cue tip.

have bigger reps. In fact, Miller rarely plays in tournaments beyond the annual Louisville pool-a-palooza, but his two Derby City banks titles (the first in 2004) have made him the man to beat at the biggest meet of the year.

Miller attributed his bank prowess in part to growing up in Dayton with cushion wizard Gary Spaeth. They helmed the champion men's open team at the 1990 VNEA International Championships and went on to win two more VNEA team titles.

"I'm sure I picked up more from [Spaeth] than anybody else," Miller said. "That, and just mixing it up with better players."

Like a lot of master bankers, Miller has played enough to simply rely on feel. He certainly doesn't use systems.

"No, just because the conditions change," he said. "Different cloth. Humidity changes the shortness or length of the bank, and how new or old the cloth is. ... I see a lot of shots. I know some of the players use the systems, but they don't hold up too well, I don't think."

-SHOTMAKER SUPREME- Earl Strickland

Of course, if you're managing the table correctly, you don't have much need for banks. But some shots are harder than others, especially when the pressure's on. Who could nail that table-length shot, for all the marbles? It's Earl Strickland.

"Earl will be the first one to tell you that nobody will make shots like me and Earl," said Rodney Morris, who has teamed with Strickland with great suc-

cess at the Mosconi Cup. "Earl is like, 'Me and you are the best shotmakers.' No one is going to beat us on tight equipment."

Morris also has practiced alongside Strickland at their home base in Spring Hill, Fla., and he's seen Strickland's extensive training regimen.

"He's basically the best because he practices all those tough shots," Morris said. "In 9-ball, a lot of times that one hard shot is going to win you the match, and over the years he has proven he can make them. ... He tries to let his stroke out. He tries not to hit the ball soft. He tries not to baby the ball or let the table beat him. He always hits the ball firm, he hits it true and follows through."

Mika Immonen follows the same principles. Check out his tips (above) for precision shooting.

-AIR APPARENT- Shawn Putnam

Putnam loves to jump. He takes great pride in it. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the art practically before he could sink a ball via the more direct route.

"I was always infatuated with jump shots, because I saw Earl Strickland shooting jump shots on TV, and he was just amazing," he said. "So, we used to go to the bowling alley and practice jumping the cue ball off the wall and back on the pool table. And we would see how high we'd get it off the ceiling and then back on. I was 17 or 18. I was real young. I didn't even know how to make a bridge. Then we started messing around,

jumping from table to table, trying to make balls."

Years of such practice have given Putnam a sixth-sense for key elements such as trajectory, velocity and landing points. You can develop your own skills with Putnam's tips on page 41.

-NO QUIT- Nick Varner

The irony is almost cruel. The guy with the most heart had a heart episode at the 2004 Derby City Classic, while trying to grind out a match.

"All of a sudden I could hardly walk. It was a big surprise and it was really painful," he said. "I was glad the match was over so I could get to the emergency room. The match didn't take too long, because I could hardly get to the table."

Think about it. Varner suffered intense symptoms from a condition that required bypass surgery, and he stayed to finish the match. Now that's heart.

"[Growing up watching Varner] it always seemed like he had more heart than everybody else," said Gabe Owen. "Buddy Hall had more natural talent, and Mike Sigel was more naturally talented. But he won just as many tournaments as those guys did. I believe he had more heart than all those guys."

"I don't think anybody has ever been real happy when they see my name opposite theirs on the board," Varner said. "They know at the very least they're going to have a tough match on their hands, because I'm going to be ready to play, and I'm going to play as hard as I possibly can."



Putnam: The Joy of Jumping

+ TIPS +

• **Diagram 1:** One key to jumping is knowing the trajectory of your cue ball. Putnam likes to visualize the cue ball directly over the impending ball, with a nice cushion for error. The line from that ghost ball to the cue ball creates an angle, and your cue should be elevated at that angle or greater. "Normally, you give yourself a little extra," says Putnam.

• **Diagram 2:** Once you know the angle of your cue, you'll know where to contact the cue ball. If, as in the example, your cue is at a 40-degree angle, imagine the ball's equator shifting to the same angle. If you hit along the equator, you're effectively hitting at center-ball. To draw the cue ball once it hits the table, or to get more pop in your jump, hit a bit below the equator.

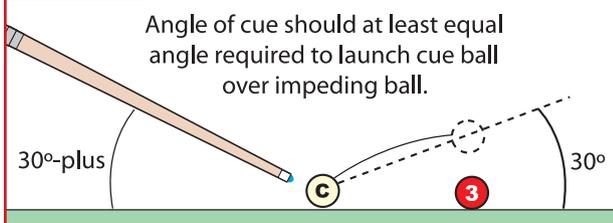
• **Diagram 3:** Your goal, especially on short jumps,

should be to land the cue ball so that it hits the table and object ball simultaneously. Among other things, that gives you the best shot at playing position after contact (assuming you applied English to the cue ball). If you fly short or long, bouncing on the table or off the object ball likely will sabotage your shot.

• **Diagram 4:** If the object ball is a significant distance from the impending ball, land the cue ball quickly after jumping the obstacle. The cue ball then can roll naturally to the target.

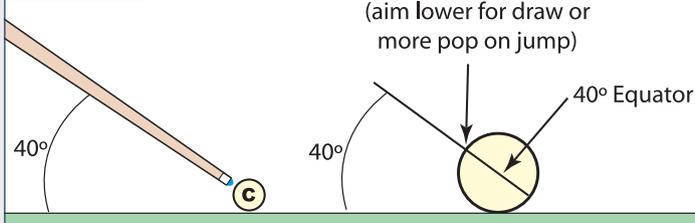
RULE NO. 1: "You can't be scared of hitting the cue ball. You have to accelerate into the cue ball instead of decelerate. Everybody tightens up right before they pull the trigger, and they decelerate. After the practice stroke, you should pop it at a harder speed than the practice stroke."

Diagram 1



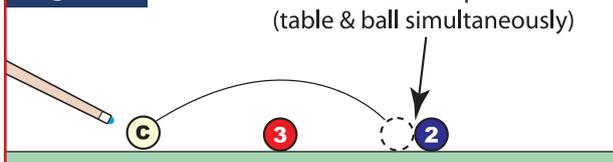
Angle of cue should at least equal angle required to launch cue ball over impending ball.

Diagram 2



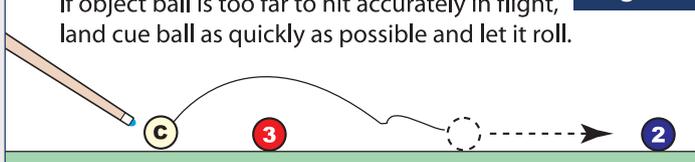
Cue tip contact point (aim lower for draw or more pop on jump)

Diagram 3



Best contact point (table & ball simultaneously)

Diagram 4



If object ball is too far to hit accurately in flight, land cue ball as quickly as possible and let it roll.

-HEAD MASTER-

Ralf Souquet

It's easy to assign a Zen mindset to Souquet, since the even-tempered and bald-headed world champion looks like he learned how to play pool in a monastery. But nobody works harder at staying sharp, upbeat and in the moment than Souquet, winner for Best Mental Game.

"When Ralf's in a match, he's only thinking positive about what he has to do," said German countryman Thomas Engert. "When he's in the chair, he picks a spot on the floor, and he's always watching on the spot. ... His temper is always the same. He is always level."

As he neared the final at the 2006 World Pool Championship, Souquet explained to the press his thought-process in later rounds of tournaments.

"I don't think about winning the event," he said. "I try only to think from match to match, because when I start thinking about what could happen in the future, you may lose focus on the first step, which is the most important one."

There's a tactical side to that focused countenance as well, said Wych. And the German players, in particular, exploit it.

"It's all business with them," Wych said. "They are very controlled, very measured. They show no emotion whether it's on the upside or the downside. They don't expose any weaknesses that can be used against them. They don't want to give their opposition anything on which to build."

-THE CLOSER-

Johnny Archer

If the survey has a glamour category, this would be it. Who is the toughest guy to beat in a final? Who comes through when it's all on the line? Most pros reasoned that the champion this category would be the guy who has won the most consistently over the years. And that would be Archer, six-time Player of the Year.

But why? It appears to be Archer's combination of superior skills, resilient mental game and confidence.

"He's got a strong belief in himself, and he's a great player, which gives him confidence, and the confidence makes him a great player; it's kind of a vicious cycle for his opponent," said Schmidt. "He relies on experience, and he has a

ton of pool knowledge. He's just a super-talented player, and he doesn't dog it."

"It's his mental toughness," said Gabe Owen. "He plays every shot like the last shot, which is how you're supposed to play, but it's easier said than done. And he does it. He plays every shot, whether he's winning 8-0 or he's down 8-0, the same way."

After winning the Turning Stone Classic in February, Archer provided a glimpse into his psyche during final matches.

"When I play in the finals, a lot of time I'm loose. I mean, not every final. Some finals I don't feel loose. But it just seems like I know there is just one match left to win, and I guess that loosens me up. ... I know this is it. If win this one, it's over."

Not surprisingly, Archer finished second only to Reyes in the survey, in terms of overall votes (89 to 54). Of course, the numbers and opinions don't mean much when it's just two guys at the table. We're tempted to dream of a high-profile challenge match, Reyes vs. Archer, race to 17, for a suitable sum. And we, the spectators, would be the real winners.