



NEW WORLD ORDER

ASIAN AND EUROPEAN PLAYERS HAVE CAUGHT UP TO THE U.S. IN POOL, WINNING THE VAST MAJORITY OF PRO TITLES AND PRIZE MONEY — AT HOME AND ABROAD. WHAT HAPPENED TO AMERICA? BY MASON KING



AS THE FIELD of 200 players at the International Pool Tour's debut event of 2006 dwindled to six, the event's TV-savvy organizers corralled the final competitors and positioned them around a table for a grim-faced video promo.

A camera suspended over the table slowly rotated 360 degrees to reveal the menacing face of each competitor — the top six players in the world at that moment. Efren Reyes, Marlon Manalo and newcomer Dennis Orcollo represented the Philippines; red-hot Ralf Souquet and Thorsten Hohmann flew the German flag; and plucky Russian Evgeny Stalev rounded out the group.

But the truly intriguing development wasn't so much which players reached the final sextet, but rather who *wasn't* among the finalists.

Although more than half the starting field of the IPT North American Open 8-Ball Championship hailed from the U.S. — 104 total — none were able to slip into the final bracket. Of the richest tournament in history. On their home turf in Las Vegas. In fact, in the previous round, only three Americans breached the final 18,

and two of them were qualifiers — not top-ranked pros or IPT members.

But that was just one event, you say. It was a fluke.

Perhaps. But it was a fairly accurate representation of how the U.S. now stacks up in international competition. Which is to say, beginning to lag behind players from Asia and Europe.

The country that invented pool is now perhaps its third-best practitioner. Americans on the whole are getting thumped in straight-up competition at major international tournaments, while players from Europe and Asia are strolling away with pro trophies on American soil. Not only that, they're taking home a vast majority of the prize money.

Meanwhile, America's leading lights are few and somewhat fallible. Johnny Archer has been carrying the load for the U.S., but blows hot and cold, and has recently performed best in mid-tier and invitational events (see story on page 78). Earl Strickland is arguably America's most reliable cue in international competition, yet he's just as likely to suffer a foul-mouthed meltdown as take home a trophy. Rodney Morris has become pool's

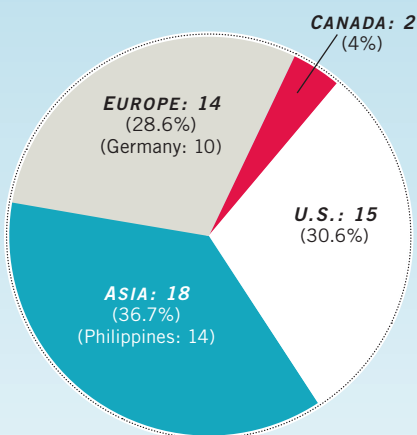
version of Phil Mickelson — an enormously talented and big-hearted guy who frequently stalls before the final push. (Ironically, all three play like gangbusters against Europe at the annual Mosconi Cup team competition, but don't always fare as well in mano-a-mano events.)

"It's not that the Americans do not have the talent," said Tony Robles, the most recent American winner (in 2004) of the Billiard Congress of America's annual pro 9-ball championship, considered one of pool's "major" events. "It's just that the Europeans and the Asians and everyone else around the world are working that much harder on their games."

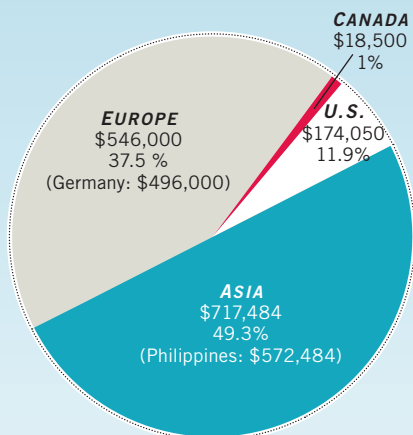
The evidence is plain in the tournament brackets and prize payouts of the last 20 months. *Billiards Digest* culled a list of 49 pro pool titles won between Jan. 1, 2005, and Aug. 31, 2006, and found that Americans took home only 15 — or about 30 percent. Mind you, the vast majority of those events were held in the U.S. Even more shocking, American players pocketed a miniscule portion of the available first-place prize money — about \$174,000 of just under \$1.5 million total, or 12 percent.

HOW THE U.S. STACKS UP

Pro Tournament Titles
(Total: 49, since Jan. 1, 2005)



First-Place Prize Money
(Total: \$1,456,034, since Jan. 1, 2005)



TO gauge America's performance versus the world's other pool powerhouses, *BD* culled the winners of 49 pro pool events held between Jan. 1, 2005, and Aug. 31, 2006. Some surprising findings:

- Although 82 percent of the events were held in the U.S. (40 of 49), American players won less than a third of the titles overall (15).
- The Philippines, which has roughly one-third of America's population (88 million to 295 million), almost

matched the U.S. in title wins — 14 to 15.

- Asians and Europeans together won a whopping 87 percent of the available first-place prize money — more than \$1.26 million.

METHODOLOGY: Chosen events had a minimum of \$6,000 in first-place prize money, with the exception of the 2005 World Games. Chosen events either took place in the U.S. or had a representative sampling of U.S. players.

The shift in the balance of power is real, and the international pool community has taken notice.

"I would say that Europe as a whole is stronger than the U.S. as a whole, and I don't think either one of them is competitive to Asia," said John Lewis, treasurer and board member of the World Pool-Billiard Association (WPA).

Several circumstances have contributed to America's slip to pedestrian status. In the last 20 years, several nations have built pool support organizations and networks that are now churning out world champions. At the same time, promising foreign players are now more likely to travel to pool hotspots like the U.S. and earn valuable road experience. And many American players had become lackadaisical about practicing their craft, in the face of meager tournament purses that barely averaged out to a living wage.

Money is a reliable motivator. The giant prize funds now offered by the IPT have sparked a tsunami of optimism among American players, who boast about their

renewed practice regimens.

"We've always said for years that if there were big money in pool, the level of play would go up," said American Charlie Williams. "You're going to see the level of pro pool in the U.S. definitely go up."

Of course, as seen at the IPT's North American 8-Ball Open, the rest of the world got the same memo.

THE PHILIPPINES fired the first big salvo in this international melee when 30-year-old Efren Reyes dropped into Red's Open 9-Ball Championship in 1985 under an assumed name and blew away the 108-player field. But Reyes' subsequent barnstorming tours of the U.S. at first could have been considered an anomaly.

The first real sign of a sea change came in 1989, when 22-year-old German Oliver Ortmann shocked the field at the BCA U.S. Open 14.1 Championships by beating Steve Mizerak, 200-186, for the title. He was the first non-American winner in

the history of the event.

Ortmann said at the time, "There are many good players in Europe, but we are all young, between 20 and 25 years old. We still have much to learn, but I think in five years we will be even with the Americans."

They learned quickly, along with some fast-emerging Asian players.

Created in 1990, the WPA's World Pool Championship was dominated in its first three years by Americans. Then, in 1993, steely Taiwanese ace Fong-Pang Chao, 26, sauntered off with the international 9-ball title, followed in the next three years by winners from Japan and Germany. The U.S. has claimed the title once since 2000.

As Asians and Europeans continue to excel in international competition, what has become painfully evident is that these new powerhouses of pool take player development much more seriously than the U.S., with extensive support systems for billiards, and even assistance offered by regional and national governments.

The perfect example today is 17-year-old Chia-Ching Wu, current WPA world 8-ball and 9-ball champion and the product of Taiwan's national push for billiard excellence started by pool promoter Yung-Hui Tu.

In 1988, Tu founded the Chinese Taipei Billiards Association, which created a supporting infrastructure for all elements of the sport — setting rules, promoting training, organizing pro and amateur ranks, and staging hundreds of tournaments for all levels of play.

The game's popularity skyrocketed with subsequent medal wins in the Asian Games, and again in 2000 when Chao won his second world title. Schoolkids suddenly had heroes. In the early 1990s, Taiwan's National Sports Council accorded billiards the same status as high-school sports like basketball, soccer and ping-pong. As of late 2005, 20 high schools fielded billiard teams, using school time and resources to develop young talents through professional coaching and regular competition. Wu emerged from such a program.

Similarly, Europe has extensive infrastructure for competition and player development. The European Pocket Billiard Federation, the continent's governing body for pool, counts 36 member countries with separate governing bodies, many of which sponsor juniors programs and regional and national competitions.

The Netherlands and Germany, in par-

ticular, have strong youth support programs. And even national governments help develop players. Emerging German players can join the Army's sports support program and practice pool daily with top-notch instruction. Hohmann, the \$350,000 winner of this year's debut IPT event, was in such a program for five years.

The great exception to this model of national organization is the Philippines, which has produced perhaps the strongest contingent of pool players in the world — led by national icon Reyes — almost entirely through its hard-scrabble gambling culture.

"Pool is intrinsically part of the culture in the Philippines," said Luke Riches, media director for U.K.-based pool promoter Matchroom Sport, which will produce the 2006 World Pool Championship in Manila this November. "Reyes and [Francisco] Bustamante and all that lot were just raised in pool from a young age."

However, after a poor overall showing at the 2005 World Pool Championship, the country's pool czars decided to get serious. They started organizing the sport with regional and global affiliations, a training academy, a national championship, and an official ranking system. (See related story, page 59.)

"We are in danger of being left behind in the sport," said Yen Makabenta, new chairman of the Billiard and Snooker Congress of the Philippines. "We have to develop our young talent, give them opportunities to achieve."

IRONICALLY, MANY of the best players from the world's new pool superpowers come to America to get the extra seasoning required to succeed on the elite level — as well as to feed off the lower-hanging tournament prize funds.

For example, Manalo of the Philippines challenged himself to travel to the States alone in May 2005 and hit several West Coast events. He snapped off the Sands Regency Reno Open and Hard Time Jamboree within weeks.

"He needed to get away from the scene here," said Jaocuin Perez de Tagle, founder of the BSCP. "Now I can see that he has matured as a player. ... He's really mentally tough."

Little-known countryman Dennis Orcollo made an almost identical journey this year, also winning the Reno Open in his first trip to the U.S. Months later he finished third at the IPT North American 8-Ball Open, collecting \$80,000.

U.S. JUNIORS SHUT OUT

The WPA World Junior 9-Ball Championships has been dominated by Asians and Europeans since its inception in 1992. (Women's division added in 2004.)

YEAR	WINNER	COUNTRY
1992	Hui-Kai Hsia	Taiwan
1993	Hui-Kai Hsia	Taiwan
1994	Jorn Kjolaaas	Norway
1995	Kung-Chang Huang	Taiwan
1996	Kung-Chang Huang	Taiwan
1997	Christian Goteman	Germany
1998	Hui-Chan Lu	Taiwan
1999	Hui-Chan Lu	Taiwan
2000	Dimitri Jungo	Switzerland
2001	Brian Naithani	Germany
2002	Ying-Chieh Chen	Taiwan
2003	Vilmos Foldes	Hungary
2004	Yu-Lan Wu (M)	Taiwan
	Meng-Meng Zhou (F)	China
2005	Yu-Lun Wu (M)	Taiwan
	Jasmin Ouschan (F)	Austria

But Filipinos aren't the only pool tourists.

"Europeans have become very acclimated to playing in America; they come over here so much, it has become like a second home," said Williams, noting for example that Hohmann has established residency in Florida.

"They learned how to play in Europe, but they definitely honed their competitiveness in America," Williams said.

Some European players like Hohmann stick to the tournament circuit, while others like Sweden's Marcus Chamat and Holland's Niels Feijen also hit the road and gamble. Chamat, in fact, has also spent a good deal of time in the Philip-

pires sharpening his skills, as has Finland's Mika Immonen.

But, while Asian and European players tend to seek out competition around the world, Americans tend to stay put.

"You don't hear about Americans moving, like Johnny Archer moving to the Philippines, or Rodney Morris moving to Taiwan," Williams said. "That doesn't happen. That only happens in America. We still have the best events. America still has the most opportunity."

So, why aren't Americans winning more events? One theory is that the player development model in the U.S. basically consists of getting a stakehorse or fat bankroll and hitting the road.

"Our teaching is just to go out and get broke," said Gabe Owen, winner of the 2004 U.S. Open 9-Ball Championship, who cut his teeth on the road in action matches. "That's the only way I've ever known."

Americans may learn how to deal with the high-stakes pressure of gambling, but it's not exactly the same pressure and environment as a mainstream tournament, said Jim Wych, pool promoter and TV commentator.

"The gambling mindset is different," Wych said. "It's a mindset that Americans probably do pretty well with, but in tournaments there is no tomorrow. In gambling, you can reassess things and come back tomorrow with a bigger bankroll."

Of course, part of the appeal of life on the road is that there may be greater potential to strike it rich. For example, 32-year-old Larry Nevel of the U.S. recorded his biggest payout as a pro at the IPT's North American 8-Ball Open — \$30,000 for a 17th-place finish. However, he already had reached that plateau gambling.

"Apart from the IPT, there just isn't

U.S. vs. WORLD: 1-5

With giant fields from all over the planet, the annual World Pool Championship 9-ball event may be the most accurate gauge of national performance. Here's how the U.S. has fared since 2000, including Americans who reached the top 8.

YEAR	WINNER	U.S. IN TOP 8
2000	Fong-Pang Chao (Taiwan)	2 (Cory Deuel and Earl Strickland, T-3rd)
2001	Mika Immonen (Finland)	1 (Jeremy Jones, T-5th)
2002	Earl Strickland (USA)	2 (Strickland; Johnny Archer, T-5th)
2003	Thorsten Hohmann (Germany)	1 (Earl Strickland, T-3rd)
2004	Alex Pagulayan (Philippines)	1 (Johnny Archer, T-5th)
2005	Chia-Ching Wu (Taiwan)	1 (Rodney Morris, T-3rd)

enough money in tournaments right now," Wych said.

It's a cold fact of life in U.S. pro pool circles that even the elite players struggle to make a living at pool. Prior to the creation of the IPT in 2005, the typical top prize for a pro tournament hovered around \$12,000 (apart from a few well-endowed international and made-for-TV invitational events).

In 2004, about a dozen male players

won more than \$50,000 in pro-tournament prize money, with only two cracking \$100,000 (Filipinos Reyes and Alex Pagulayan). That kind of money goes far in Asia, but not in the U.S.

The money was so bad that some players at least temporarily quit pool and tried their luck on the poker circuit, including George San Souci. Promising pool pro Nick Schulman, 21, won \$2.1 million in a World Poker Tour event in 2005.

Subsistence living as a pool player didn't inspire great practice habits for many players, or extraordinary commitment to the game. Family men Robles and Morris, both winners of major events, were considering leaving pool before the creation of the IPT.

"I started to explore other avenues, but now we've got some money [in the game]," Morris said in late 2005. "We can make a living. It feels exciting again."

Several U.S. pros started hitting the practice table every day. "I haven't done that in 15 years," an enthusiastic Archer told *BD* in late 2005, in a telling admission.

THE PROS are likely correct: The IPT will ramp up everyone's game. The tour's mammoth payouts also will flush out several lesser-known U.S. talents who have the potential to be world champs. For example, David Matlock, a former pro who essentially retired from the pro circuit, was the highest-finishing American at the North American 8-Ball Open, securing an impressive tenth-place finish as a qualifier.

But more could be done. Both Robles and Williams called for continued development of the BCA's junior program, which principally organizes qualifiers for its annual Junior National Championships and produces the event.

"Europe and Asia have strong junior programs," Williams said. "They're turning out world-class players like they're machines. We're not."

For example, since the creation of the WPA's World Junior 9-Ball Championships in 1992, no American has won the event (see table on page 49).

The task of junior development naturally falls to the BCA, which is the WPA's member organization and governing body for pool in North America. However, the BCA recently refined its mission to further focus on its role as a trade association for the billiard industry, leaving the junior program a lower priority. The program accounted for 3 percent of the BCA's total program expenses in its 2004-2005 fiscal year.

"Youth pool in this country is not organized," said the WPA's Lewis, former director of leagues and player programs for the BCA. "No one is taking a strong direction with this in the U.S. It's really about the youth, and the fact that we're not doing this is what's going to turn us into a second-rate country very soon, if we in fact aren't already."

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