


 A photograph of Allison Fisher, a professional pool player, leaning over a pool table. She is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt with a patch on the sleeve and a watch on her left wrist. She is holding a pool cue in her right hand and is about to take a shot. The pool table has a blue felt top and several balls are visible. In the background, there is a blurred crowd and a sign that says "ACK".

THE GREATEST

After 50 Classic Tour wins, it's time to talk about Allison Fisher's place among other sports legends.

Story by Mason King

IT'S TIME we stopped comparing Allison Fisher to Jean Balukas, and started comparing her to Roger Federer.

And Martina Navratilova. And Tiger Woods. And Annika Sorenstam.

Fisher has put together a record-breaking, opponent-crushing, trophy-hoisting run over 24 years in cue sports that rivals that of any athlete in any sport. Not that anyone outside of pool has noticed.

Take Federer, for example. The 26-year-old Swiss steamroller seized his 50th singles tennis title on Aug. 19. It received the usual accolades and scrutiny — features in all the major newspapers, a shout-out on SportsCenter. Pundits asked, “Is he the greatest ever?”

Just two weeks earlier on Aug. 5, Fisher had scored her 50th title on the WPBA Classic Tour at the U.S. Open in Lincoln, R.I. It didn't exactly make the newswires, although you'll eventually be able to see it on ESPN when the taped broadcast airs at 4:30 p.m., Oct. 14.

The national media's third-class treatment of pool is a whole other story. The point is that Allison Fisher deserves to be in the same conversation as Federer and Woods and Navratilova and all the other elite champions who have transcended their sports and become syn-

onymous with consistent excellence and utter dominance.

“I can't believe what I've achieved,” Fisher, 39, told *BD* in September, claiming that she wasn't keeping track of her titles until recently being prodded by the billiard media.

“I think that is what you'll find about successful people — they don't live in the past,” she said. “It's being very present. You're only as good as your last game. I think staying in the present is important to do well in anything, and not to dwell on what you've done.”

“For me, it's about pride in the performance, really, and always trying to bring out your best game.”

The ability to focus on the quality of the performance, instead of getting hung up on nerves and trophies, is an essential trait of championship-caliber athletes, according to JoAnn Dahlkoetter Ph.D., a prominent sports psychologist and author of the book “Your Performing Edge.”

“It's crucial for top athletes, when it comes down to the final game or few strokes, to have the ability to stay in the moment,” Dahlkoetter said. “It's being able to say, I'm not going to think about the outcome, but only the process.”

Fisher might not be tracking her record too closely, but we folks in the me-

dia have. And it's pretty phenomenal.

Solely on the basis of her Classic Tour titles, Fisher is already in the same ballpark as the top active tennis players Federer and Lindsay Davenport, and golf's Woods and Sorenstam (see graphic on page 57). She has surpassed the top names in bowling, such as 48-year-old Walter Ray Williams Jr., who logged his 42nd pro tour win in 2006.

While not exactly apples-to-apples, the sports of golf, tennis and bowling are among the best comparisons to women's pool. In all four sports, the athletes compete individually on established tours with sizable fields.

One could argue that the talent pool is shallower in the WPBA than in other sports. Big bucks, after all, tend to bring more competitors to a sport, and golf fields, for example, are often at least twice the size of the 64-player roster for a WPBA event. But also consider that most pro tours have much more extensive schedules than the WPBA's seven- to 12-event seasons over the last 12 years.

Fisher has put up impressive numbers with fewer opportunities. She has competed in 105 Classic Tour events since joining the 9-ball tour in late 1995, and she has won 50 of them. That's a winning percentage of almost 48 percent,

which is competitive with other sports stars, to say the least. Woods, the most dominant men's golfer of all time, clocks in at about 26 percent for his PGA career (59 wins in 228 events). Sorenstam won an unprecedented 41.3 percent of her events during a torrid period from 2000 to 2005 (43 titles in 104 events).

And Fisher's pool career is just half of the story. The native Brit enjoyed a commanding 12-year professional snooker career before stepping foot in the United States. Her resume from that period includes seven singles world titles, four world titles in doubles events, and roughly 80 other titles. (Fisher's record-keeping from this era is a bit spotty.)

Like most of the big names under consideration here, Fisher also has a passel of international and invitational titles to her name, including four WPA world 9-ball crowns. If you just add those four to the tally, Fisher counts about 140 professional singles titles.

That number puts her near Navratilova, widely considered to be the most accomplished female athlete of the last 30 years. The Czech tennis legend won 167 singles titles out of 380 singles tournaments entered — or 44 percent. That tally of singles titles is a record for all of tennis. Her winning percentage in singles matches was about 87 percent.

Unfortunately, the WPBA doesn't have readily available records for all of its tournaments, but given the number of events won by Fisher and the mere handful of times she has finished outside the top four, she has likely posted a winning percentage of at least 85 percent. Even in Navratilova's company, Fisher looks pretty good.

Aside from sharing similar records with some of the most dominant athletes in history, Fisher also shares many of the same personal characteristics that make champions.

Dahlkoetter has boiled down these traits after more than two decades working with professional and Olympic athletes. They include:

- Dealing with adversity. "Top athletes know how to deal with a difficult situation," Dahlkoetter said. "They know how to make a comeback when they're losing. When they know the odds are against them, they embrace the chance to explore the limits of their potential."

Fisher concurs: "I think one of my biggest qualities is that I never give up.

▶▶ ALLISON VS. THE ALL-STARS

HERE'S HOW Fisher stacks up against dominant champions who are still active, and the record-holders in their respective sports.

[(r) Retired; * Record for gender/tour; figures as of Sept. 7]

ALLISON FISHER, 39

WPBA titles: 50*

Pro snooker titles: 90 (approx.)

GOLF

- **Annika Sorenstam, 37**
LPGA titles: 69
- **Tiger Woods, 31**
PGA titles: 59
- **Kathy Whitworth, 68 (r)**
LPGA titles: 88*
- **Sam Snead (deceased)**
PGA titles: 82*

TENNIS

- **Roger Federer, 26**
Singles titles: 50
- **Lindsay Davenport, 31**
Singles titles: 51
- **Jimmy Connors, 55 (r)**
Singles titles: 109*
- **Martina Navratilova, 51 (r)**
Singles titles: 167*

BOWLING

- **Lisa Wagner, 46 (r)**
PWBA titles: 32*
- **Walter Ray Williams Jr., 48**
PBA titles: 42*

I really don't give up. There are times that you will feel a little weak, and others where you are like, 'Eh, it's not my day.' But there is always a chance. ... I do have a very strong will."

- Focusing on process, not outcome. Dahlkoetter tells a story about Olympic triathlete Dan O'Brien, who was leading an event but got wrapped up in the excitement: "It took his focus away from what he had to do for that final jump, and he ended up blowing it." On the flip side, she points to an Olympic pole vaulter who uses visualization techniques to break down and focus on the raw mechanics of the jump.

Fisher is famous for concentrating on stroke fundamentals: "That is definitely me. I've been working on mechanics since I was a teenager. It certainly has given me consistency in performance."

That mindset comes in handy in pressure situations. "I pick one thing to focus on. It might be something in my mechanics."

- Internal motivation and self-direction. "Champion athletes decide early on that they are training and competing for themselves," Dahlkoetter said. "It's not necessarily for coaches or parents or for the medals. The direction and drive needs to come from within. Top athletes [are doing] exactly what they want to be doing."

Fisher finds motivation and value in her ability to excel. "I love going out there and giving my best performance," she said. "I love competing. I love the competition. It's giving your best performance under pressure."

Gerda Hofstatter, a longtime friend and fellow Classic Tour member, admires Fisher's continued competitive fire in the face of improving competition.

"She has to fight a lot harder to get where she wants to," Hofstatter said during the EnjoyPool.com 9-Ball Championships in May. "There are new players, younger players putting pressure on her. And I think she's feeling it. But what I love about Allison is that she rises up to the challenge and loves the challenge."

She noted Fisher's excitement after beating 21-year-old Jasmin Ouschan in the semifinal of the EnjoyPool.com event, after the Austrian had beaten her twice previously.

"Isn't it nice to see that after all these years and all these titles, she still gets excited about doing well in competition?" Hofstatter said. "It's in her blood."

Fisher only recently started paying close attention to other top athletes, like Woods and Federer. The experience has been inspirational.

"I think that has been good for me and very healthy to see other people who are at the highest level in their sport. It has been good to see their reactions along the way, and their journey in that tournament. How they carry themselves, how they do it from the beginning to the middle to the end. That has helped me. Like Federer's comeback at Wimbledon this year. That is real fight and desire.

"I think they are people who want to bring out their best performance. They're like me and what I do. It's not necessarily in the winning and the losing. It's the performance." 