

PEACH'S DREAM

LONGSHOT **DARYL PEACH** FULFILLED A LATE-NIGHT PROPHECY AND STRUCK THE VICTORY POSE AT THE WORLD POOL CHAMPIONSHIP IN MANILA, WHILE LOCAL FAVORITE ROBERTO GOMEZ LIVED A NIGHTMARE IN THE AGONIZING FINAL.

Story by MASON KING

Photos by LAWRENCE LUSTIG

DARYL PEACH felt his stomach churn like a washing machine, while his mind spun through shots, slips and ugly scenes from his matches that day. He saw the cue ball drift astray. Object balls clanged off pockets. Hundreds of Filipinos jeered his mistakes.

Peach shifted on the too-firm mattress in his two-star hotel room in Manila. The clock said 4 a.m. In half a day, he'd be playing the biggest match of his career — the final of the World Pool Championship.

After four hours in bed, he still couldn't

sleep. He popped out his earplugs and heard the screeching and beeping of tiny jeepney taxis on the street below. He swallowed four more ibuprofen, trying anything to relax. He switched on the TV, but his gaze rested a mile and several hours beyond it, as he imagined every moment leading up to the match.

The beginning was easy. Peach and his English mates from the U.K. would follow the same routine, down to the smallest detail. He'd slide on the same borrowed black socks. He'd slip his room key in the same pocket. They'd walk the



same route. They'd eat in the same restaurant, sit at the same table and in the same chairs and order the same food.

Other elements were out of his control. His opponent, the Filipino phenom Roberto Gomez, had squashed his five previous opponents by a combined score of 53-11. The boisterous Manila crowd would root for their countryman and razz Peach, as they had in his bitter battle with Francisco Bustamante hours before. And the table was a mystery, as tournament officials promised to neutralize the soft break that both Gomez



Peach kept his composure in the final, while Gomez (below) dissolved to tears.

and Peach finessed so successfully.

More scenarios sped through Peach's bald head. Finally, at 7 a.m., his 35-year-old frame felt fatigued. So he wedged his earplugs back in and rolled onto the bed.

Soon, he began to dream.

No surprise, he transported himself to the final match. Gomez broke first, employing the soft shot. No balls dropped. Then Peach broke, sinking balls with a medium-speed stroke from the left side — not the right, as he favored the day before. The match played out, and

Peach could see himself hoisting the championship trophy. And he could see his parents and fiancée, Lesley, smiling.

Peach awoke at 10 a.m. The butterflies hit him immediately, but he knew he was going to win.

IN ALL of Manila, Daryl Peach might have been the only person who expected Daryl Peach to win.

To the casual observer, Peach's trip to the final had every attribute of a fluke — the law of averages catching up to a longtime journeyman who had nev-



er advanced past the first knock-out round. Heck, no other player from the whole of England had ever advanced past the quarterfinals. At the start of this year's Championship, oddsmakers rated Peach at a lackluster 150-to-1.

Plus, Gomez was just too good. Conventional wisdom had it that the Philippines housed dozens of unknown players just as tough as national icon Efren Reyes. And this year's Championship looked like a coming-out party for the burly 29-year-old they nicknamed "Superman." With a sharpshooter's mentality and an arsenal of creative moves, Gomez sported a game so much like that of Reyes — albeit, circa 1980 — that he might as well have worn a big yellow "E" on his chest.

How much of a favorite was Gomez? Even Karl Boyes, another surprise semifinalist from England — who, in a bizarre bit of serendipity, hailed from the same town as Peach — admitted to picking Gomez in the final.

"Roberto will win," Boyes said after watching Gomez run an astonishing 11 racks against him in their semifinal match. "He's been mashing everybody up. He's been playing really well for the whole week."

Yes. But so had Peach. All year, in fact. Quietly, he had risen to a second-place ranking on the highly competitive EuroTour. And, heading into the final, Peach knew he had an essential element that Gomez perhaps lacked — mental toughness.

"I have a strong head," he said. "I haven't got the best ability. There are players out there with more ability than me. But what gets me through a lot of the time is that I'm very strong upstairs."

Sitting next to Gomez in the cavernous Araneta Coliseum and awaiting the player introductions, Peach could sense Gomez buckling under expectations.

"He was already under huge pressure," Peach said. "Don't get me wrong; I was feeling it too. But he was really feeling it. To be fair, all of the Philippines was expecting him to deliver."

The rowdy crowd received a far different Gomez in the final than the free-wheeling, pocket-splitting hero they had embraced over the nine-day tournament. Superman yielded to a tentative Clark Kent, now unable to jump a single object ball without fouling. Peach executed an effective master plan, spear-



Enormous Araneta had championship pedigree — and too much space.

ing the manageable shots and cooking up crafty safeties when he wasn't sure.

Even playing his "B" game, Gomez lurched to a 15-12 lead. But a foul brought Peach back to the table for a crucial three-game run. Then Gomez's game completely unhinged.

Gomez wilted. And Peach blossomed.

YEN MAKABENTA, the brains and billfold behind this year's WPC, hosted the event in the Araneta Coliseum because he wanted to see an honest-to-God, true sports *spectacle*.

If the final match wasn't exactly a battle of pool heavyweights, the venue naturally lent itself to championship grandeur. The 15,000-seat domed Coliseum housed the legendary "Thrilla in Manila" bout in 1975 between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier.

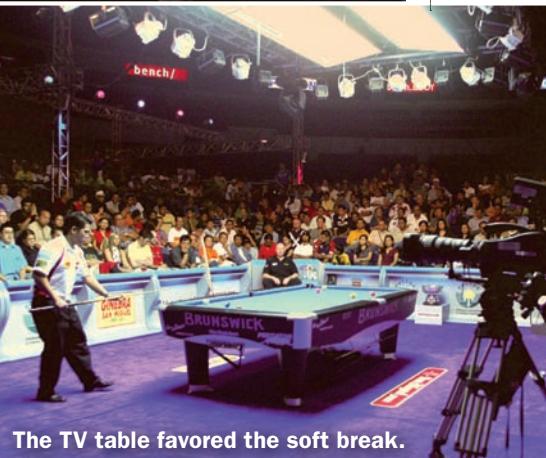
"I wanted to see what it would be like to see a real crowd around the event,"

Makabenta said, hoping to attract 3,000 to 5,000 spectators a day.

Makabenta brought the WPC to the pool-crazy Philippines for the second consecutive year, through his sports promotions firm Raya Sports & Events. In 2006, the Championship fielded a capacity crowd of about 1,000 in a posh convention hall in a quiet section of Manila. This year's event at the Coliseum, held Nov. 3-11, was smack dab in the center of one of the city's most congested commercial districts. Luring spectators wouldn't seem to be a problem.

Crews constructed two three-sided playing arenas on the Coliseum's main floor for televised matches. Farther up in seating sections, they built platforms to hold six more tables. In perhaps a first for pro pool, the main televised match would play over the jumbotron.

Raya lost money on the WPC in 2006 — a slight shortfall in a three-year plan to host the tournament. It would ben-



The TV table favored the soft break.

efit in 2007 from a more favorable currency exchange rate on the biggest expense — a \$1.1 million site fee to ESPN Star, which aired the event across Asia.

The third party in the deal was U.K.-based Matchroom Sport, which owns the worldwide TV rights to the Championship and organizes the event. Through the World Pool-Billiard Association, which sanctions the WPC, Matchroom pegged 118 players from 40-plus countries, and then held qualifiers in Manila for the remaining 10 spots.

A mind-boggling 160-plus players from 23 countries entered the qualifiers.

The Philippines posted the most contestants, with 47 entrants hoping to join the ranks of national heroes like Reyes and 2006 champion Ronnie Alcano.

Enter Roberto Gomez.

THEY CALL him "Superman." He has the barrel chest, square jaw and healthy black mane with a gelled "S" curl defying gravity. He does otherworldly things at the pool table — shots that tax descriptive powers, like "one-rail kick carom" and "two-rail kick combo."

Still, as a newcomer to pro pool, Roberto Gomez was forced to enter the qualifiers like most of the Philippines' army of gifted cueists. It took him seven tries, but he finally secured a spot in the seventh of 10 qualifier contests.

This was a new breed of Filipino cue hero. Instead of living a hard-scrabble life and turning to high-stakes pool action as his sole means of survival, Gomez was university-educated and — honest to God — started a career as a mild-mannered TV reporter. Only later did he decide to pursue tournament pool.

Gomez grew up in Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. He started playing pool at 9 years old, idolizing Reyes. "Every game that he has ever played on video, I have it on tape," he said.

Although he dreamed of being a pool pro, he followed a traditional path through the school system. He studied broadcasting and worked as a field reporter for the ABS-CBN network in the Philippines,

"looking for crimes and accidents and other fresh news," he said.

However, he stayed less than two years and pursued pool instead. In 2005, he fell in with Perry and Verna Mariano of Bugsy Promotions, which has reshaped Filipino pool over the last two years by signing young talents like Gomez and providing training, direction and the means to travel to international events.

As a qualifier in the 2006 WPC, Gomez strolled undefeated through the round-robin group stages, only to lose in the first knockout round to Alcano — also a Bugsy protégé.

In 2007, the 128-player field faced a different format in the group stages, designed to whittle the combatants to 64. The players divided into 16 groups of eight each and played double-elimination mini-tournaments. Two wins, you're in; two losses, you're out. Gomez cruised through Group 16, besting Netherlander Niels Feijen, 9-6, and Dharminder Lilly of India, 9-4.

Advancing to his first match in the knock-out rounds, he started experimenting with a soft break. He found that the pokey stroke would usually sink a wing ball on the Brunswick Metro tournament table.

He wasn't alone. Soon, the soft break would be the talk of the tournament.

ON THE morning of his group-stage matches — coincidentally, also Group 16 — Peach discovered that he left his socks at home.

Not a particularly promising beginning to Peach's ninth trip to the World Pool Championship. Of course, nothing about Peach's career at the WPC was particularly promising. Since his debut in 1999, he had never finished beyond the round-of-64.

The results didn't suggest Peach's true talent or current standing in European pool circles. Like many of his English mates, he first grounded his game in snooker. After switching to 9-ball in the mid-1990s, he found his niche and cemented a solid pro career.

He found further stability at home in Blackpool, England, a seaside resort town. His fiancée, Lesley, gave birth to their daughter, Ellie, in spring 2007, which lent him a sense of peace.

"I know it sounds a bit corny, but ever since my daughter was born, that is when my game went through the roof," he said. "I have no idea what it's about. But sometimes when I'm playing, and things aren't going my way, I close my eyes and I see her face, and she's smiling. It takes your mind off things."

By the start of the 2007 WPC, Peach was ranked No. 2 on the EuroTour, which typically fields more than 200 players per stop. "Over the last year, I felt I was playing as well as I ever had been," he said.

Peach shared a suite in Manila with fellow Brit Craig Osborne, so he hit up his mate for a pair of socks. "By pure coincidence, I had purchased new

socks just before leaving for the Championship," Osborne said.

So began the first of many routines between friends. "He wore a brand new pair of my socks every day," Osborne said. "He came into my room every morning at the same time to get the socks."

Osborne proved valuable for more than just cozy toes.

Peach lost his first match of the group stage to Matjaz Erculj of Slovenia, 9-1. Already eliminated from the tournament, Osborne devoted himself to Peach as a coach, trainer and cheering section. During a break in Peach's next match — a do-or-die contest with Filipino Rodolfo Luat — Osborne followed Peach into the restroom, where they powwowed about the match. That provided a spark, igniting Peach to a 9-3 victory, and then a 9-5 win in his final match to secure a spot in the final 64.

"From then on, we followed that routine," Osborne said. "Every toilet break, every break between racks, we'd talk about what was going on, how he was feeling, and preparation for the next rack. Of course, we had no indication that he was going to go on to win it all."

But after Peach's first match in the knock-out stage, they knew this trip would be different. Against 2006 champ Alcano, Peach faced a zealous Filipino crowd. Keeping his wits about him and looking to Osborne and their buddy Des Morley for moral support, Peach gutted out a 10-6 victory to reach the final 32 for the first time. He was on his way.

ALCANO DIDN'T exit alone. The Philippines placed an impressive 13 shooters in the final 64, and eight of them bombed out in the first knock-out round. They included Reyes, who feels acute pressure from home-country fans when playing in the Philippines.

"He is scared to miss the ball, because, to the people here, Efren is a hero," said Francisco Bustamante, Reyes' longtime friend.

With Reyes out of the running, the 43-year-old Bustamante became both the sentimental and odds-makers' favorite. At the 2002 WPC, he fell two games short in a harrowing final against Earl Strickland, just two days after learning that his 7-month-old daughter, Marielle, had died from a viral blood infection.

Although feared on the men's circuit for his jack-hammer break, Bustamante

also gave in to the soft break at the Championship. Particularly on the two TV tables, players nearly always could coax a wing ball into the corner pocket with a tidy snap from just off the rail. Almost as often, the 1 ball would wander into a side pocket.

Bustamante didn't have a choice, as the soft-serve outbreak had reached epidemic proportions.

"If I break hard, I have no chance," he said. "All my opponents break soft, so I have to try the same thing."



Bustamante celebrated the win (top), but Rees (middle, at left) reviewed the shot and called a foul, leading to Bustamante's exit (right).

As the field shrank to 16, the problem began to weigh on Thomas Overbeck, vice president and sports director of the WPA. He fielded complaints, interviewed players and solicited solutions from anyone with an opinion.

"What we would like to have back is that spectacular power break, and that is completely lost here," Overbeck said.

However, no one could say definitively what made the soft break so effective. The tables offered 4.5-inch pockets — tight enough for a championship. The 1 ball racked on the spot, and the back three balls were tapped — favorable for the soft break, but not automatic.

One theory, at least for the TV tables, held that the production lights dried out

the Simonis 860 cloth and allowed balls to slide more. But the problem wasn't confined to the cameras. In a round-of-32 match on an outside table between American hope Shane Van Boening and Hungary's Vilmos Foldes, both players employed the slow- or medium-speed break and sank at least one ball on the snap in all 18 racks.

"It's too easy," said Van Boening after losing, 10-8. "It's a big advantage for everybody, and everybody has a chance. I don't think it's very fair."



Overbeck resisted making a sudden rules change. "What we don't want to do is change it to 'A' next year, and then 'B' the next year and 'C' the next year," he said. "We want to sort the problem out and find the [right] solution."

WITH OR without the soft break, Gomez pummeled his opponents. He streaked to the quarterfinals

with swift wins over Alex Lely, 10-1; former world champ Chao Fong-Pang, 10-2; and Feijen, 11-0.

Peach also reached the quarters without incident, handling Alcano, 10-6; Taiwan's Lee Kung-Fang, 10-7; and Harald Stolka of Germany, 11-5.

Matched with Bustamante in the quarterfinal, Peach figured that he would face a partisan throng. But he always could turn around and see Osborne, Morley and Shirley Holtz, the wife of Scottish 9-ball Pat Holtz, forming a phalanx of support in the front row.

Filipino spectators numbered barely 100 at the start of the 10:30 a.m. match on the main TV table, and the arena was as quiet as a mortician's library. In fact, the crowds never materialized as Makabenta had hoped, with sparse audiences in the early rounds and patrons maxing out at about 3,000 for the last two days. "The Coliseum was a little too big for us," Makabenta allowed later, also noting that live coverage on local TV kept many spectators away.

Despite the small congregation of fans that morning, the immense pressure of playing for country apparently clutched Bustamante. He jarred the 8 in the second game, the 2 in the fourth, and a 4-5 combo in the sixth. Peach rolled to a 9-4 lead but then scratched on his break. As if shaken from a dream, Bustamante mounted an amazing break-and-run comeback, nailing gutsy combos and banks with brio.

On the hill, 10-9, Bustamante could see his way to victory when a nudged 9 ball blocked his path to the 3. He kicked off the short rail, and the cue ball appeared to hit the 3 and 9 simultaneously. The then-sizable crowd whipped from a whisper to a roar as the 9 dribbled



Svelte semifinalist Boyes was just one of the new English kings of 9-ball.

downtable into the corner pocket. Bustamante shook his fists in celebration.

Both Peach and Osborne leapt from their seats. From their vantage point, the cue ball hit the 9 ball first, resulting in a foul. Referee Nigel Rees signaled that he needed to review the shot, having the advantage of instant replay on several monitors in the TV arena.

As Rees reviewed the hit dozens of times from different angles, spectators shouted their verdicts. Peach and Bustamante took turns lobbying Rees, and the crowd chanted "Busta! Busta!"

When Rees called it a foul, they jeered. Rees stood fast: "Looking from the overhead camera, it was a foul."

Peach took a time-out, allowing him to steady his nerves and for Osborne to have a Vince Lombardi moment in the restroom: "I asked him if he had planned his route, and he said, 'Yes.' And we said, 'This is it now. It's do or die.'"

With measured pace, Peach started his runout. He rolled long on his position for the 7 ball, which delighted the crowd. He collected himself, potted the tricky cut, and then held his hand to his ear in a how-you-like-me-now? pose.

"That is where I lost my emotions a bit," Peach said. "Usually I keep them inside and use them, but the adrenaline was pumping that much. It was awesome really. It's times like this, it's the reason why I play."

At 10-10, Peach eased through the final rack for the victory. His friends hurrahed, waving the English flag. A smattering of spectators booed. Bustamante grabbed his cue case and made a beeline for the exits.

THE SMALL band of English rebels would have even greater reason to wave St. George's Cross.

Fellow Brit Karl Boyes broke into the quarterfinals as well. In an almost surreal coincidence, Boyes also lived in Blackpool. Even more amazing, the 25-year-old had only taken up 9-ball



Foldes broke soft ...



... and Van Boening sat.

one year earlier, after a stalled career in English 8-ball.

The slender Boyes was newly boyish, having dropped about 45 pounds in a year. "I was a good-looking lad back then, when I was three-stone overweight. So I thought if I lost the weight, I'd look great," said Boyes, who enjoys cracking wise.

He cut a dashing figure in the quarterfinals as he ran up a 9-4 lead against Joven Bustamante (no direct relation to

Francisco), another stud from the Bugsy stable. Bustamante put up a fight, drawing to 9-8, but he jarred a 5 ball in the 18th game. Boyes sprung to his feet and pumped his first.

"I couldn't believe it," Boyes said. "When I saw it rattle, I almost jumped onto the table."

Boyes broke and ran the final rack for the 11-8 win. In 18 years at the WPC, no English player had advanced past the quarterfinals. Now there were two in the

semis. The insane proposition of an all-Blackpool final bemused the pressroom.

Boyes would have to get past Gomez. The Filipino steamroller flattened 2005 runner-up Kuo Po-Cheng in their quarterfinal tussle, 11-4.

For a moment in the semifinals, it looked like these new English kings of 9-ball had exercised divine right. Peach surged ahead of Hungary's Foldes, and Boyes took the first four racks of his match, largely by keeping his foe off the table. Gomez stewed in his chair, glowering with heavy brows.

In the fifth frame, Gomez forced Boyes into two fouls and moved back into the driver's seat. He piloted the cue ball like a remote-control racecar, and compelled balls into their pens like cattle. Boyes smirked, accepting the dark humor in his opponent winning 11 consecutive racks.

The 11-4 match became notable mostly for the playing conditions on this, the secondary TV table. The soft break wasn't working, so both players plied robust strokes. Tournament officials took notice.

Peach had finished off Foldes, 11-2. Gomez joined him for a painfully staged stare-down in the pressroom, and the two soon went their separate ways until the final the next afternoon.

THE SEMIS finished in early evening, so Gomez and his live-in girlfriend, Pearl, enjoyed a traditional dinner of shared beef and fish dishes with the Marianos and a dozen other pool industry honchos.

Although exhausted from his matches, the grinning Gomez was wired. "My pulse is moving fast, my brain is moving fast," he said. "I'm thinking about tomorrow — thinking about being the world champion, thinking about how if I lose I will regret it forever."

Peach had a similar problem. He struggled in bed with an endless mental loop of gameday situations. Of course, the result was his strangely hopeful dream: "Gomez goes dry with the soft break ... I break hard from the left ... I'm holding the trophy ... Lesley and my parents are smiling."

Tournament officials were occupied as well. Hoping to bring back the power break for the final, they moved the table from the secondary arena to the main TV stage. They also planned to wait un-



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til the last second before turning on the TV lights, to limit the drying effect.

Peach's morning played out as usual. Bottle of water for breakfast. Socks from Craig. Play cards with Des. Lose at cards. Last to the elevator. Small lasagna and large Coke for lunch. Walk through same mall. Say hello to same people. And so on, right up to the Coliseum.

Peach was accustomed to the storyline, as underdog to a front-running Filipino. But Gomez had trouble adjusting to his sudden role as standard-bearer for Philippine pool. During player introductions, the lusty whoops of nearly 3,000 fans slugged him in the gut.

"I know the crowd is with me, but sometimes they don't know that they are giving me pressure," he said later.

Just like in Peach's dream, Gomez won the lag and broke first. But instead of a dry soft break, he shattered the rack and sank the 1 and 6 balls. So much for clairvoyance. But soon Gomez conjured an omen of the ragged match to come, jawing the 7 in the corner with a reverse cut.

Peach cleaned up and then set his cue ball on the left side for his first break. He dropped the 2 ball, and ran out for a 2-0 lead.

Leading 8-3, Peach scratched on the break — karmic payback for a fluked-in 8 ball in the previous rack. Gomez set about evening the score. Over the next six racks, he allowed Peach exactly one shot. The zip returned to his stroke, and he pulled off some eye-popping plays, including a swerve shot around an object ball into a 1-6-7 combination. Gomez crept ahead, 15-12.

During a TV break between racks, Peach felt soft in the knees. "I turned to Craig and said, 'I'm so weak. Can you find a bar of chocolate or something?'"

Osborne tore out into the Coliseum

corridor. He returned with a sticky bun and chocolate brownie.

"So I filled my face with the sticky bun," Peach said. "Within seconds, the sugar kicks in, and I could feel the difference. The sticky bun was massive."

Peach got back on track, and Gomez's game derailed. Gomez fouled on a jump shot, hitting the blocker ball. Peach ran out. On Gomez's next turn at the table,

I wasn't going to go out playing safe," he said.

Peach speared it, then worked through the rack as Gomez wept in his seat. After sinking the 9-ball, Peach collapsed for a moment on the table rail, but then hoisted his cue in the air. The house hollered in approval, finally giving the Englishman his due.

Peach turned to his three-member fan club. He hugged Osborne, bowed his head and cried.

"I handled the pressure as good as I could, but you can't cope with it by yourself," he said. "Without Craig, Des and Shirley, I couldn't have done it."

IF PEACH was this year's Cinderella story, then he needed to be mindful of his ride back to England turning into a pumpkin.

He had scheduled his flight home for midnight, which left him little time for interviews, autographs and back-slapping. Morley, Osborne and the Holtzes sent him off in a limo, and Peach arrived at the airport expecting a quiet trip home. Instead, he was mobbed.

"All of the airport staff wanted autographs and photos taken," he said. "Everybody knew. It was unbelievable. A lot of passengers as well. And even on the flight, the flight crew all knew, so I did photographs with them as well. And passengers.

"I didn't get much sleep, but I wouldn't have gotten much anyway, because my mind was racing with what I'd just achieved."

He probably logged his first real rest in 48 hours while on his flight to Manchester International Airport. And there awaited an unforgettable scene.

Television crews lined up for interviews. Homemade banners flew over friends, sisters, nieces and nephews. At the forefront were Lesley and Ellie, and Peach's proud mum and dad, smiling.

Dream fulfilled.



The Filipino crowd unnerved and overwhelmed Gomez (top), while Peach leaned on pals (from left) Morley, Osborne and Holtz for moral support.

he undercooked a safety, and Peach tied the match, 15-15. A dark murmur rippled through the crowd.

In the final two racks, Gomez fell apart. Able to take the hill, he stiffed the 9 ball. Peach steeled himself in the case game, and executed a beautiful two-rail kick safe on the 1 ball. Gomez's response defied explanation — a one-rail kick with no apparent purpose.

Peach stared down a cross-side bank on the 1. "I told Craig before the match that if it came down to the final rack, and I had a chance to go for a bank,