



NOT ALWAYS PRETTY

GERMANY'S **OLIVER ORTMANN** WON UGLY AT THE WORLD 14.1 CHAMPIONSHIP, WHERE STINGY POCKETS AND INEXPERIENCED STICKS COMBINED FOR SOME UNORTHODOX PLAY AND HEART-STOPPING SLIPS.

— Story by *George Fels* —

— Photography by *Jonathan Smith* —

FOR ALL HER ELEGANCE, THE GAME OF 14.1 CONTINUOUS POCKET BILLIARDS CAN BE ONE CRUEL BITCH OF A MISTRESS. HOW ELSE WOULD ONE EXPLAIN A 69-BALL PENALTY FOR FAILURE TO DRIVE TWO BALLS TO THE RAIL ON THE GAME'S OPENING BREAK? A GAME THAT KEEPS ONE CONTESTANT IN THE CHAIR WHILE HIS OPPONENT SCORES ALL THE POINTS? A FINAL THAT LOOKED LIKE A MIXED-MARTIAL ARTS MATCH BETWEEN RAY CHARLES AND LITTLE STEVIE WONDER?

The lady, however, does have her moods. In the second annual Predator World 14.1 Straight Pool Championship — nicely run July 9-14 by Dragon Promotions at the Hilton East Brunswick, just off the New Jersey Turnpike — she did permit some highly memorable races. First, however, she required that all competitors don a pair of lead boots first, in the form of the Diamond tables' nasty, nasty pockets.

"It's not that they're tight," explained Florida's genial John Schmidt, perhaps America's best hope to bring the title home. "They're four-and-a-half inches — two balls will still fit side-by-side. But they've changed the pitch of the pocket jaws [i.e., their angle toward each other]. It's only about 2 degrees' difference, but between that and how deep the pocket lip sits, they're really tough."

A field of 64 players from 15 countries prodded the balls into these unforgiving pockets in three separate stages — round-robin to winnow the field to 32, double-elimination through 16, and then single-elimination. Indeed, balls that appeared to have been struck

cleanly and even with "pocket speed" could be seen wiggling and spitting back in their shooters' eye. To observe a top-shelf player staring slack-jawed at a miss he simply cannot comprehend is deliciously fulfilling to us ham 'n' egggers who make up most of the cue-games universe.

ROUND-ROBIN: MEET THE PINOYS The Filipinos have become to pool what the royal Khan family of Pakistan used to be to the sport of squash ("When you have beaten everyone else in the world, then you are ready to play a Khan"). Accordingly, the early-rounds play of this year's entrants from the islands, Warren Kiamco and money-match terror Dennis Orcollo, drew a lot of what attention there was to draw from the sparse galleries.

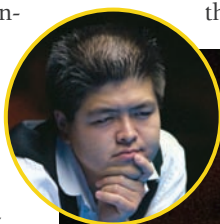
The fact is, straight pool is about as welcome in the Philippines as the cobras that haunt the hinterlands. Not only are the playing conditions for it frequently deplorable, but far more important, it doesn't suit the purposes of that gambling-happy nation. Side bets cannot be placed on individual racks, as they can in a 9- or 10-ball match, and it takes far too long to determine a winner.

Between them, Kiamco and Orcollo have exactly one tournament's worth of 14.1 experience (Orcollo played this event last year). Their

games are practically interchangeable, produced by mascot-sized, expressionless men, both ferocious gamblers, playing largely on their magnificent instincts. They do understand that the mission is to get the balls open as early in the sequence as possible — but in connecting the open balls, their play slows perceptibly, almost as though they were thinking, "Now that I can finally play any ball into any pocket at any time, exactly what is it that I do?" Unconventional position sequence play, though, is simply pool's answer to baseball's unearned runs: Everything looks the same on the scoreboard. Orcollo went 6-1 in round-robin play, Kiamco 5-2, and both men advanced to the final 16.

Another player tandem receiving more than routine curiosity was the pair of young Korean sisters, Bo Ram Cha and Yu-Ram Cha — along with Austria's Jasmin Ouschan the only female entrants. The sisters are said to train a mere 12 hours a day (with a two-hour break for dinner)! Each went 2-5, but they are just 21 and 19, respectively, and produced some 50-ball runs that had spectators' heads nodding in respect.

Elsewhere in round-robin competition, there were some scores that inspired double-takes. The milk of human kindness requires that the losers



Challenger See could hardly watch in the error-filled final.



Harriman flourished while flirting with disaster.

remain nameless, but excluding forfeits (of which there were too many), two games went 100-2 and two went 100-1. And the venerable Danny Barouty, of nearby Queens, N.Y., ousted one opponent by a mere 100 to -8. (That is nearly four full racks short of a record, however. The legendary Joe Balsis once lost a U.S. Open match 150 to -13 — to a total unknown, yet — and until a feeble late rally, Balsis' scoring total for the match stood at -36!)

Four competitors came through the opening rounds undefeated, all of them Europeans: Russia's Konstantin Stepanov, 2006 champion Thorsten Hohmann and runner-up Thomas Engert, both of Germany, and the Netherlands' Niels Feijen. The rounds were also gen-

erally kind to American contestants, with the notable exception of Maryland's Mike Davis, who was sensational in '06 but fell to 3-4 this year. Thirteen Yanks sallied forward into double-elimination play, and as a special treat for the hometown crowd, six of those had

son, while Smith, a photographer who has worked for this magazine, carries the distinctive mantle of "World's Best Working-Stiff Player"), and Boston's Matt Tretault all came through. But the biggest single upper for the crowd had to be Barouty, the field's first-born and its only glasses-wearer, who eventually earned his way into the Sweet Sixteen with a thrilling victory over no less than Hohmann himself, 150-117.

DOUBLE-ELIMINATION: NEW FACES

The second of the tournament's three phases was as notable for who didn't advance as it was for those who did. Two of last year's semifinalists, Mika Immonen of Finland and America's Max Eberle, were casualties; another surprise exit was that of perennial challenger Ralf Souquet, who suffered the added indignity of losing to a countryman, young Nico Otterman.

By now, however, most of the tongue-wagging was about two players all but unheard of in America. One was a young Chinese by the intriguing name of Huidji See (one can practically hear the smartasses guffawing back, "Oh, not much"). Young See is the third-ranked player in the Netherlands, behind Feijen and Nick Van den Berg, and presents pool with the first bona fide flat-top crew-cut since the late Jimmy Moore and, going even further back, Texan Lee Roy Kinman. See gained entry to this meet barely a week before the first ball was struck, and then only when another contestant bailed out. He would go all the way to the tournament semifinals, along the way sitting down none other than his countryman Feijen.

But even with See's fine play, he was absolutely low-profile next to another rookie, Martin Kempter of Austria, a friendly 26-year-old with an engaging smile who readily admitted his 14.1

8 **NUMBERS GAME**
Number of major straight-pool championships won by Oliver Ortmann in the U.S. (2007 World 14.1, 1989 and 1993 BCA U.S. Open) and at the European Pool Championships (1987, 1989, 1990, 2000 and 2006)

East Coast credentials. New Jersey's own Allen Hopkins and Ed Hodan, New Yorkers Tony Robles and Jonathan Smith (Robles may be the best-liked player on the planet, and for good rea-

pross was in its infancy: "I play a little bit in Europe, one tournament, then I practice one, two weeks for this, that's about it." There's a 156-ball practice run in that meager preparation, so there's

obviously considerable raw talent there. The word “raw” is operative in that praise, however. Highly operative.

First there’s the fascinating technique with which he measures his break shots. He raises his cue with both hands as if preparing to offer it up for sacrifice, and holds it over the break ball on the shot line. Then he points at the rack, and then he’s ready to shoot. “It’s something I learned from my coach, and actually a lot of guys in Europe do it,” he explains, apparently unaware that American eyes have never seen anything like it. “Between the butt of my cue and the shaft [i.e., it’s the joint of his cue that goes directly over the object ball], I find a 90-degree line to the shot. Then I know where to hit.” That clarification, while verbatim, is still incomplete, and why he cannot simply visualize that information as other players do is anyone’s guess. But it works.

And then there were the break shots themselves, which suggest that young Kempter has the game of 14.1 confused with rotation. His favorite break-shot strategy, in fact, is to draw the cue ball all the way back to the far end rail and out again. The crowd murmurs with anticipation every time he lines one up; it’s quite similar to hoping Barry Bonds will park a baseball among the kayakers, except that this is a very nice kid without the size-12 head. Kempter brought both his aiming and execution techniques to bear, and then some, against America’s Dennis Hatch, who plays much better straight pool than most people think — although, on this occasion, he didn’t play any pool of any kind. Kempter ran 150 and out on him, a feat accomplished only a relative handful of times in the game’s history (Sigel vs. Zuglan, in the battle of the East Coast Mikes 17 years

ago, comes to mind, but nothing more contemporary than that). Hatch then graciously agreed to continue racking the balls so Kempter could continue his run (there was a substantial bonus for a 200-ball effort), but was pressed into service only once, as Kempter got just 10 more balls. Still, that was good enough for the meet’s long run and a \$5,000 reward.

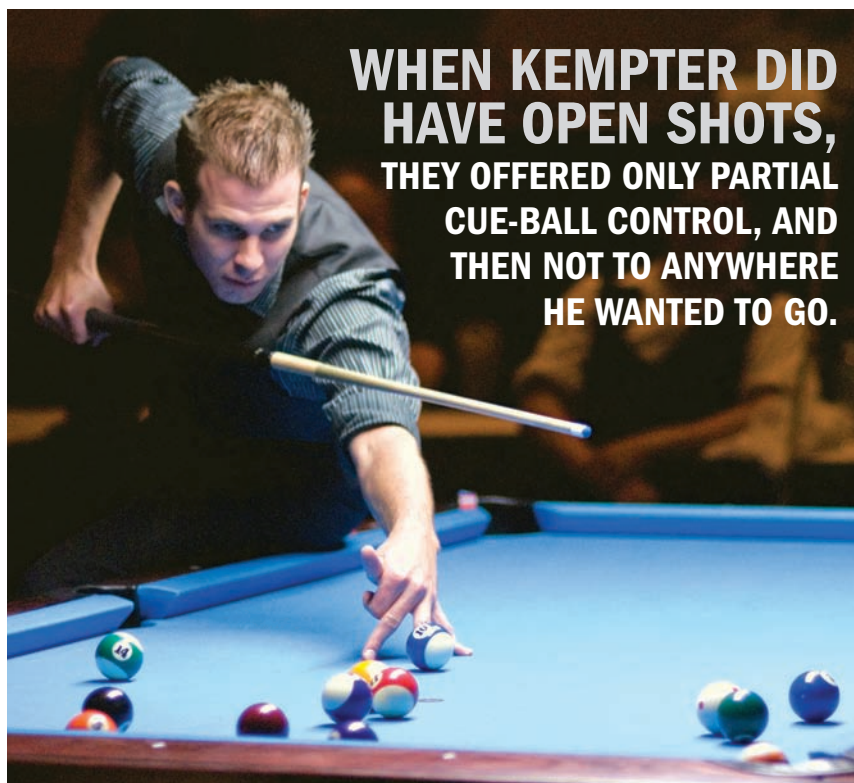
Long runs in straight pool, while they seem almost infinitely complex, can normally be reduced to just two aspects: (a) How consistently did the

half racks he ran on Hatch, he had to alter the landscape five or more times in six of them. That’s quite a bit of ball bumping, and while I do favor the female pronoun when writing on 14.1, it’s equally fair to say that the lady does not appreciate having her balls bumped to excess. Like See, Kempter would reach the semis — they were opponents — where the lady would take him to task for his indiscretions most pointedly.

SINGLE-ELIMINATION: GUT-CHECK TIME

The best match in single-elimination play was almost certainly the Schmidt-Engert encounter in the round of 16, an unusual pairing of 400-ball runners. (Engert has actually come within a single ball of 500.) Trailing 169-80, Schmidt took a practical approach to wiping out an 89-ball deficit: He ran 99. After the two men traded nervous innings of single-digit scores — two for Schmidt, one for Engert — the German lost the match out of sheer nonchalance. Facing a relatively simple but over-a-ball shot near the left side rail, the gaunt

lefty inexplicably decided to take his cue behind his back instead of simply reaching for the bridge. The diabolical corner pocket wasn’t having any of that showboating, and the resultant wobble allowed Schmidt the win.



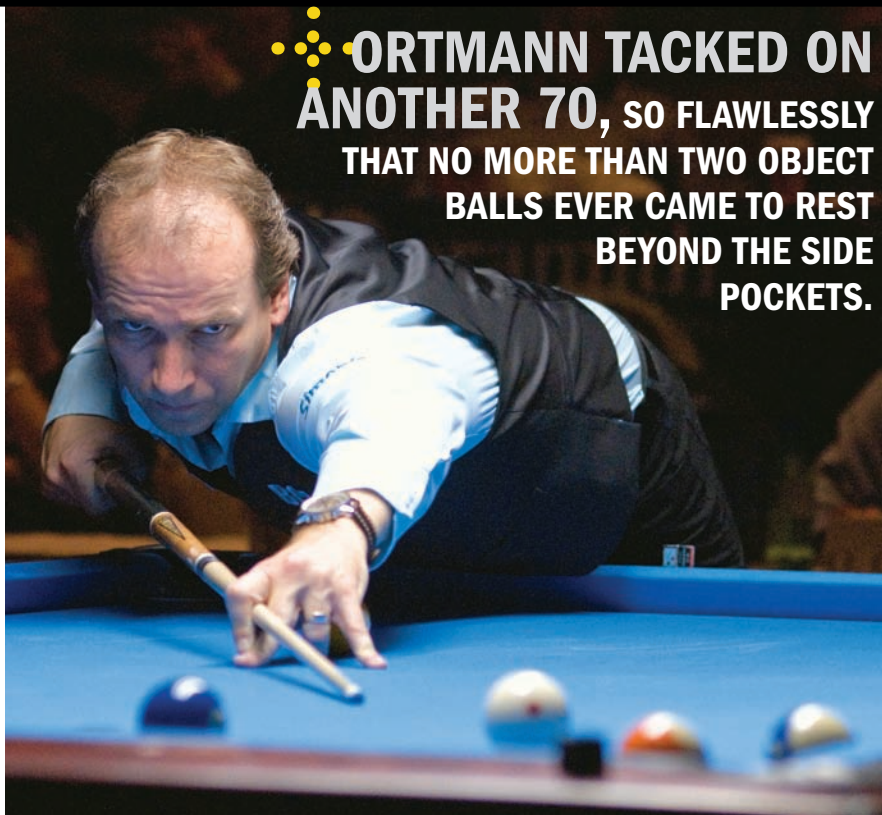
**WHEN KEMPTER DID
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player hit his/her primary break shot at the proper speed — that is, get object balls open and accessible to the cue ball without re-clustering them?; and (b), how consistently did the player ensure the success of *secondary* break shots by creating patterns that included a “safety valve,” or “insurance,” ball? Assuming that the player has the requisite skills to connect the balls once they’re opened and manage the cue ball while doing so, that’s really all that long runs are about. With Kempter, however, as aspect (a) has clearly gone the way of the passenger pigeon and sabre-toothed tiger, aspect (b) becomes even more critical. He seems to have a modest understanding of that concept. But of the eleven and a

NUMBERS GAME Total number of balls pocketed by Oliver Ortmann during the championship

1,890

Elsewhere, Ouschan, whose stellar and fearless play brought her to the final 16 for the second straight year, finally showed some troubles with nerves in losing to the steady Kiamco. Hopkins, whose practice strokes are both lon-



◆ **ORTMANN TACKED ON ANOTHER 70, SO FLAWLESSLY THAT NO MORE THAN TWO OBJECT BALLS EVER CAME TO REST BEYOND THE SIDE POCKETS.**

ger and more fluid than his actual celebrated delivery and who still produces some of the finest position patterns anywhere, simply did not have the firepower for Hohmann, who authored one of his three 100-ball runs on the heathenish tables. Barouty fell to Orcollo's shot-making ability. Germany's Oliver Ortmann tuned up for the next round with an easy 200-44 victory over Radislaw Babica of Poland, who sports what is easily the field's finest nickname, "The Choirboy." (Indeed, with his wavy hair and an unlined face that appears to have never been shaved, Babica looks like the kind of cherub whose parents would faint dead away if they thought he was even within smelling distance of a pool table.) Kempter continued to punish the balls in sidelining Otterman, and Missouri's Danny Harriman took out Van den Berg.

THE LAST EIGHT: FOUR ROOKIES, FOUR VETS

Just two Americans survived the round of 16, Schmidt and Harriman, and while they disappointingly drew one another, it at least ensured that a Yank would reach the semis. Both Filipino players advanced, Kiamco to play See and Orcollo to take on the veteran Ortmann. And in the final match, hardly anyone gave much credence to the slugging

Kempter against defending champion Hohmann.

Kiamco suffered an early miss on a ball he appeared to have struck perfectly, and spent the rest of the match playing "on tilt," as the poker players say. Ortmann gave Orcollo even less chance than that, running 107 and 93 to win, 200-8, in a spectacular two innings. But those two mismatches were more than compensated for by the other two. Kempter shot out to a 152-53 lead on Hohmann, then watched in awe as the defending champion ran eight solid racks to reclaim the lead. But a side-pocket scratch on a routine break shot derailed him, and Kempter got out with a triumphant shout that betrayed his youth.

And the two Yanks provided the best of the quarterfinal matches. Schmidt has the bragging rights to a U.S. Open 9-ball title to go with that 400-ball run; the lower-profile Harriman has won titles in all five of pool's major forms. Both are in their early 30s, with their games probably yet to peak, and both have solid credentials as money players. In a game as long as 200 points, both competitors are likely to see table layouts that require an object ball to be drilled — no matter how thankless the pockets — and the cue ball forced into position; between these two short-game sharpshooters, that is what this

match figured to come down to, and that's exactly what happened.

Harriman's finely-tuned game has a quirk or two. As his resume includes bank-pool titles, he welcomes those opportunities far more than his straight-pool peers, and is even willing to use banks as secondary break shots. He also favors the inside-English, behind-the-rack break shot that sends the cue ball off three rails rather than one. Like former American League batting superstar Rod Carew, he apparently has more stances than most golfers have clubs, and in good times or bad, he plays with a mournful expression that suggests he would cry if he stepped upon an ant.

Schmidt ran the first four racks of the game. But Harriman, who plays exceptionally well from behind (he came from nine racks back to defeat Sigel last year), caught him at 64-58. Schmidt then ran an additional five racks to go ahead 129-64. Harriman came back yet again, 75 balls this time (at one point prompting the silent gallery with a chipper, "I thought that was a pretty nice shot, folks") before jawing a ball in a far corner. The two men then staggered for a few innings of single-digit play before Harriman went 29-28 back-to-back for the win.

THE SEMIS: CLASS TELLS

With all four of last year's semifinalists gone (indeed, only Hohmann survived to the quarters), the best 14.1 pedigree remaining was, by far, Ortmann's, who has won two U.S. Opens at the game (1989 and 1993). Ortmann's stroke production is actually reminiscent of the immortal Ralph Greenleaf's; he's another butt-plate gripper who also angles his body away from the shot, swinging his hip clear of the cue by a good two feet. The stroke itself is executed mainly through a wrist-flick; thus equipped, he would appear to be much better suited to straight pool than any other form, yet he owns innumerable European titles and a 1995 world championship at 9-ball. He would face Harriman in the second semifinal.

Upstarts See and Kempter played the first match — except that it was never really a match. See is clearly the better straight-pool player of the two, perhaps not quite ready yet to sling elbows among the game's elite, but definitely

TOP 16 SINGLE-ELIMINATION PLAY

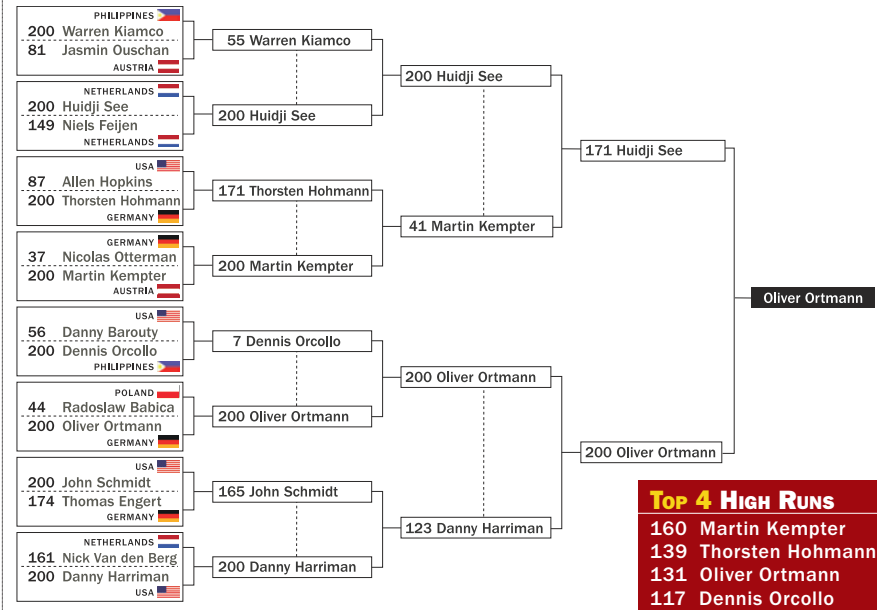
one to watch. Kempter never did find either his rhythm or confidence; when he did have open shots, they generally offered only partial cue-ball control, and then not to anywhere he wanted to go. Only a tepid late rally brought his total to 41, and his Howitzer-like break shots were never a factor. Kempter, in fact, generally appeared overjoyed just to be where he was. It cannot be predicted that he will join the game's top ranks, but as his game stands, he will certainly be one of the most fun to watch.

The Harriman/Ortmann encounter was considerably more worthy of championship semifinal play. Harriman went -2 on the opening break and watched Ortmann pile a 67-ball run on top of that penalty. Harriman needed seven rails with the cue ball just to score the two points that got him even. Shortly thereafter, Ortmann tacked on another 70, so flawlessly that no more than two object balls ever came to rest beyond the side pockets. In the familiar position of playing from behind, Harriman ran 29, then 69, to get to 152-111; Ortmann was sufficiently rattled that he could run no more than 17 balls in any inning from there, but his initial 69-ball lead eventually proved too much for Harriman to overcome. Harriman's last hurrah was a two-rail kick at an attractive combo behind the rack, but he erred in adding English to the shot. The combination of spin and new cloth took him too long, contacting the wrong ball, and Ortmann limped out.

THE FINAL: ROOM FRESHENER, PLEASE

There are all too many potentially awful puns on the word "spin" in cue-games journalism. In the lexicon, the word has come to mean an intentional slant on what is factual. Perhaps a lesser publication would be willing to spin the final of the 2007 world championship, but this one will not: This was truly a terrible, terrible game of pool.

Oliver Ortmann would have been a prohibitive favorite against Huidji See, had there been any action available (there was not), but instead of bolstering his confidence, his heavily favored



status seemed to undermine it. With virtually nothing to either prove or lose, See should have been loose as a goose; he just couldn't get there. The two men lurched toward game ball together, in a stupefying smorgasbord of tepid one- to two-rack runs, half-diamond misses, botched open-table position, and em-

little "Yee-haw!" just before game ball was clearly, and appallingly, the highlight of the alleged match.

"This title means a lot to me," said Ortmann in his victory speech, in which he classily dedicated the win to his late sister, who passed 12 years ago. "The fans watching, as well as myself, understand what straight pool means. We all love straight pool."

The eternally cheerful Charlie Williams of Dragon Promotions (who has committed to running the event, despite the fact that it's unlikely to break even, he says) told the crowd, "I'm hopeful we'll see an American champion soon." Still in his chair, Ortmann cracked dryly, "I don't think so." (The German is normally so tight-lipped, it was a bit like getting a laugh line out of the aforementioned Bonds.) And, that odoriferous final notwithstanding, he may have a point. You can't improve at a game without playing it, and there are straight-pool leagues and tournaments all across Europe and Asia. Where are America's hopefuls going to turn to improve their games? The practice table?

Or, on the other hand, Ortmann could continue to play as he did in the final, and see how America's best respond to that.



Get a grip: Ortmann was the obvious favorite versus See.

barrasingly bad safeties. The match had no pivotal points; a machine that doesn't run cannot be expected to pivot either. At 182-171 (yes, that's how close this stinker was), Ortmann finally cashed in his experience chip and worried the last 18 balls home. His soggy