



Alex Higgins

Alex “Hurricane” Higgins, transformer of snooker, died on July 24th, aged 61

THE game of snooker is a curious one. Professional players wear black waistcoats and bow ties, as if they have been waylaid on their way to a funeral. The referees, similarly attired, also wear white gloves with which to replace the balls upon the table. The green baize cloth, much like the smooth lawn of a bowling green, enforces quiet, concentration, care. Only the odd nervous cough, soon suppressed, breaks the glacial atmosphere.

But snooker grew up in Britain's working men's clubs as something rough, rude and rambunctious. Beer fuelled it, cash betting underpinned it, and scores were settled with fists in the street outside. Speed was a virtue; safety, beyond a certain point, just sissy. The good player took on all comers and dispatched them, mercilessly, one by one.

Most professionals learned to establish a prudent distance from that world. Alex Higgins never did. The man who reached the heights of snooker in the 1970s, and turned it into a global phenomenon in the 1980s, was always the edgy, jiggling teenager who haunted the Jampot

Billiard Hall off the Donegall Road in Belfast's Shankill. There he would keep the score for pocket money and, little by little, start to play himself, a scrawny creature with fast, feline grace who would prowl around the table and seem to know at once how to build a break or make a clearance, always three balls ahead of himself. He'd play for anything: Mars Bars, fizzy drinks, a packet of Player's, a smooth pint of Guinness down the throat. He was a Protestant boy who would even take on a Taig if there was money in it. He would take on anyone, because he knew within a short time that he could beat them all.

This was the world he brought with him like a gale into the sacred halls of the sport, such as the Selly Park British Legion Hall in Birmingham, where in 1972 he won his first world championship at 22, then the youngest winner ever. At the time he was homeless, moving from squat to squat through condemned streets in Blackburn. He appeared for the final, fingers stained with nicotine, in white trousers and a tank top. The World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association ruled these "clothes unbecoming to a professional" and, after his victory, fined him.

This was the first of many, many run-ins. The WPBSA tried to make him wear a tie; he would tear it off, and sit on the sidelines at matches with a pint and a cigarette, seething. He was disciplined for punching officials in the stomach, twice; head-butting a referee who asked him to take a drugs test; trashing hotel rooms; telling a Catholic rival he would have him shot, and pissing into pot plants. Drink and womanising destroyed his two marriages and landed him in court for offensive behaviour. One girlfriend stabbed him; another locked him in her flat, from which he tumbled 25 feet. He broke his foot then, but it never stopped him playing. Nor did the fall he took once over a wall outside a pub in Blackpool, though his arm dripped blood afterwards onto the smooth green baize.

Gambling it away

Despite all this, probably because of it, the public loved him. In the years of his best form (helped by the advent of colour, which made sense of the balls), snooker became a television sensation. Viewers agreed with him that he was hounded by officialdom, and crowds urged the rebel on. They liked his emotion at the table, the undisguised fire and grief; they fell for his murmuring, boyish charm, and most of all they admired the matador beauty of his play. This seemed almost reckless in its certainty, with screw shots, multi-cushion shots and backspin that appeared impossible to mortals. Opinion was divided over whether the peak of his game was the 1982 world championship semi-final, when he rescued a deficit of 59-0 with a break of 69 to reverse the match entirely, or the final, when he made a total clearance of 135 in the final frame (his opponent, Ray Reardon, sitting pale with disbelief) and then, in tears, called his wife and baby daughter out of the crowd to hug them.

Celebrity, though, didn't suit him. He didn't know what to do with it, except to put more money on more horses, or drink more vodka, or buy more fedoras, until there was nothing left of the £3m he had earned in his career. Wild behaviour hurt his form; punishment meant long bans and loss of rankings, so that he had to slog time and again through grimy qualifying rounds. But he

would have done it anyway, since he would play stark naked in a coalhole if there was a stake on the table.

At 60, shockingly gaunt from throat cancer and with his voice reduced to a rasp, he found himself back in Belfast, cadging money from friends for a drink and a copy of the Racing Post. He didn't play much now, the local snooker halls had barred him, but he was still sure he could beat almost everyone. He had been "mesmerising" at the table, he told the Telegraph in his last whispered interview, and with practice he could be so again. He told others that snooker was "dying". This was obviously untrue; professional snooker would never again, after him, be the funereal affair of old. But without him that electric charge was missing from the sword-like pointing of the cue, and from the click of the White propelling perfectly to the pocket the Blue, the Pink and the Black.