

SNOOKER

PLAYER BY PLAYER

A COMPILATION OF THE 100 GREATEST SNOOKER PLAYERS



WRITTEN BY LIAM McCANN

SNOOKER

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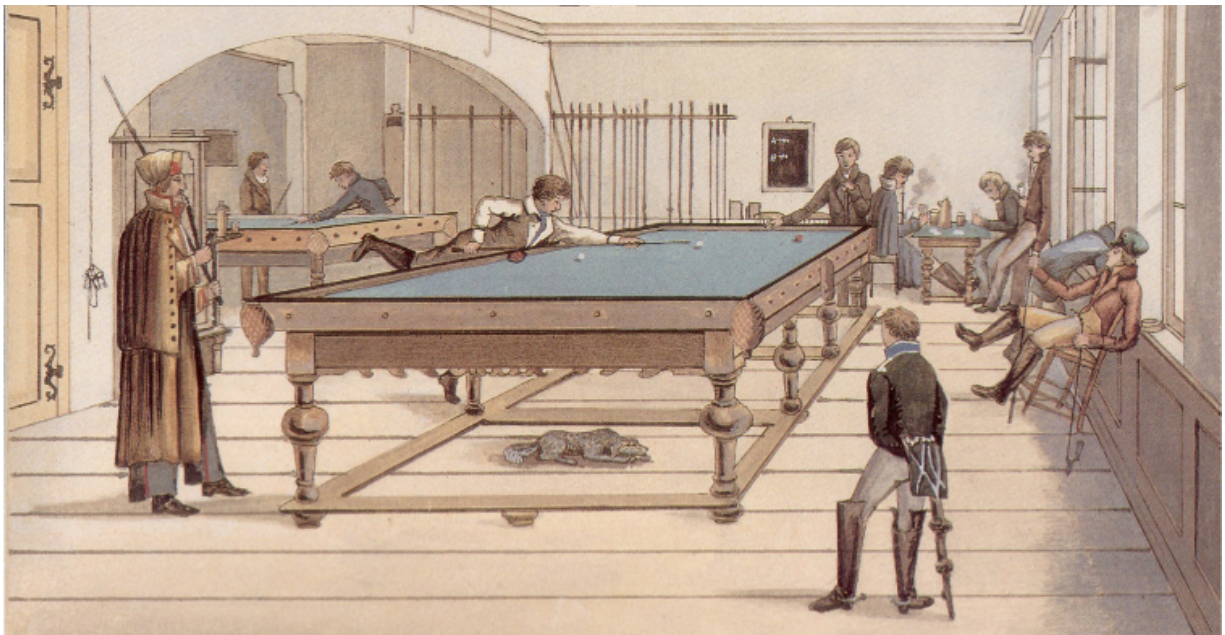
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Introduction

It is widely held that an early version of snooker was played in the latter part of the 19th century by British army officers in India, but the game can trace its roots back to the Middle Ages. Cue sports like billiards had been evolving from the mid-14th century when an outdoor game similar to croquet morphed into an indoor table game played by, amongst others, King Louis XI of France.

The outdoor variant then evolved separately into modern croquet, golf, cricket and various bowling games, while the indoor version grew so popular that by the mid-18th century it was being played in almost every café in Paris. The rather wieldy mace that had been used to strike the ball was refined into a delicate cue by 1800, and stuffed cushions were then added to stop the wooden balls falling off the table. Little scoring arches like croquet hoops were then swapped for pockets, the balls were upgraded to ivory and the game of billiards as we know it today was established.



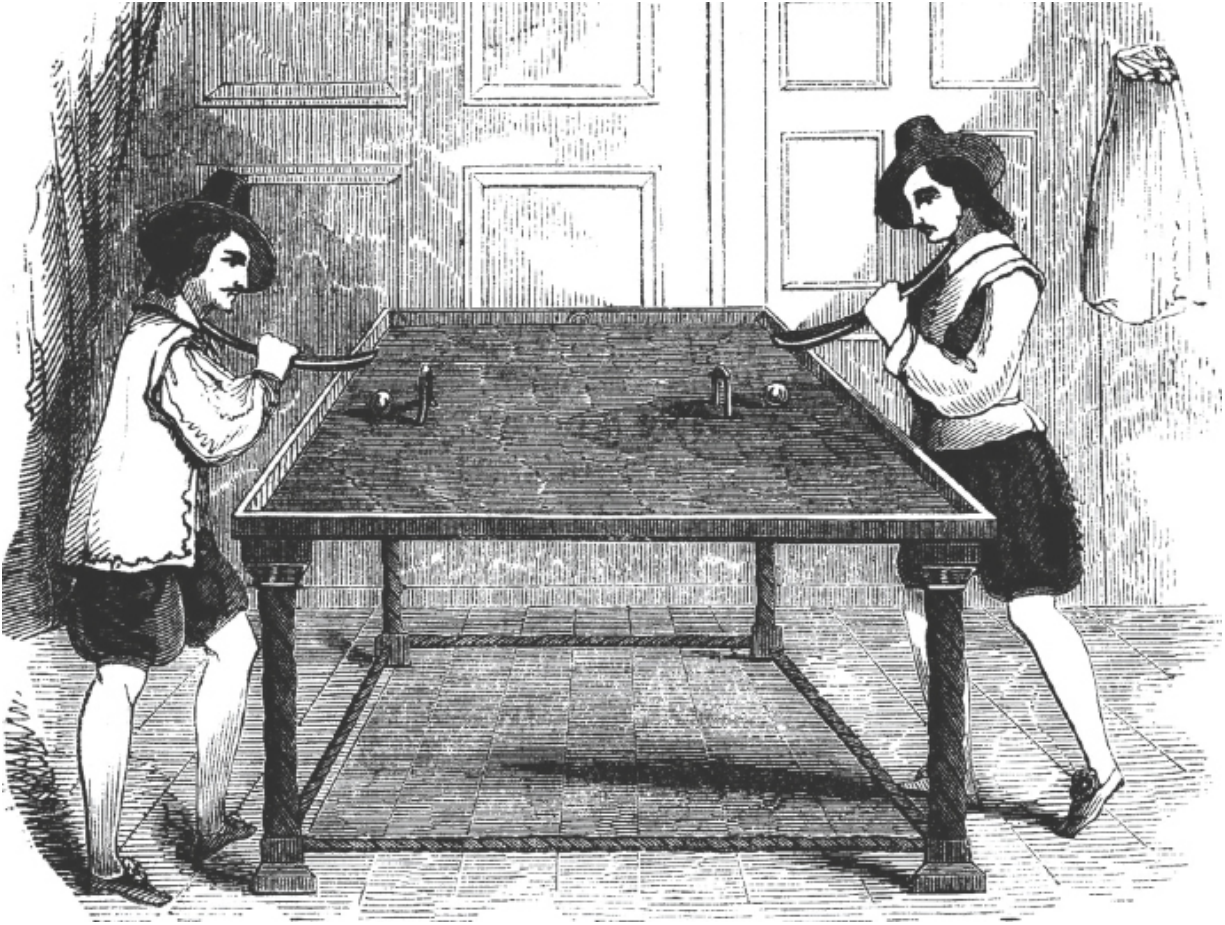
An illustration of students playing three-ball pocket billiards in Tübingen, Germany, in the early 19th century

In around 1874 coloured balls were added to the reds and black during a game of billiards at the officers' mess in Jabalpur. Ten years later, Sir Neville Chamberlain of the Devonshire Regiment (not the 20th-century prime minister) was playing an inexperienced opponent who failed to pot a ball after a shot. Chamberlain, probably because the word 'snooker' was slang for a new recruit, labelled him thus, and novice billiard players from then on were known as snookers.

Chamberlain drew up a set of rules that differentiated between billiards and the new game with its various coloured balls, and its popularity spread back to the UK and throughout the Commonwealth. In the early part of the 20th century it was still a game for the privileged few who could afford a table, however, but it gradually filtered down to the working men's clubs.

By 1927 the game had become so popular that professional English billiards champion Joe Davis helped found the World Championship. He dominated the event for the next two decades and was unbeaten until his retirement in 1946. The game declined in the 1950s and early 1960s and it wasn't until David Attenborough, then working as the controller of BBC2, commissioned a series called Pot Black (to promote colour television) that the sport was brought to a wider audience.

The experiment was a huge success and a new World Championship was introduced. By 1977 the sport had moved to its spiritual home, the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, and the following year the event was televised in its entirety. Snooker's popularity increased rapidly and colourful characters like Alex Higgins, Jimmy White, Bill Werbeniuk, Dennis Taylor, John Virgo and Steve Davis helped reel in up to 18 million TV viewers for epic matches like the 1985 world final.



Billiards in the early 18th century bears little resemblance to the game of today

Steve Davis dominated the decade but the 1990s would belong to a prodigiously talented Scotsman, Stephen Hendry. More recently, Ronnie O'Sullivan, John Higgins, Neil Robertson, Mark Selby, Judd Trump and Mark Williams have all battled it out for the coveted world number one spot. The game has also become hugely popular in the Far East, with the Chinese in particular threatening to dominate the sport for the next generation.

Advani

Pankaj Advani was coached from a young age by former national champion Arvind Savur. He won his first title at the age of 12 and was prolific at both snooker and billiards – he was Indian Junior Billiards Champion in 2000 and 2001, and champion of both cue sports in 2003. In 2005 he achieved the Grand Double of the ‘time’ and ‘points’ formats at the World Billiards Championship, and he is the only person to win all five major billiards events in one season. He then won the World Professional Billiards Title by demolishing nine-time champion Mike Russell.



Pankaj Advani at the 2012 Paul Hunter Classic

Having been offered a wildcard spot on the main snooker tour, he promptly dispatched Craig Steadman, Steve Davis, Alan McManus and Michael Holt during qualifying for the International Championship, but he then withdrew from the event to defend his billiards world crown (successfully). He then beat John Higgins 4-1 on the PTC tour and reached the quarter-final of the 2013 Welsh Open with a win over Graeme Dott, although he eventually lost to Judd Trump. If he can bring his exceptional billiard skills to the snooker

table, there's no reason why he can't challenge for ranking titles in the near future.

Name: Pankaj Advani

Born: July 24th 1985, Maharashtra

Nationality: Indian

Turned Pro: 2003

Century Breaks: 10

Highest Break: 143

Ranking Titles: 0

World Titles: 0

Allen

Mark Allen benefited from Lottery funding, which helped him win the Northern Ireland Championships at Under-14, 16 and 19 levels. He then entered an invitational event in his home country and beat Steve Davis and John Higgins before eventually losing to Stephen Hendry in the quarter-final.

In his third professional season he reached the last 32 of the UK Championships, and he also made an impact at the 2006 Welsh Open. He threw away a lead over Shaun Murphy, however, and he then surrendered another winning position to Andy Hicks at the qualifying tournament for that year's World Championships.

His fortunes were about to change, however. In 2007 he qualified for his first World Championships, and he discarded his choker's tag by beating former champion Ken Doherty in the first round. He eventually lost to an inspired Matthew Stevens but by then he was already ranked in the top 32.

Doherty branded him a disgrace at the 2007 Grand Prix when he twice struck the cushion with his fist, but Allen survived the repercussions and gradually clawed his way into the top 16 with wins over Graeme Dott and Ryan Day. In 2009 he defeated defending champion Ronnie O'Sullivan at the World Championships but he eventually lost 13-17 to John Higgins in the semi-final. He won his first tournament – the Jiangsu Classic – later that year, demolishing home favourite Ding Junhui 6-0 in the final.

At the 2010 World Championships he was on course for a maximum break when he came unstuck on the green. He later recorded the tournament's first 146 break when he beat Mark Davis in the second round. He made it to his first ranking event final at the 2011 UK Championships (after five previous attempts) but, despite a determined fight-back from a desperate position, Judd Trump held on to win 10-8.

He finally won his first ranking tournament at the World Open in China by beating Jimmy Robertson, Judd Trump, Mark King, Mark Selby and Steven Lee, but the season ended in disappointment after first-round losses at the China Open and 2012 World Championships.



Mark Allen pots the black at the 2012 Paul Hunter Classic

Allen seems to court controversy with the snooker establishment. He has long-running and bitter feuds with Stuart Bingham and Ken Doherty, and he also called for the chairman of the World Professional Billiards & Snooker Association, Barry Hearn, to resign after he changed the format of some tournaments and encouraged the crowds to be more vocal. He also criticised the conditions in China for the World Open and was promptly fined. He then accused several of the Chinese players of not owning up to fouls, for which he was again fined by the WPBSA.

Allen lost in the first round of the 2013 World Championship to Mark King.

Name: Mark Allen

Born: February 22nd 1986, Antrim

Nationality: Northern Irish

Turned Pro: 2003

Century Breaks: 176

Highest Break: 146

Ranking Titles: 2

World Titles: 0

Bingham

Stuart Bingham had a reputation as a journeyman who never quite reached his potential, but an upsurge in his recent fortunes has seen him enter the top 16. In 1996 he won the English and World Amateur titles but he didn't make an impact in a professional tournament until the 1999 Welsh Open, where he beat John Higgins on the way to the quarter-final. The following season he caused a major upset when he defeated Stephen Hendry in the first round of the World Championships while he was only just ranked in the world's top 100.

In 2002 he enjoyed more success at the game's blue riband event when he almost made a maximum break (he came unstuck on the final pink). Having missed out on £147,000 he then lost a match he should have won (8-10) to Ken Doherty. From 2004 until 2006 Bingham was solid if not spectacular. He reached the quarter-final of the Grand Prix by beating then world champion Shaun Murphy and made the same stage at the UK Championship. He then made a 147 in the qualifying tournament for the Masters and beat Steve Davis in the event itself.



Stuart Bingham uses the rest at the 2011 Shanghai Masters

Bingham remains on the fringes of the world's elite and occasionally causes a shock, such as when he defeated Ronnie O'Sullivan 9-6 at the 2010 UK Championship. He finally won his first ranking event in 2011 when he came from 8-5 down to beat Mark Williams in the Australian Goldfields Open, but he then performed poorly for the remainder of the season.

He made a great start to the 2012/13 season, however, winning his first two tournaments and then making the final of the Wuxi Classic ranking event. In the final itself he made his third competitive 147 but he couldn't stop Ricky Walden ending his 16-match unbeaten streak and taking the title. He also performed well at the 2013 World Championships, reaching the quarterfinal before being beaten by eventual winner Ronnie O'Sullivan.

<p>Name: Stuart Bingham Born: May 21st 1976, Basildon Nationality: English Turned Pro: 1995 Century Breaks: 158 Highest Break: 147 Ranking Titles: 1 World Titles: 0</p>
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Bond

Nigel Bond enjoyed a sterling amateur career before he turned professional in 1989. He reached a ranking semi-final in his first pro season and then made the final of the 1990 Grand Prix. This was the Hendry era, however, and Bond was soundly beaten 10-5 by the Scotsman.

The pair met again in the final of the 1995 World Championship but Hendry was again too strong and he ran out a comfortable 18-9 winner. The year before Bond had pulled off one of the tournament's greatest comebacks when he rallied from 9-2 down to beat Cliff Thorburn 10-9 in the Canadian's last Crucible appearance. Now ranked in the world's top five, he won his only ranking title to date, the 1996 British Open, by beating John Higgins after he needed a snooker in the final frame.

Between 1993 and 1996 Hendry proved to be his nemesis at every World Championship, but Bond eventually scored a victory over the master in their Crucible quarter-final in 2006. Bond led comfortably but was then pegged back to 7-7. He eventually managed to pot a re-spotted black (the first to decide the final frame of a World Championship match) to record his first win at the event in seven years.



Nigel Bond

In 2011, Bond won a one-frame shootout tournament for the world's top 64 players, but he has since slipped down the rankings and is now outside the top 32.

Name: Nigel Bond

Born: November 15th 1965, Darley Dale

Nationality: English

Turned Pro: 1989

Century Breaks: 99

Highest Break: 140

Ranking Titles: 1

World Titles: 0

Brecel

Luca Brecel is surely one of snooker's future stars. In 2009, aged only 14, he became the youngest European Under-19 Champion. He then beat Jimmy White and Ken Doherty in the World Series of Snooker before narrowly losing to Graeme Dott in the quarterfinal. He also beat Joe Perry in the Paul Hunter Classic and Stephen Hendry in an exhibition in Bruges.

In 2010 he became Belgian Champion and he eventually turned professional after being offered a wildcard on the main tour the following year. By the end of the season he was ranked 65 in the world and he made his first 147 at an amateur event. In 2012 he broke another record when he beat Ian McCulloch, Barry Pinches, Michael Holt and Mark King to become the youngest person to qualify for the World Championship. Despite knocking in a century, he was defeated in the first round by Stephen Maguire.

He found the rest of the season tough but he then won four qualifying matches to reach the main draw for the 2012 UK Championship. He continued his good form by seeing off Ricky Walden (6-5) and Mark King (6-4) to become the first Belgian to reach the quarter-final of a ranking event. He had two chances to beat Shaun Murphy in his next match but couldn't pot a relatively easy pink and lost 6-5.



Luca Brecel could dominate snooker for a generation

Given time to mature and learn how to grind out results when things aren't going his way, Brecel will surely be a force in the game for the next two decades.

Name: Luca Brecel
Born: March 8th 1995, Dilsen-Stokkem
Nationality: Belgian
Turned Pro: 2011
Century Breaks: 22
Highest Break: 136
Ranking Titles: 0
World Titles: 0

Burnett

It took Jamie Burnett four years to make an impact on the professional tour when he reached his first World Championships. Despite leading Terry Griffiths 5-0 in the opening round he capitulated and lost 10-9. He then reached the quarter-finals of the 1997 German Open and the 1998 Grand Prix. The following season he beat world number one Stephen Hendry twice and also recorded victories over Stephen Lee and Mark Williams.

During qualifying for the 2004 UK Championship, opponent Leo Fernandez fouled and the referee awarded Burnett a free ball. He potted the brown as an extra red and then cleared the table with a break of 148, the first time anyone had exceeded the 'maximum' in a professional tournament.

He was embroiled in a betting controversy when huge amounts of money were placed on him losing 3-9 to Stephen Maguire at the 2008 UK Championships but, although he was questioned by police, they found no evidence of wrongdoing by either player. He qualified for the 2009 World Championship after a record absence of 13 years, and then reached his first ranking final in Shanghai after impressive wins over Andrew Higginson, Mark Davis and Jamie Cope, although Ali Carter beat him in the final itself, 10-7.



Jamie Burnett attempts a tricky long pot with the rest

He failed to qualify for any ranking event in 2011/12 but began 2012/13 strongly and almost won his first title at the minor-ranking Gdynia Open. Neil Robertson held on to win a tense final 4-3, however. He then failed to win a match from December onwards and missed out on qualifying for the 2013 World Championship.

<p>Name: Jamie Burnett Born: September 16th 1975, Glasgow Nationality: Scottish Turned Pro: 1992 Century Breaks: 109 Highest Break: 148 Ranking Titles: 0 World Titles: 0</p>

Campbell

Marcus Campbell made little impact on the world of snooker until an extraordinary match at the 1998 UK Championship. Stephen Hendry was the game's dominant force and he was expected to trounce Campbell, but the underdog recorded one of the most surprising results not just in snooker but in any sport when he thrashed Hendry 9-0. He proved the result was no fluke by beating Quinten Hann 9-6 in the next round.

Campbell couldn't reach the same heights until he beat Graeme Dott and Anthony Hamilton at the 2007/08 Grand Prix, although he eventually lost to Joe Swail. He also showed strongly at the Welsh Open with wins over Lee Spick, Ricky Walden and Gerard Greene, before he lost to Ding Junhui. He qualified as a wildcard for the 2008 Bahrain Championship with a 147 but was beaten in the tournament by eventual champion Neil Robertson. He then qualified for the 2010 World Championship but couldn't get past Mark Williams.

Campbell won the Euro Players Tour Championship, a minor-ranking tournament, in 2010 in a season that saw him enter the world's top 32. In 2011/12 he entered six of the eight ranking tournaments but lost at the last 16 stage and only finished the season 30th in the order of merit. In 2012/13 Campbell qualified for the Wuxi Classic and reached the semifinal at a ranking tournament for the first time in his career by beating Stephen Lee, Fergal O'Brien and Mark Williams. He eventually succumbed to nerves and lost 1-6 to Ricky Walden, although a ranking win is probably within his grasp.