



## Resurrecting a favourite pastime

**Greg Baum goes in search of snooker, and finds there is still great passion for cue sports.**

SNOOKER and billiards have had some bad breaks lately. In March, gangster Lewis Moran was shot dead at The Brunswick Club, the Sydney Road establishment that houses the game's headquarters in Melbourne. Last week, the roof sprang a leak during a tournament, flooding a table. It was the first known instance of "rain stopped play" in a snooker tournament, said Alan Croft, secretary, score registrar and archivist for the Victorian Billiards and Snooker Association. Then Eddie Charlton, Australia's best-known player since the incomparable Walter Underwood, died. It is problematic which was the greatest setback. Moran's messy death caused the cancellation of A grade pennant at the Brunswick Club that night. The flooded table cost \$1500 to repair. But Charlton's passing invoked surprisingly little sadness. Croft said Charlton's single contribution to snooker was to play it so well that it gained the game worldwide attention, most memorably on the cult-like television program *Pot Black*. "Without him, our sport would not be recognised, true," Croft said, "He did a lot, but he could have done a lot more." A colleague was even less well disposed. "He was a hustler from the day he came to the day he left. But he was a wonderful player." In the perverse way of these things, Charlton's death attracted more attention to snooker than at any time since *Pot Black*. Croft does not deny that he would love to have the program back.

He is encouraged that the RACV club is allowing for camera positions and TV strength lighting when installing a new table at its new headquarters. He is hoping for a deal with Channel 31. Croft said it would need only one world Australian champion to rekindle public interest. Australia has had several previously.

As recently as 2002, Steve Mifsud, a mild-mannered hero at the Brunswick Club, was world snooker champion. In billiards, there is the peerless Lindrum, said to have been even more dominant in his sport than Bradman in his, Tom Cleary and, more recently, Robbie Foldvari, whose portraits also hang with Mifsud's on the club walls.

Now Croft and VBSA treasurer George Hoy can barely contain themselves when speaking of 22-year-old Neil Robertson, the 2002 world under-21 champion, who left last weekend with Mifsud for the world championships in the Netherlands.

While in Australia, Robertson won all five tournaments that comprise the Victorian circuit. He made three century breaks in

a row, an unlikely feat, and would have had a fourth in succession except that he missed the pink when on 94. He also made three perfect breaks of 147 at practice.

At present ranked about 40, he is likely to feature "in the TV rounds" of lead-up tournaments in England in the next month. "He's the next Eddie Charlton", said Croft. He is also something of a missing link, between the salad days of Charlton and *Pot Black* and the halcyon era that Croft and Hoy believe can come again.

Croft and Hoy had just finished a friendly game at the Brunswick Club when *The Age* found them. Croft plays for the Yarraville club, but calls the Brunswick Club the "Victoria Park of snooker".

### **He did a lot, but he could have done a lot more. ALAN CROFT, VBSA secretary, on Eddie Charlton**

Downstairs, it is a modern pub-club with big windows, pot plants and pokies, but old fashioned clientele with lived-in faces. Upstairs, it is dim and hushed in the best snooker hall tradition, but no longer smoky. It looks mustier than it smells. Some tables, said Croft, have been there unbudged even by a millimetre for more than a century.

Arguably, cue sports have two diametrically opposed images. One is of airless pubs, hustlers and misspent youths with a shadowy edge, a picture sharpened by Moran's murder in a snooker club.

The other is of stuffy gentlemen's clubs: black ties, white gloves, cigars and whisky. Neither image is especially modern, nor, said Croft, any truer than any caricature.

Pubs are still the hotbeds of pool, and clubs - Melbourne, Athenaeum, RACV, but also Brunswick and Yarraville - remain the cornerstones of pennant. But smoking is now banned where pennant is played.

Dress codes still apply, but are more relaxed. As for the gangsters, Moran was in the Brunswick Club that fateful night to drink with friends downstairs; he was a world away from the tables and players.

Croft recalled a racier time when tobacco sponsorship was freely available, popular exhibition matches were played in suburban shopping centres, and tables could be found in schools, too. But sponsorships dried up, shopping centres found more lucrative uses for their spaces, the schools became more correct. The young now misspent their youths on electronic games.

Croft said cue sports were still flourishing in Victoria, with about 200 pennant players and up to 3500 regular competitors in pubs and clubs. But he acknowledged that there was a generational problem.

The present crop of players began when everyone's dad had a table in his garage or den. "We're finding that we're ageing," he said. "The baby boomers are going." Croft told of one four-man pennant team whose average age was nearly 85. But he has been cheered by a recent influx from the Asian community, which he said now comprised nearly 40 per cent of players.

Since tobacco sponsorship was outlawed, cue sports have been essentially self-funded. It falls to the clubs to find the money to send players overseas, sometimes to replace a table at nearly \$50,000 a time and maintain cloths at \$2000 each a year.

Croft said that if cue sports ever got money from governments, they would spend it on juniors. In the meantime, the best they can do is offer players under 18 free entry to tournaments.

Croft and Hoy are evangelists. Croft first played standing on a fruit box at his father's table, and he still likes to spend around two hours a day playing or practising. He compared its fascination to golf, a game he also played. "It's golf without the weather." On Sydney Road, the rain pelted down.

Like golf, snooker depends on stance and a grooved action, he said. Like golf, some stroke the ball with effortless power, others whack it. Like golf, it is a psychological and tactical game. Like golf, it is inscrutable; some days, every shot will drop, others, none will. Like golf, it demands an even temperament. Croft and Hoy have both seen cues broken over knees. Like golf, it is a game that possesses players. "I broke a cue 15 years ago and vowed not to play again," said Croft. "It was my right arm."

But he did come back, of course. In snooker, a break is just a beginning.



Eddie Charlton