

# Sports of the Times

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

By ARTHUR DALEY

## From Behind the 8-Ball

**W**ILLIE MOSCONI is a champion of the world and yet not many sports followers even have heard of him. That's a mistake. It's about time you got acquainted. Willie is a dapper little fellow of 32 with prematurely gray hair, handsome features and a most engaging personality. He's also the world titleholder at pocket billiards, a game which is known in more coarse circles as "pool."

At present he's defending his crown against Jimmy Caras in a transcontinental tour through ten cities. In the course of his travels he passed through our bustling little village and gave an eye-filling demonstration of his extraordinary skill. Mosconi looks as though he might dominate his phase of the sport just as did the equally colorful Ralph Greenleaf before him.

He plays faster and with more daring than did Greenleaf. His willingness to gamble on a risky shot probably is the main reason he has an exceptional number of long runs. When he first won the championship in 1941 he ran 125 and out on nine occasions. In fifty-eight other instances he had runs of more than 100. Anyone who ever held a cue stick in his hand can appreciate what breath-taking feats those streaks represent.

However, none of them even can begin to compare with the most spectacular string he ever fashioned. That was when he equaled Irving Crane's world-record long run of 309 balls pocketed without a miss. It was almost one of those believe-it-or-not things that he should hit the old record right on the nose before he met with failure.

### Almost a Record

Wee Willie pocketed the 308th ball with neatness and dispatch, clearing the table of everything but the one ball left to keep the sequence in operation. They racked up the other fourteen balls and Mosconi glowed in delight. His position play with the cue ball had been perfect. He'd be able to slam the object ball into the corner pocket and then burrow into the pack with the cue ball, splitting it wide open. It looked as though he'd be going for a week.

But something went wrong. The object ball fell, properly enough, to equal the old record. However, the cue ivory unaccountably squirmed into the bunch and stopped dead. Willie surveyed the wreckage in complete consternation, his dream of a new mark almost at an end. But he determined to give it the old college try as he studied the set-up carefully. There were two vaguely possible combination shots for a bold thrust of the cue ball into the pile.

Both the 15-ball and the 8-ball were lined, more or less, at the same corner pocket. The black 8-ball was farther away and the champion calculated that the 15 had a better chance of beating it to the pocket. He made the stroke. The 15 rolled toward the opening, hit the corner and wavered on the brink, almost as if it were trying to make up its mind whether or not to go in.

While it so hesitated, that fatal 8-ball hit the opposite corner of the pocket, brazenly brushed the 15 aside—and dropped in. But Willie hadn't called it, and so it didn't count.

"It almost was like Hank Greenberg needing one home run to break Babe Ruth's record," mourned the champion, "and then hitting the ball for a triple off the top of the screen in his final turn at bat in the last game of the season." A very neat analogy, it must be said.

That wasn't the only time that Mosconi was embarrassed in his travels. He once was booked for an exhibition in Binghamton against some home-town wonder, the promoter paying a very fancy price for the champion of the world. Willie followed the usual practice of the billiard wizards against local yokels by obligingly splitting wide the pack on the break in order to make the competition interesting and in order to give the home boy a chance to make a moderately respectable showing.

### Much Too Helpful

The Binghamton lad astounded him by ripping off a run of 50 and then cagily playing safe. So Willie took his second shot and missed. Thereupon the local yokel ran 75 to finish the match, 125 to 0. The red-faced Mosconi, who'd taken just two shots and hadn't made a point all night, felt morally bound to offer his services free for a second match. He gave no concessions this time and actually had a deuce of a job in winning.

Like Willie Hoppe before him, Mosconi took up billiards at the age of 6—but he didn't stick at it the way the immortal Hoppe did. His father owned a billiard parlor in Philadelphia, but was such a rabid baseball fan that he closed up the place every afternoon to go to the ball games. So Willie would sneak in, climb on a chair and knock the balls around. When his father locked up the balls on him, he borrowed round potatoes from the kitchen and practiced with them—until he ripped the green-baize cloth one day. That ended his pool-playing rather abruptly.

When the depression threw him out of his upholsterer's job in 1930, Willie had plenty of time to practice billiards. So rapid was his improvement that he was soon winning lesser tournaments, then sectional and divisional ones. In comparatively little time his natural abilities, steady nerves and smooth stroking catapulted him into the big time. Apparently, he's now there to stay.

Like all cue artists, he gives out with the "body English" on difficult shots, that silly but instinctive custom of leaning hard in the direction you want the ball to go. He picks his spots for it, though. He always has since one steamingly hot day in St. Louis when he was performing in a billiard parlor on the second floor of a building. His rival was giving a shot "body English," backing away from the table as if that would draw the ball along. And he backed right out of an open window. No damage, though. But it did teach Willie a lesson.