

By SIDNEY M. SHALETT

THE first chapter of this story opens some forty-six years ago when a stern German father named Hoppe stood his solemn-eyed 6-year-old son Willie on a wooden box alongside an erratic old billiard table and placed a cue in his small hands. The latest chapter was written in Chicago recently when Willie Hoppe, in a performance unprecedented in billiards history, recaptured one of the numerous championships he has held. In between are many dramatic chapters in Willie Hoppe's amazing career.

Young Willie's world was bounded by the four corners of a billiard table. Known throughout the country and abroad as the "Boy Wonder," he earned a living for his family by playing in exhibition matches. Then, at the old age of 18, he captured his first world's championship. For fifteen years he stayed on top until, in 1921, a younger man defeated him. It was said that "old age" finally had caught up with the great Hoppe; but he made an expedition up the traditionally impossible "comeback trail," quickly recaptured his old crown and for another long period stayed either on or near the top of the heap.

When the erstwhile "Boy Wonder," now the "Old Master," entered the recent Chicago tournament for the world's three-cushion billiard championship, the "old age" whispers again were heard, for Willie was 52 and he was up against strong opposition. But the "Old Master," in the language of billiards, was "free-wheeling," and "the other guys were as good as dead." He not only won the championship but swept the tournament in a manner never before equaled, by defeating each of his ten rivals twice to pile up twenty straight victories. If he never touched a cue again, Hoppe's place in the billiard hall of immortals—along with such all-time wizards of the cue as Frank Ives, "Old Jake" Schaefer and the rest—would be assured.

WILLIE HOPPE today—the sleek blond hair of his youth has been polished down to a thinning gray pompadour, and he is stocky and somewhat poker-faced—holds, or has held, so many billiard crowns that he has to think a bit before he can catalogue them. The very fact that there are so many titles is a tribute to Hoppe's skill and the skill of other players of his

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Story of Willie Hoppe, a champion again at 52.

caliber; when one game became too easy for the experts another and more difficult one was invented.

It was all very simple at the start. In straight-rail billiards the player was required to hit the two object balls with the cue ball. Then skillful players discovered that they could manoeuvre the balls into little triangles near the cushions or in the corners of the tables in a manner which permitted them to repeat the same pattern shot over and over again—the object balls hardly moving as the cue ball traveled to a cushion and thence to each of the object balls before returning to its original relative position—and roll up points so fast that it became difficult for the spectator to keep track of them.

RULES were adopted which limited the right of the player to make these shots in the corners, and the various balkline games were invented to limit them along the rails. Lines were drawn on the table and the player had to move at least one of the object balls out of the areas marked off by the lines in a given number of shots. [The various balkline games are designated by numerals defining the areas and the number of shots.] In three-cushion billiards—most spectacular of all billiard games—there are no limited areas on the table but the cue ball must strike the cushion three times and the two object balls to score a point.

In the evolution of the game Hoppe has played his part, and his skill with the cue has brought him not only fame but fortune. Back in the golden Nineteen Twenties a championship was worth \$20,000 a year; the largest manufacturer of billiard equipment paid the "champ" a \$7,500 salary for giving exhibitions and there was plenty of extra money to be earned in tournaments. Today there is no salary and tournaments are fewer; yet the championship remains a bonanza, for exhibition offers have poured in since the Chicago triumph—enough to keep Hoppe, who is general director and instructor at the Metropolitan Billiards Club on West Fifty-seventh Street, extremely busy.

HOPPE, however, has paid the price of everything he has won. All his life he has kept a training schedule as rigorous as that of any athlete—roadwork, exercise, regular hours, diet, temperance and interminable practice.

It all began back in Cornwall Landing, a tiny town on the Hudson, when Hoppe's father, who kept a battered billiard table in his combination lunchroom and barber shop, discovered that Willie had the makings of a billiard player. So there was no playing sandlot baseball with the other kids for Willie—he had to stay in and practice his billiards. And besides, baseball might hurt his hands.

"Father was one tough taskmaster," Hoppe says. "He trained my older brother Frank and me so we could trim all the visiting drummers—though I had to stand up on a box to do it."

Then, in the Spring of 1895, when Willie was 7 and Frank was 9, the elder Hoppe took them on a barnstorming tour of up-State towns. It eventually led to an exhibition at that old center of elite billiards, Maurice Daly's Academy at Thirty-first Street and Broadway in New York City. Willie captured Daly's heart with his trick

of scrambling up on the table for a difficult shot, then flopping off onto the floor to get out of the way of the cue ball. Soon Daly had bought him a little dinner jacket and was taking him to the Union League Club for exhibitions.

Hoppe's father sold his business in order to continue barnstorming with his "wunderkind." This barnstorming made for a strange life. Willie had little time for school, so for a while his mother accompanied the party as a sort of traveling schoolmarm. When Frank, who wanted to study stenography, insisted on quitting there was a brief period when Mother Hoppe, who never before had touched a billiard cue, appeared as Willie's partner.

There was a lean stretch when she had to pawn her diamond ring to keep the family eating. Just when things looked gloomiest, Willie, then 14, received his first offer to go to Paris. From then on the "Boy Wonder" advanced steadily until, at the age of 18, he finally was matched with Maurice Vignaux, then the 18.1 balkline champion of the world.

IT was a picturesque contrast the two players presented as they met on that drizzly night of Jan. 15, 1906, in the glittering ballroom of the Grand Hotel in Paris: Willie, a stripling, his hair plastered and parted down the middle as straight as one of his cue shots, and Vignaux, the "Old Lion," a white-maned, portly old man who resembled a music professor. Willie was nervous and got off to a bad start, but in the second half of the game the magic click of the ivories drowned out everything else from his consciousness. When the match was over Willie was world's champion.

His career from then on is told in headlines that fill a scrapbook almost as fat as a billiard table. Back in America, he speedily lost his championship and was publicly joshed by his friend Mark Twain for the "steadfast" manner in which he held his cue as he sat in the high chair watching his opponent stroke away his title. But he won it right back, and also won the 18.2 championship. He played for President Taft in the White House. Then he held the balkline crown from May, 1910, through November, 1921, defending it against all challengers from Europe, Japan and the United States, until "Young Jake" Schaefer, brilliant son of "Old Jake," lifted it from him.

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Willie Hoppe, the "Boy Wonder."



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ished, however, Hoppe went into training, worked a "hitch" out of his arm that was affecting his game, and returned to recapture the title in 1922. Then he found a new world to conquer in the newer three-cushion game. New stars rose and old stars sank, but Hoppe hung on like Father Time himself.

AT 52 Hoppe still lives up to the rules of training, practice and concentration to which he attributes his success. He goes to bed as early as his exhibitions permit, gets nine or ten hours of sleep and, after a light breakfast, walks two or three miles in Central Park not far from his home in West Fifty-seventh Street. For many years Hoppe was a total abstainer from both tobacco and alcohol; only lately has he permitted himself a few cigarettes and an occasional beer or cocktail. He has never driven a car for fear driving might stiffen his wrists, and he limits both reading and the movies to save his eyes.

To see Willie Hoppe in action is to see an almost unbelievably efficient human billiard-playing machine. When he puts on his dinner jacket and stiff shirt to face a tournament gallery he becomes a man of iron nerves. There are no temperamental outbursts from him; he doesn't even know the crowd is there; its noise and applause are but a distant hum to him. "The game," says Hoppe, "is won on the table"—that's where he keeps his eyes.

Hoppe has no superstitions; he is so free of sentiment that he never has bothered to name the maple cue butt that has served him faithfully for the past thirty-six years. Though he isn't very articulate—he is a soft-spoken man who talks best with a cue in his hands—he has developed a personal philosophy that might be equally applicable to boxers, chess players, musicians, lawyers, writers or business men. That philosophy is expressed in his quiet dictum that "it isn't always the genius who gets to the top; it takes plenty of hard work and concentration along with talent."

His idea of what makes a good billiard player is summed up according to that philosophy. "First," he says, "you must have natural ability. But you also must be able to concentrate—an even temperament is a big help too—and you must love the game well enough to put a lifetime of practice into it."

HOPPE can't quite put his finger on the intangible element that distinguishes a champion from an expert amateur. His best explanation is that a "champ" must have all the qualities of the good player and also the ability to stand up under the "terrific fire" of tournament play; that's where power of concentration becomes important, he believes.

As for himself, the "Old Master" intends to keep up that "hard work" and "concentration." He says he never has been in better form than he is now, and he expects to keep on playing billiards "at least until I'm 60."

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