



A BAIZE OF GLORY

Craig Smith went to meet master cueman Steve Davis for a potted history of his inspirations - and aspirations to mentor the next generation of professional stars.





Behind every great player is a great coach. This adage certainly rings true for Steve Davis who, had it not been for the encouragement, commitment and passion – all the hallmarks of a coach – shown by his father during those formative years, might have meant the world was never treated to ‘The Nugget’ lifting the world snooker crown on six occasions.

With many more tournaments now on the snooker calendar from the days of our parents’ favourites taking to the table – household names such as Jimmy White, Alex Higgins, Stephen Hendry and Steve himself – the desire to be at your best for a more prolonged period is well and truly at the forefront of players and coaches’ minds.

The extra dimension of psychological support is also prevalent, with renowned psychiatrist Dr Steve Peters working with the likes of Ronnie O’Sullivan, not to mention the clutch of sporting royalty away from the baize. What other differences are there between today’s game and the 1970s,

when a young upstart from east London first started to emerge, through the 80s with the inclusion of Davis’ inaugural world title in 1981?

“I think the game has changed only really in as much as there is more emphasis on attacking than the era I was brought up in, and the era before me,” begins Steve.

“The mentality of the game is different nowadays. The first opportunity that is a reasonable one you have got to try take now. It wasn’t necessarily the style of play that was around in the 80s and going back further.”

The laymen (and women) among us, who don’t possess an interest in snooker, may wonder why this is, given the apparatus of table, cue and a set of snooker balls has pretty much remained the same. However, as Steve testifies, times have moved on:

“The game has become far more aggressive. That’s not necessarily a coaching thing, but a shot selection. For example, in golf, you would have to go for the pin now.

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They [the golfers] can't go for the middle of the green if they want to win the tournament. In the past, they could possibly win playing par golf."

Given this acceleration of the game - Davis' famous black-ball final of 1985 against Dennis Taylor took 14 hours 50 minutes to complete - from more extended bouts of safety play to a brand of 'naughty snooker' to coin modern-day parlance, what does this mean for today's coaches and mentors?

"The one thing we've all got in common, whether it is me as a professional, one of the coaches, or as a fan, is we all love the game," says Steve, a co-deliverer of World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA) and 1st4sport coaching qualifications.

"What we find is that we are bumping into people with so much enthusiasm for the game. They are wanting to help in their local area. We see a great deal of that when we run kids' clubs.

"From a coach's perspective, trying to inspire is the difficult part. You are never going to inspire someone who doesn't want to play, but when you find someone who wants to play they're self-motivated, so it makes the job easier.

"Not all coaches are worried about coaching professionals; they want to coach kids to get them to enjoy the game. The thing that has rubbed off on me the most is getting people to enjoy the game and from that perspective, giving them an insight into the higher level is nice, as sometimes that switches a light bulb on for them.

"Coaches are inspired by the occasional player they get who shows some durability, dedication and enthusiasm," adds Steve, reminiscing over time spent nurturing his talent with his inspirational father along with the countless hours spent reading *How I Play Snooker* by the legendary champion Joe Davis, the man responsible for organising the first-ever snooker World Championship.

Given Steve's high-profile status, pedigree and continued involvement in the game with coaching qualifications, what does he see as the key areas of knowledge that coaches and mentors can impart on their players?

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From a player's perspective, Steve attests to "wanting someone who will not be necessarily criticising your choice of shots, but be sensible enough that when you push the boat out too far, to highlight it after the event, not during, therefore not ripping you to pieces in the dressing room".

With regards the 15–20 minute mid-session interval that snooker players get in matches at a professional level, what they do during this time is personal preference. In the case of players like O'Sullivan it may be a quick consultation with Dr Peters; whereas some players may prefer small talk over a cup of tea.

"I'd say, ultimately, it is about having some down time [with their coach/mentor] where they can have a chat, such as 'Did you see that shot?', 'Yeah, yeah'. That's enough. It could be a shoulder to cry on or someone to help you get perspective, such as 'Did you see that film the other night?'," adds the now-BBC commentator and pundit.

Ultimately, the game of snooker is about trying to win the frame. Whether it be coaching or mentoring players at club, amateur or professional level, "coaching in general is about making the most of everyone's natural ability". If you manage this, then it is pretty much frame and match. **CE**

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NUGGET'S NUGGET

“The art of being a good coach is to give a strong mental picture of what you want your pupil to achieve. The art of being a good pupil is to take this information on board and put this mental picture to good use.”

Source: *Interesting* by Steve Davis

