



PHOTO BY LARA ROSSIGNOL, ASSISTED BY "CRISPY" PENDLETON

# **BACK FOR MOORE**

**AFTER QUITTING POOL AND THE  
PERILOUS LIFE OF A HUSTLER,**

**•STEVIE MOORE•**

**RETURNED TO TAKE A SHOT AT  
THE IPT. THE TOUR'S ALL BUT  
BURIED NOW, BUT MOORE'S  
BACK FOR GOOD.**

**By Mike Geffner**

# •STEVE MOORE•

## STEVIE MOORE COULDN'T BELIEVE IT.

After all those years of scratching out a living on the road, a passage that took him from a mouthy teenager to nearly his 30s, Moore's pool existence had come to something as silly as this: a guy in a rinky-dink bar somewhere in Wisconsin getting right in his face and screaming, calling him out for being a hustler, and threatening to rob him, if not hinting at worse.

And over what? Nothing but a measly gambled-and-lost \$50.

"Are you kidding me? Over \$50?" Moore said to the guy. "Hey, man, if the money is that important to you, I'll just give it back."

"Maybe the best thing for you to do," the guy said, glaring, "is to leave."

Which Moore, with the cash remaining in his pocket, did in record time.

But as soon as he hit the outside, Moore turned to his traveling partner and said in no uncertain terms: "Man, this is it. I'm getting in my car and going home and getting a job. I'm not going through this crap anymore." Like the day before, being warned to watch his back after beating out a drug dealer for a sizeable sum in Indiana, and before that being held up by two guys, one with a shotgun, in Ohio.

Enough was enough.

That last trip was in August 2003. Even though some insiders considered Moore the best road player in America at the time, "I had reached the end of the line with that life," he's saying now from his Atlanta home. "I was totally burned out on all of it. On the gambling. On traveling all the time. On hustling people just so I could eat. I started really hating the game — which I've always loved — and I was getting real bitter toward people and not trusting them, even in everyday life. In fact, I had gotten so paranoid that I thought since I was trying to hustle everybody they all must be trying to hustle me,

or do something bad to me. People scared me, to where I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown. I kept telling myself, even before that last road trip, 'I got to stop.' I mean, ain't no tellin' what would've happened to me if I stayed on the road."

Moore didn't only think he was done forever with the road back then, but, for the most part, pool. He was determined instead to backtrack totally and create a different path to his future — by being a working man and going full-force after a life that had security and a pension and a

with the post office, driving around in a truck delivering the mail.

"Not bad for a high-school dropout," he says of the postal gig. "I didn't see myself getting anything better than that. But, man, that was one grueling job, the longest days. I did it for two weeks before I couldn't take it anymore."

It was around this time, coincidentally, that Kevin Trudeau's International Pool Tour was being born and along with it all the hoopla of million-dollar prize funds and "guaranteed" income.

Following the scent of unprecedented cash, players — including hardcore roadies hiding in the woodwork for years — flocked from everywhere trying to land a spot on the tour.

Not Moore, however — the avowed retired pool player on his new mainstream career track.

He resisted the IPT so completely that he even eschewed qualifiers played in nearby Louisville and in his own backyard of Atlanta — despite constant pleas from all the local pros, most notably Johnny Archer, Monica Webb, and Helena Thornfeldt, saying he should "definitely get in there and play," that he was too great a player to simply sit on the sidelines during such a uniquely opportune time in pool history.

It was only after he got an earful from his girlfriend Kristen, clearly disgusted with her beau's stubbornness, that Moore's head turned around. "You're a stupid [expletive]," she said, "if you don't play in those tournaments."

They were obviously the magic words, because just like that, Moore was back playing every single day at Mr. Cues again, practicing for six hours a day trying to get his game back. He snapped off the 9-ball title at the Viking Southern Classic Open in October 2005. And soon, he was entering IPT qualifiers that forced him to fly to such far-off places as Rome, Italy, and Weert, Holland.

Moore ended up winning that qualifier in Rome and another one in Raleigh, N.C.,



DAVE THOMSON/MEDIUM POOL

Moore finally arrived with his Reyes-slaying Derby City bank title.

401K plan. "I had that in my blood anyway," he says. "My mom, who raised me and three other kids all by herself, was a very hard worker and sometimes worked two jobs at once to make sure her kids were taken care of."

So, dropping to his knees and crawling around on his hands, he stapled down carpets and glued down hardwood floors. He had thoughts of possibly becoming a fireman or an EMT; he bartended in the same poolroom he used to play, Mr. Cues II; and he landed a \$16.80-an-hour job

which secured him spots in the 2006 North American Open 8-Ball Championship and the World Open 8-Ball Championship. By the time he was done, he was ranked 42nd on the IPT list and had earned nearly \$29,000 in prize money. That same year, he also had an impressive U.S. Open 9-Ball Championship, in which he knocked out defending champion Alex Pagulayan and finished tied for 17th. Leading off 2007, he finally came out from the shadows for good by winning the Derby City Classic's 469-player bank-pool division, defeating, of all people, the legendary Efren Reyes in a hill-hill final, ending it by firing in a spectacular two-railer. Moore actually beat Reyes twice — dealing the Magician a 3-0 loss in Round 12 of the event.

"I never really played banks before," Moore claims, "just a few games as a kid and that's about it."

## **"I SAW HOW LITTLE THE PRO PLAYERS GOT PAID. I KNEW I COULD MAKE MORE MONEY ON THE ROAD. I THOUGHT I WAS TAKING THE EASIER ROUTE."**

Says Monica Webb: "That shows you right there the kind of player Stevie is."

The last time Moore won anything that big was a dozen years ago, when he snapped off the World Bar Table Championship in Palm Springs, Calif., at 21 years old. "Both a blessing and a curse," is how he reflects on that achievement now, the curse being that it led to an undercover life that satisfied his wallet but not his heart.

"I got a little sidetracked," says the man who's suddenly a rising star on the professional circuit after spending a lifetime as a faceless entity drifting from one town to the next. "My original intention was like all young pool players: to be a professional and win a lot of tournaments and get recognition for being a great player. But I saw how little the players got paid, and I knew I could make more money on the road, thought I was taking the easier

route. I have no regrets, except maybe that I should've tried to make it on the pro tour earlier. If I did that, I might've won a lot more tournaments by now."

Growing up, he was the only kid he knew with four names, Donald Steven Merle Moore, and he was born and raised in a tiny speck on the Bible Belt — Spartanburg, S.C. "We had five colleges, but there still wasn't anything going on there," he says. "It was pretty much an ultra-religious ghost town."

His mother, Frances, worked various odd jobs, including painting white lines on roads, and his father split before he was born. "I've never ever talked to him, don't know him at all," Moore says. "He never married my mom. They just had a fling together. But when I was 15, my mom told me that he lived in Spartanburg. I just never bothered to look for him. I'm sure [not having a father during my childhood] had an effect on me. For one thing, I'm definitely a mama's boy."

He shot his first games of pool when he was 7, but it wasn't until he was 12 that it started consuming him.

He was a regular at a small hangout called Mary's Quick Stop, a place with two bar tables, video games, a jukebox, and tons of junk food. He'd play Donkey Kong, or Pac-Man, or Asteroids, munch on some Reese's Peanut Butter Cups or Swiss Cake Rolls, then challenge the other boys at games of 8-ball.

"As soon as I was let out of school, I ran to Mary's and played pool until supper-time," he said. "Then right after supper, I ran right back and stayed until midnight."

In classes, Moore's attention would constantly wander, daydreaming about shots he played the day before or wanted to play, and he endlessly practiced his bridge using a pencil. Even when he slept, he dreamed about making a great shot to win a major championship.

He won his first local tournament at 13, and made his first big score at 14. "I won \$300 and thought I'd never have to work again," he says with a chuckle. At 15, already beating the best player in town, a guy named Jimmy whom he once worshipped, he abruptly quit school to take up pool as a living.

Which didn't exactly go down well with his mother.

"I don't care, I'm not going back to school," he told his mom after she challenged him. "I don't need school. I can make a lot of money playing pool."

"How I finally convinced her to let me quit school," Moore says, "I don't know."

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# •STEVE MOORE•

It was a year later that Moore experienced what he's convinced to this day was the most critical juncture in his development. For eight months, he lived in a motor home right outside a poolroom in Greensboro, N.C., and virtually every day, for as long as four hours, sparred with his idol, Earl Strickland, in race-to-9 sets.

"In those days, I needed the five-out from him to compete, and even that might not have been enough," Moore says. "I lost every set we played, of course. I was lucky to even get a game or two. I was totally awe-struck, but he was very nice to me. He was quiet most of the time, but if he saw me do something wrong,

worker or whatever else he could come up with on that particular day. He used disguises. "Once, in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, I made up my face to look older, wore glasses and raggedy clothes, and beat this guy out \$500," he says. "Around a month later, looking just the way I do naturally, I played the same guy, who didn't recognize me, and beat him again for another \$500." And he taunted his opponents with a "bad mouth," he says. "I cursed pretty much every sentence when I was young, had no respect for anything or anybody."

In his early years, he thoroughly reveled in the road life. "I didn't care where I

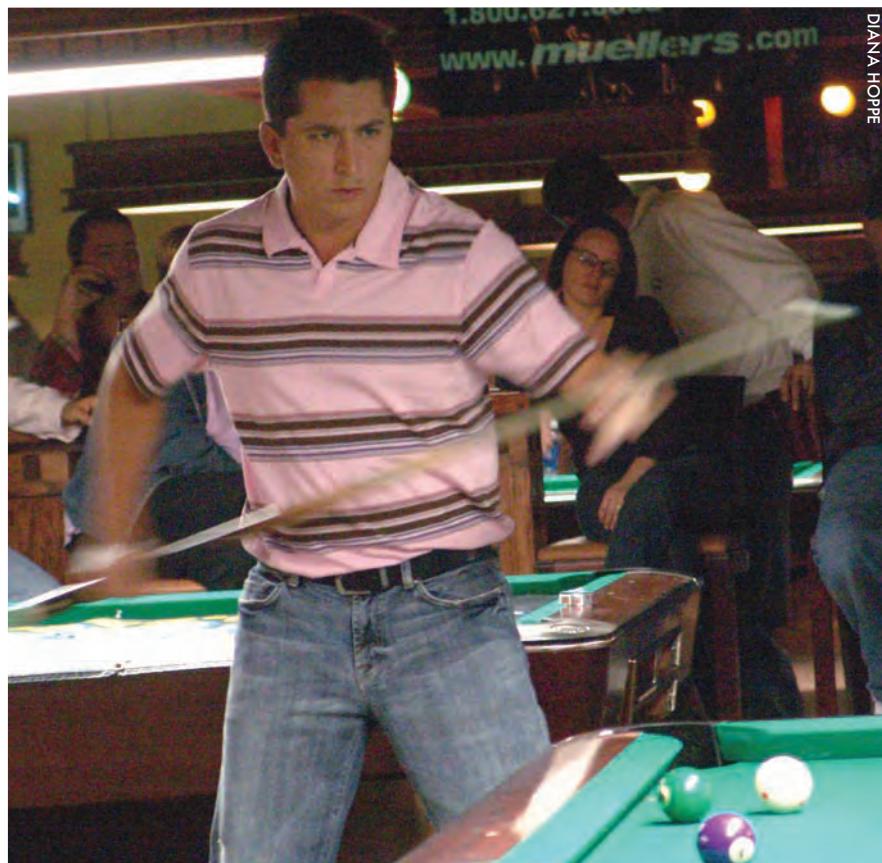
"I don't care if you mention my name, write a story about me if you want," Moore said to Hoppe, "but please, no pictures."

Though petrified at the time that the photos would still make the rounds in the billiard magazines and eventually dry up his action, Moore laughs about that incident now.

"I was grinding it out in those days," he says. "What's funny is, that all the things that made me nervous before, I now want to happen. I want to be on the cover of all the magazines now. I want to attract attention and sponsors. I want all the recognition now. I want to be so well known that everybody knows me."

But as he went from childhood to adulthood, Moore saw, more and more, the dark side of road life. The users and double-

**"I'M GLAD THAT I TOOK UP THE GAME AGAIN. I LOVE IT SO MUCH, AS MUCH AS I DID WHEN I WAS A KID. AND I FEEL LIKE MYSELF AGAIN."**



**In the pink:** Moore's early forays above ground included a Southern Classic title.

like a position mistake, he'd stop me and ask me, 'Why didn't you go this way?' I didn't understand how big that was until recently. I mean, guys would give up their left arm to learn from Earl. I finally got a chance to thank him for that at this past Derby City Classic. Looking back on it now, it was like a young golfer getting to play with Tiger."

On the road full time at 18, Moore went by aliases — Donald or Donnie or Junior. He lied about who and what he was, pretending to be a student or a construction

lived, or if I was broke or what," he says. "I just wanted to play pool somewhere for money. It was an adventure, got me away from my boring life in Spartanburg."

He'd enter a regional event on the rare occasion, but never anything bigger than that, desperately trying to keep his profile as low as possible. In fact, once, at a tournament in Greenville, S.C., when billiard photographer Diane Hoppe suddenly began taking pictures of him without permission, he freaked out, ran up to her and virtually begged for her not to publish them.

steerers. The liars and cheats. The two-bit thieves and criminals. Almost everybody he knew in those road years, he'll tell you, fell into one or more of those categories. "Just pretending to be my friend so they could make money with me or off me," he says. "That's just the way it is out there."

The darkest moment came around a year-and-a-half before he decided to chuck the life for good.

It was around midnight. He and his partner had just exited a poolroom in Portsmouth, Ohio, after winning \$250 in a ring game. They were heading to their black Nissan Pathfinder, parked about 50 yards away but down a dark, secluded street. When they reached the SUV, two guys wearing ski masks, one brandishing a shotgun, jumped out from behind some bushes, yelling.

Moore wondered if it was merely a bad joke but still dropped his pool stick to

the ground and raised both his arms in the air.

"What are y'all doing?" Moore said.

"Shut the f--- up and give us your god-damn money!" one of the guys barked.

The guy with the gun put the barrel to his partner's head. The other jostled Moore, who had \$4,000 of mostly winnings hidden on him.

"Man, I was so amped up," Moore remembers. "I wasn't going to let that guy push me around and just take my money after I had worked so hard for it."

Acting on nothing but pure instinct, Moore grabbed at the robber and started wrestling with him; the guy socked him smack in the head. "And when he hit me," Moore says, "he let me go."

The other robber made off with \$250 from Moore's partner, but missed another \$800 buried in another pocket. "And my partner and I just ran as fast as we could to the front of the poolroom shouting that we were getting robbed," he says.

It was, if nothing else, a wake-up call, and it unquestionably shook Moore up.

"But only a little," he says. "I know I could've gotten killed, but it could've happened to us coming out of a grocery store just as easily. I said to myself, 'Yeah, that was bad, but I ain't going to work.'"

That viewpoint lasted until those back-to-back days in August nearly four years ago, when he realized that a higher power was trying to tell him something. "I think things had to happen the way they did [for me to be where I am today]," he says. "The road definitely improved my game, made me tougher, harder, but I wouldn't wish it on anybody. I don't think a person should have to go through that trying to improve at the game or to make a living."

In the last two years or so on the pro circuit, Moore, 33, the guy with the shaky back arm, has built up an impressive hit list, knocking off in major events not only Reyes and Pagulayan but also Thorsten Hohmann, Mika Immonen, and Archer, among others.

"Believe me, he knows he's a great all-around player," says Archer, who has roomed with Moore recently at tournaments, "but he's not overly cocky about it or thinks it's going to just come without him working on it. He's still a student of the game, keeps trying to get better and better, and he's a fighter. Some people think because they're great players they deserve to win. He wants to earn it."

"You watch him practice," adds Monica Webb, who's known Moore for over a dozen years, "and it's inspiring. He puts

so much effort and focus into every shot. Even when he plays with me or Helena, you'd think he was playing for a million dollars.

"And right now, he seems more driven than ever. He has big dreams and aspirations. He wants to leave this world having made an impression. I truly believe that his desire and intensity alone won that [bank] tournament in Louisville."

Players describe Moore as a technician — a smart, rock-solid, high-percentage shooter who won't dazzle you with anything fancy but will awe you over time with his utter flawlessness.

"He's always told me, 'If it ain't simple, don't do it,'" says Webb. "I remember I was playing against him and I went for this tough shot, and he said to me right afterwards, 'Okay, well, if you make it you're a hero, but if you miss it you lose the game.' I got the message, and it's been in my head ever since."

Moore says that because he puts his "heart and soul" into every shot and "wants to execute everything, so I don't look like a fool up there" that it forces all the tension out through his back arm and makes it flutter and twitch. "It's from bearing down so hard trying to hit that cue ball so precisely and make them balls, man," he explains. "Gotta do it for my food and to excel and for the love of the game."

"His arm can distract you from his game sometimes," says Webb, "but he still shoots very straight, and, when he has to, he comes with the shot, it seems, every single time."

The irony is, the IPT, the very thing that sucked Stevie Moore back from the dead, that made him believe that pool was his destiny again, that teased him with big money and big titles and at last a legit life without all the hustle, has all but withered and died.

"It really bums me out," he says, and that doesn't even include the disturbing fact that the IPT still owes him more than half of the \$18,900 he won at the World Open.

"Hey, man, no matter what happens from here [with the IPT], I'm glad that I took up the game again. I love it so much, as much as I did when I was a kid. And I feel like myself again. I felt like such a fake when I stopped playing, both to myself and to other people. I feel like I'm finally on the path I always should've been on."

A path where he can show his face and state his name and not panic at the sight of a camera.

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