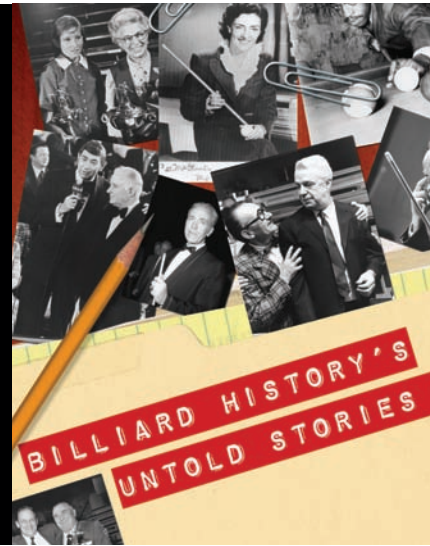


ALL THAT TALENT SQUANDERED

St. Jean could beat Greenleaf, but not the bottle.

Story by R.A. Dyer



THIS IS the story of Ralph Greenleaf's drinking partner, a man who was a gambler and a contender for the national championship. He was a hell-raiser of the old school — of the very old school — a product of Prohibition and of the Roaring '20s. Sometimes he wore a tuxedo, sometimes a mask. He almost always carried a flask.

Welcome back to Untold Stories. This month I'm profiling Andrew St. Jean, one of the most colorful almost-champions of our most colorful sport. In 1928, St. Jean was runner-up for the title, being bested only by the great Greenleaf himself. St. Jean also was among that stable of players contracted by the Coca-Cola Company to don masks and appear in poolrooms. They played anonymously as "Masked Marvels" as a promotional gimmick.

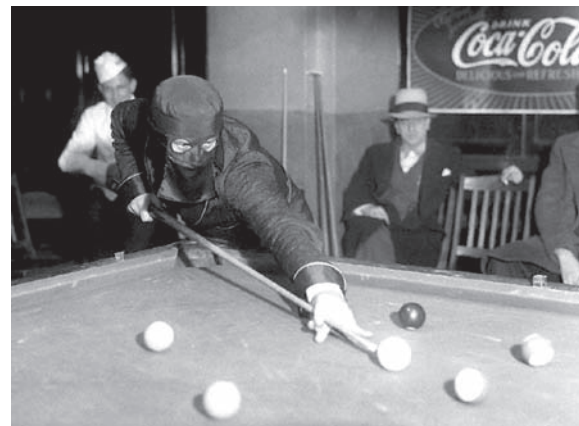
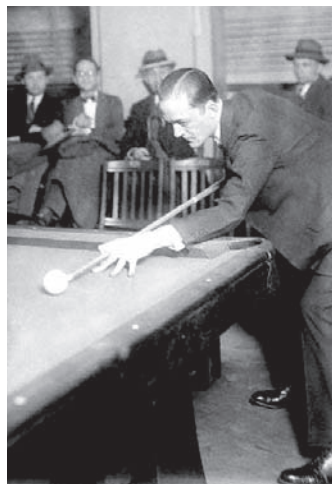
For this month's column, I have interviewed New Englander Ray Desell, one of the nation's few experts on the life of St. Jean. I also have consulted Willie Mosconi's memoirs and those of Minnesota Fats. I gathered a few more details on Steve Booth's Web site, www.onepocket.org, and from *The New York Times*. Mike Shamos, curator of The Billiard Archive, provided one of the few remaining photos of St. Jean.

These things we know for sure: St. Jean was of French-Canadian extraction and of working-class parentage. His was from a family of immigrants. His parents spoke French, and the language was probably St. Jean's first. He was born in 1902, died in 1954, had a life-long love

of booze and gambling, and was treacherous as a player and extremely skilled. He was said to have the ability to run 70 balls one-handed and during his later years made his living playing three-cushion billiards with only one hand.

It was cirrhosis that killed him. He was buried in his hometown of Lowell, Mass. (also the home of Jack Kerouac),

Desell that they lost track of St. Jean over the years, although one recalled seeing him play against Willie Hoppe during the 1920s. St. Jean also was said to frequent a social club in Lowell popular with French-Canadians. It's called the Pastetempe Club and it's still there in downtown, looking pretty much the same as always. "He was dyed-in-the-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BILLIARD ARCHIVE

St. Jean, left, could perform at the highest level in plainclothes, or in costume as the Masked Marvel.

over in his family's plot at St. Joseph's Cemetery. "He only lived a few miles from where I live now," says Desell, a resident of Lawrence, Mass. "His father owned a poolroom in Lowell, and ... he liked to drink and he partied with Greenleaf many times. They both liked to go out and drink — even before they did exhibitions they would go out and get tanked."

Desell said St. Jean was the oldest of four known siblings: He had a brother and two sisters, and the sisters later became nuns. The sisters, now dead, told

wool Canadian — the whole family was," said Desell. "The French-Canadians worked in factories there — textile factories in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Lowell. They were all textile cities, and there were many ethnic groups there, mostly working class."

One of the few known photos of St. Jean (provided to us courtesy Shamos and The Billiard Archive) reveals a man with a long nose, a rising hairline and sleepy languid eyes. His dark hair is rigid and slicked back. There's a straight ruler racing-stripe part on the left. Un-



Ralph Greenleaf was both a drinking companion and competitor for St. Jean.

like many modern players, St. Jean appeared to shoot crab-like, with both knees bent. In the photo he seems quite focused and plenty dignified, although I imagine he might have had a little bottle tucked away somewhere beneath the folds of his elegant coat.

Like Greenleaf, St. Jean was very much a product of the Jazz Age. Both men enjoyed celebrity (although St. Jean's was nowhere near that of Greenleaf's) and both were show-boaters. St. Jean, for instance, was known to attempt spectacular and ridiculous shots — shots that any cautious player would pass up. But then again, St. Jean loved applause almost as much as he loved whiskey, and he was clearly addicted to both. There were few in the pool world who kept pace with Greenleaf when it came to drinking, but St. Jean certainly was one of them.

"I got this from people who knew him and played him — from Portland, Maine, and everywhere else. I talked to them and they all said the same thing: St. Jean was an alcoholic ... and he squandered his talent," said Desell. "Mosconi said

the same thing: St. Jean was the greatest player in the world from the neck down. He had the physical ability."

Several old-timers, the late Eddie Taylor among them, also tell us that St. Jean was a world-class one-handed player, perhaps one of the best ever. Norm "Farmer" Webber, a fixture at Cochran's in San Francisco from 1955 to 1963,

"MOSCONI SAID THE SAME THING: ST. JEAN WAS THE BEST PLAYER IN THE WORLD FROM THE NECK DOWN."

— RAY DESELL

said he played St. Jean just as World War II was coming to a close. "We played a match together in Portland, Maine, at Dube's Billiard Parlor in 1944 or '45," said Webber, who was interviewed by Steve Booth back in 2004. "He came to play an exhibition, and I played him straight pool and beat him. ... He was

sober at the time I played him. I only beat him by one ball, 100 to 99."

Taylor, the so-called Knoxville Bear, provided Steve Booth more evidence of St. Jean's prowess. "I didn't know him, but you know who told me that he was a tremendous one-handed player? Fats told me, and another guy named Dayton Omstead — and Dayton was a pretty damn good three-cushion billiards player. He [Omstead] told me that he played St. Jean even up, and he was running three and four and going five rails and whatever, playing one-handed."

Desell himself said he was told by the late Bob Ingersoll of Boston that St. Jean once ran 70 balls against him — and that was one-handed. To my knowledge not Willie Mosconi, not Ralph Greenleaf, not anyone else, anywhere, had ever managed such a Ripley's Believe-it-or-Not freak run. Fats could play one-handed — but not like that. "During the 1940s, St. Jean would play three-cushion billiards one-handed for \$4 a game, because nobody was going to play him any pool — that was just impossible," said Desell. "But you'd be asking for trouble, because he could run 50 balls with one hand. He'd just take a cue off the rack, and if you promised to buy him a beer he would do it."

In 1927, one of his best years as a professional, St. Jean proved that physical ability. It was in that year that he bested Greenleaf not once, but twice in handicapped exhibition matches. On one occasion, St. Jean didn't even need the spot, as he beat Greenleaf 1,250 points to 1,232. In the following year, on April 3, St. Jean won the Eastern States Championship, which probably then was con-

sidered the most prestigious regional event in the nation.

Here's a sample of the coverage, this from *The New York Times* on April 4:

"In one of the most sensational pocket billiard matches of the present season Andrew St. Jean defeated Arthur Woods to win the pocket billiard championship at Kreuter's Billiard Academy last night. St. Jean scored his victory 125 to 71 in only two innings, and took the championship with a record of nine victories and one defeat.

"St. Jean was forced to watch Woods at-

tain a run of 65 points in the first inning of their match. St. Jean, however, replied with 118 points on his first trip to the table. Woods got only six in his half of the second, and then St. Jean ran out with seven.”

The article noted that St. Jean's 118 was the high run of the tournament, and that he went through his 10 games making 90 percent of his shots.

The *New York Times*, in an article published a few weeks later, reported that Greenleaf was keen to meet St. Jean for the national championship. Greenleaf was still smarting from those two previous exhibition losses, and it's likely that the two had posted a sizable side-wager on their outcome. That means the losses probably cost Greenleaf more than just his pride. On April 23, 1928, *The New York Times* noted that Greenleaf, then the national champion, was expected to sign papers finalizing the title-match event featuring St. Jean as challenger.

“It is known that he is especially keen to meet Andrew St. Jean, twice his conquerer during the past season in handicap matches,” the *Times* reported. “Charles S. Kline of the Strand Academy said yesterday that he was willing to stage another meeting between St. Jean and Greenleaf and that he intended to wire an offer to the champion. Promoter Kline said he felt certain that St. Jean would play.”

St. Jean got off to a spectacular start against Greenleaf, putting the champion on notice that he was not a man to be trifled with. Again, this from the *Times*:

“Andrew St. Jean, who has twice defeated Ralph Greenleaf, six times champion of the world in handicap pocket billiard matches, started his scratch encounter with Greenleaf at the Strand Academy and got off to a 75-point lead, even though he divided blocks with Greenleaf.

“The total score is 252-177. This is part of St. Jean's attempt to place himself in the forefront of leading challengers for the world's title. ... St. Jean played an unbeatable game to win the opening block, 131 to 30. So efficiently did St. Jean perform that he ran out the block in nine innings.”

St. Jean ended up losing the six-day match, 1,058 to 1,500, which ended May 19. It would mark the closest he'd ever get to the summit of American pocket billiards.

Desell said that St. Jean had more success as a gambler, but even then he would sometimes beat himself. He sim-

ply lacked the discipline to stay away from tough shots: “You know, sometimes he'd be running 40 balls ahead of the guy and he'd play some crazy shot and the guy would beat him,” Desell said. St. Jean sometimes lacked the discipline to simply lay low.

St. Jean was not above dumping games, but he preferred to simply run over his opponents. And any hustler will tell you that sometimes you've got to lose money to make it.

Take for instance the story of St. Jean and the two bookies. Desell said all three had driven into a small town, checked into a hotel, and then the bookies went off to set up the game. Apparently they had gotten a line on a pigeon, and what they figured was some easy cash.

“They said, ‘Andrew, stay in the hotel, order something to eat and take it easy. We'll be back.’

“But St. Jean gets a little restless and he went downtown and he had a few drinks in a bar. And then he went into the street and hit another bar. And so he [gets drunk] and he's shooting pool and he's showboating. The guy he was supposed to play there sees all this, and so the match was cancelled.”

And finally there's St. Jean, the Masked Marvel. The Coca-Cola company for several years would contract with top flight players to appear unannounced in poolrooms. There they would anonymously challenge the best local player. The Masked Marvels also performed trick shots. Afterwards the Coca-Cola promotional people would hand out free soft drinks, and the Masked Marvels would mysteriously slip away.

“The Coca-Cola company had a few Masked Marvels — I don't know how many — but they would pay them a stipend, and St. Jean was one of them,” explained Desell. “He also did a lot of exhibitions in New York City during the 1920s and the 1930s — he would do three-cushion exhibitions in the afternoon and he'd play at night. He really was nothing short of spectacular.”

R.A. Dyer is the author of “Hustler Days, Minnesota Fats, Jersey Red, Wimpy Lasser and America's Great Age of Pool.” His new book, “The Hustler & The Champ: Willie Mosconi, Minnesota Fats, and the Rivalry That Defined Pool,” is due out in October. Look for found pool footage and poolroom lore at the “Untold Stories” link at www.hustlerdays.com.

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