

EXCLUSIVE BOOK EXCERPT

BD PRESENTS A SNEAK PEEK AT A NEW BOOK BY “UNTOLD STORIES” COLUMNIST R.A. DYER, CHRONICLING THE LIVES OF MINNESOTA FATS AND WILLIE MOSCONI AND HOW THEIR RIVALRY DEFINED POOL.



THE FUTURE RIVALS FIRST MET AS YOUNG MEN AT FRANKIE MASON'S POOLROOM IN PHILADELPHIA, WHERE RUDOLF WANDERONE — AKA **MINNESOTA FATS** — CHALLENGED STRAIGHT-AS-AN-ARROW **WILLIE MOSCONI** TO \$50-PER-GAME ONE-POCKET. DYER RECONSTRUCTS THAT FATEFUL MEETING.

SO HE comes up the steps, striding across wood floors looking fat and well fed but no doubt with desperation behind a carefree façade. The Depression then beat down upon the nation; men were broke, families were starving — and maybe Rudolf Wanderone was too. Sometimes he lived at home, sometimes not. He had foraged through the poolhalls of Manhattan and Brooklyn and then, when the easy pickings played out and when his name started appearing in the news-

papers and the pool magazines, he took to the road. And so here he comes, he's arrived in Philadelphia, and at his side is that other back room player of shady repute, Babyface Alton Whitlow, and together they scan the room.

Suckers, suckers everywhere, they must think.

If they were starving, they never let on. If they were one loss away from homelessness, they never said.

Wanderone has no known skill at anything but cards, craps, and pocket

billiards. He has never held a job, and so, exactly and precisely like Willie Mosconi, he has sought refuge in poolhalls. But unlike Willie, Wanderone embraced this life with gusto. Unlike Willie, Wanderone never cared about looking like a lowlife scoundrel but rather feared being mistaken for a peniless bum. During those days when joblessness defined America, Wanderone summed up his life's meaning with a flash of green, a nervous twitch, a W. C. Fields taunt, an unquenchable

thirst for larceny. Hustling in small rooms and the big, moving, moving, moving brother, Wanderone reinvented himself. Carrying Babyface Whitlow's cue not out of deference but because they probably only had the one between them, Fats made his scratch the best way he could. And he did so with style.

So now Rudolf Walter Wanderone has come to Philadelphia flashing his \$250 cash money, calling it a fortune, and yet pledging to make it double. "Who wants some of . . . this?" he taunts.

It's a siren call, as true as one ever hears in a second-floor poolroom.

"I say I'll play anyone, anyone at all. . . ."

And who is there to hear this call but a man about Wanderone's age, a man about Wanderone's height, a man looking more irritated with every passing moment. He's there behind the counter, he's the houseman, and Wanderone has

cast his larcenous eye upon him.

"Hey, there, you, buddy. Why don't you play me some one-hole, c'mon."

Wanderone would appeal to the houseman's vanity and his arrogance and taunt him into a game — because that is how the hustle worked.

C'mon, Buddy, he says.

He has taken the houseman for a chump.

Let's go!

And so finally the houseman screws together his cue. He steps out from behind the counter. If he smiled that day it would have been utterly without warmth. Rudolf Walter Wanderone may have miscalculated.

"Let's see what you got," says the houseman. "I'm Willie Mosconi. Let's play some pool."

HUSSLERS TRAFFIC in impatience, ignorance, greed, and ego. Their tools are personal charm, an un-

derstanding of odds, an innate sense of human psychology, and an ability to deceive. Hustlers can victimize better players, or they can victimize lesser ones. They can victimize members of the general public. The most low-down of the hustling tribe can even cannibalize his own financial backers.

Hustlers employ a myriad of different techniques, but most are simple variations on two broad strategies. The first is simply to "play on the lemon," which means to mask one's true ability by purposefully making position errors, scratching, or missing balls. A player on the lemon might typically win but only just barely. Or he might win only slightly more games than the other fellow. Or the hustler might win only when the stakes have grown to his liking. A man on the lemon creates the comforting illusion that he isn't stealing another man's money. And if played with subtlety—that is, if played with good humor and flattery—the hustler's victim might keep losing for days.

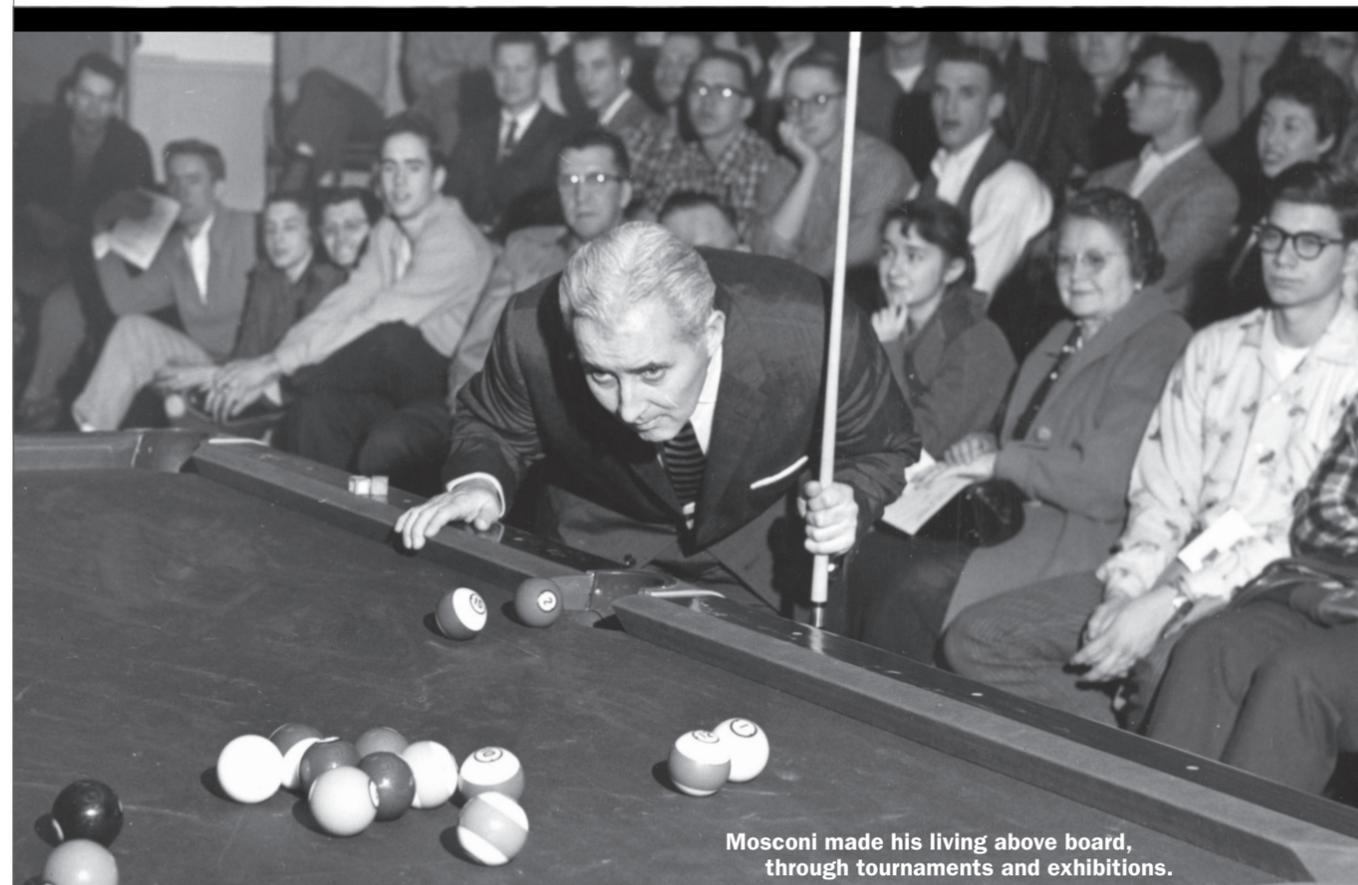
The second broad strategy is "sharking," and this is when a hustler behaves in disruptive or disconcerting ways to throw his opponent off. This can be as subtle as removing one's handkerchief while an opponent is shooting. It can be as overt as making physical threats. Sometimes the player getting sharked doesn't even realize he's getting sharked. Take, for example, those sometimes very funny hustlers who disarm their opponents with nonstop jokes and pratfalls.

Now when New York Fats met Willie Mosconi that first time in Philadelphia it appears that Fats combined both of these techniques into a single ploy. Dubbed "The Big Hoorah," Fats' hustle allowed him to use all of his athletic and psychological skills, but it did not require him to depend too heavily on those attributes he always held in short supply: patience and humility. Under ordinary circumstances the ploy might have given him a good chance of success. Of course, playing Willie Mosconi does not constitute ordinary circumstances.

In a nutshell, this is how the "Big Hoorah" is supposed to work: The hustler walks into the poolroom, maybe with a confederate, and starts knocking balls around. All the while



Fats (with Hubert Cokes, right) embraced the hustler lifestyle.



Mosconi made his living above board, through tournaments and exhibitions.

the hustler brags about his supposed skill and daring, but loudly, "Look at this shot! Lookee here!" he might say. Or: "Here it goes! Here it goes! Here it goes — beautiful!" The more obnoxious, the more ridiculous, the flakier, the better. The key is to not play well, not even close to well — again, to play on the lemon — and to affect a vulgar swagger that verges on the imbecilic. This sort of sharking Fats was perfect for.

Typically the hustler's relentless crowing combined with his seeming ineptitude will lure in a mark. And typically this mark will be some sort of local poolroom hero who would be utterly helpless against a professional. If the hustler has done his work, the local's own pride will drive up the wager while his ire will unbalance his shot making. Hence, the Big Hoorah is the perfect combination of sharking and hustling. The hustle also rewards an itinerant player like Fats, who then had neither the desire nor the patience to stick around any single room for long. Flit in. Piss off the helpless locals. Take their money. Clear out.

The disadvantage is also clear: not every local is helpless.

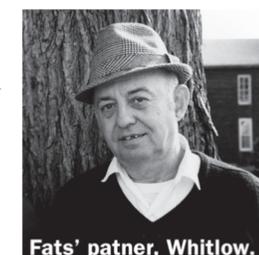
Philadelphia during the 1930s was the top city in the nation for pocket billiards. Former national champion Andrew Ponzi made his home there. And then there was George Kelly, a national-class player, and Jimmy Caras, another future world champion. Even the great Ralph Greenleaf spent some of those years in Philly, mostly in Allinger's but also sometimes over at Frankie Mason's. Greatness attracted greatness to the City of Brotherly Love, so when hustlers came looking to hook their fish there, they'd be wise not to cast their lines too far. The Philadelphians of the 1930s and 1940s played pool at terrifying levels.

WANDERONE WOULD have been specifically aware of Mosconi's reputation as an intimidating straight-pool player. But Wanderone also knew that Willie was the houseman, the guardian of the till, and that he would have to get through him if he was going to really score that day at Frankie Mason's. At Wanderone's side, remember, was Babyface Alton Whit-

low, another hustler of very ill repute. With their gold bracelets, their wide ties, and their cocked fedoras, they were roadmen of the most dandified sort. Straightaway they got to a table,

and they began playing back and forth, and Fats starts flashing his turd-sized wad of cash, and he brags about his ability to pocket balls and probably also his ability to lay women.

If they were playing one-pocket, Fats certainly wouldn't have been showing everything he had. He'd run twos and threes certainly, but never fours and fives. He also would have been passing on those crazy-ass banks. He sure-as-shit wasn't hitting three-railers or running out. All the while Fats would have been working Willie's nerves like a boxer on the heavy bag, crowing about each and every damn shot, bragging about obvious luck, making Willie ache with his nonstop stupid prattle. For good measure Fats also turned his taunts to the back room card players, the old Italian cronies beneath the bluish white haze of cigar



Fats' partner, Whitlow.

smoke. *Save me a seat!* Fats said. He'd be back there to take their money just as soon as he won a few pool games.

That is, if someone at Frankie Mason's had the nuts to play him.

Willie did not jump at the opportunity to play Fats. Fats wouldn't shut up, couldn't shut up — *C'mon, Mr. Straight Pool; c'mon, Mosco-o-o-o-ni, let's go* — but Mosconi at first remained unmoved. It's not that the man remembered as America's finest-ever pool player didn't figure to beat Fats, although at that early age he might not have been absolutely certain. It also wasn't that Fats had not sufficiently sparked his ire. Rather what was probably the case was that Willie did not have enough to cover the stake. Wanderone came in flashing his big wad, cursing and babbling and taunting, and it was all so very humiliating. But Willie needed someone to back him up.

Fats knew this, and Babyface knew this, and they knew that Willie would want to play but couldn't afford it. But they also knew that Mosconi had

a supporter and a very well-heeled one. That supporter was Frankie Mason himself, the owner of the poolroom, and one must consider him the target of Fats's hustle that day just as much as Mosconi was.

"Why don't you play this guy and shut him up?" Frankie Mason said finally. "You play him, and if you can beat him, do it."

And this is precisely what Fats was waiting to hear.

And so that's how it began: Fats and Babyface barging into Frankie Mason's, crowing and boasting and making a spectacle of themselves,

and Willie getting pissed, and Frankie Mason presiding over the first great matchup of the would-be hustler king and the greatest player on earth. Fats

figured to get the advantage by insisting on one-pocket, that game that Willie always considered a hustler's gimmick. Fats understood the angles;



— Mosconi's bread-and-butter was straight pool.

Willie, not so much. The wager was set at \$50 per game. Willie and Fats would play five games in all.

IT COULD get drafty and cold inside Frankie Mason's, and there was that near-permanent smell of pool chalk and acrid cigars and that smell too of old men and of old wooden floors. The tables were mostly ten footers, but there were also the pocketless tables for the sweet game, for three-cushion. The tables stood in a line, each next to its brother, just like soldiers for morning reveille. Around one table old men gathered. Pulling their hardwood chairs across hardwood floors, screeching and scraping all the while, they murmured anxiously, and they placed their bets.

And then, oh sweet Jesus, it began, and the murmuring ended. It was like the silencing of crickets at the sudden burst of light. Men stared in amazement as Fatty stroked, but softly, and they watched as whitey magically went coasting into the stack.

Some of the balls spread out to the rail nearest Fats's pocket, and then the cue ball landed down by Willie's pocket, useless and dead. It was a perfect defensive break. And that's when the sharking started. *C'mon, Willie!* he would have said. *Do something with that, Mr. Straight Pool!*

The railbirds had fallen silent, but Fats was making a terrible racket.

Let's go, Willie. Let's go, Mr. Straight Pool!

Willie takes his shot. It works out well enough. And then Fatty takes his. Willie shoots. Fatty shoots. It goes back and forth for a while, and then somewhere in there Fatty makes a mistake. He makes one ball, then two and three. But then he shoots safe, and he leaves too much. And that's when Willie falls upon the table, falls upon it with eyes blazing like a wild animal. Willie Mosconi always played with hatred, the absolute and pure form, and that hatred became all the more acute that day in Frankie Mason's poolroom. Willie Mosconi did

not simply wish to beat Fats. He did not simply wish to take his money.

What you gonna do, Mosconi?

So here it comes. Here it comes.

Bang, bang, bang, bang. Bang.

The balls fall in a torrent, and the room and the men and the whole world outside vanish away. Fatty's jabbering and cursing seem like a distant thing. And Willie keeps dropping balls one after another. *Pay me, goddamnit. Pay me!* And then Fats and Willie played again, and Willie won again. In between, Mosconi would snipe at the sweaters,



— Fats, left, and Mosconi renewed their rivalry on TV in the 1970s.

telling them to keep it the hell down. Fatty kept racking. Willie kept running balls.

Pay me, he said.

Pay me.

Now it must be said that no one remembers the scores. No one remembers which balls fell first and which fell second. And accounts vary as to who actually won.

In his own memoirs and in countless interviews, Fats insisted he came out on top. He "whacked out" Willie but good, said Fats. "He couldn't beat a drum," he said. "I played him a hundred times, and I beat him a hundred times." But that's not all. Willie Mosconi proved himself at Frankie Mason's to be the biggest joke the world has ever known. "He was always scared of me. He can't beat me for money."

Mosconi said they played five games and that he won all five. He said Fatty may have come looking for a quick score but what he got was broke. "I beat him five straight times for fifty bucks a

game, and I had to lend him train fare to get back to New York," Willie said. "Fats was just another one of dozens of pool hustlers around the country who made their living off unsuspecting marks." He said he never beat anybody good. "He was, in a word, a con man, but he was as good a con man as I'd ever known. He knew all the angles when money was at stake."

And so here we find a flashpoint, a flint-and-steel moment to spark the conflagration decades later. Mosconi said he won. Fats said it was bullshit. Most must agree

that Mosconi's story was the more credible simply because most agree that Mosconi was the more credible player. But what's indisputably certain here is that both men then were intimidating players, both had spent those tough years honing their respective skills, and that the first great Fats & Willie Show, just like the second, represents just as much a conflict of style as it does a conflict of ability.

During those years Fats beat men by shark-

ing and taunting and playing on the lemon. He worked hard to perfect those tricks of his trade. Willie learned during those years about shape and cue-ball control. His ability to win grew in direct proportion to his hardening disdain for Fats and for all men like him.

The months and the years passed, and the high-stakes money challenges piled up, and his antipathy for gamblers etched a jagged groove further into Willie's already rough personality. These men were a loudmouthed, wretched lot. The desire to beat them grew inside Willie like a black cancer. The prospect of defeat at their hands was an intolerable one, too humiliating to contemplate. And so maybe this too helps explain the man who just then was emerging as an uncompromising competitor.

Maybe he owed the sharks that much, at least.

"The Hustler & The Champ: Willie Mosconi, Minnesota Fats and the Rivalry that Defined Pool," will be available in October from The Lyons Press.