

It's a Wonderful World...

Steve Mizerak

1944-2006

It's a Wonderful World: That was his favorite song," said Karen Mizerak, Steve's wife of over 25 years. "He'd sing it in the pool room all the time," she continued, "so at the service I hired a guitar player to play it."

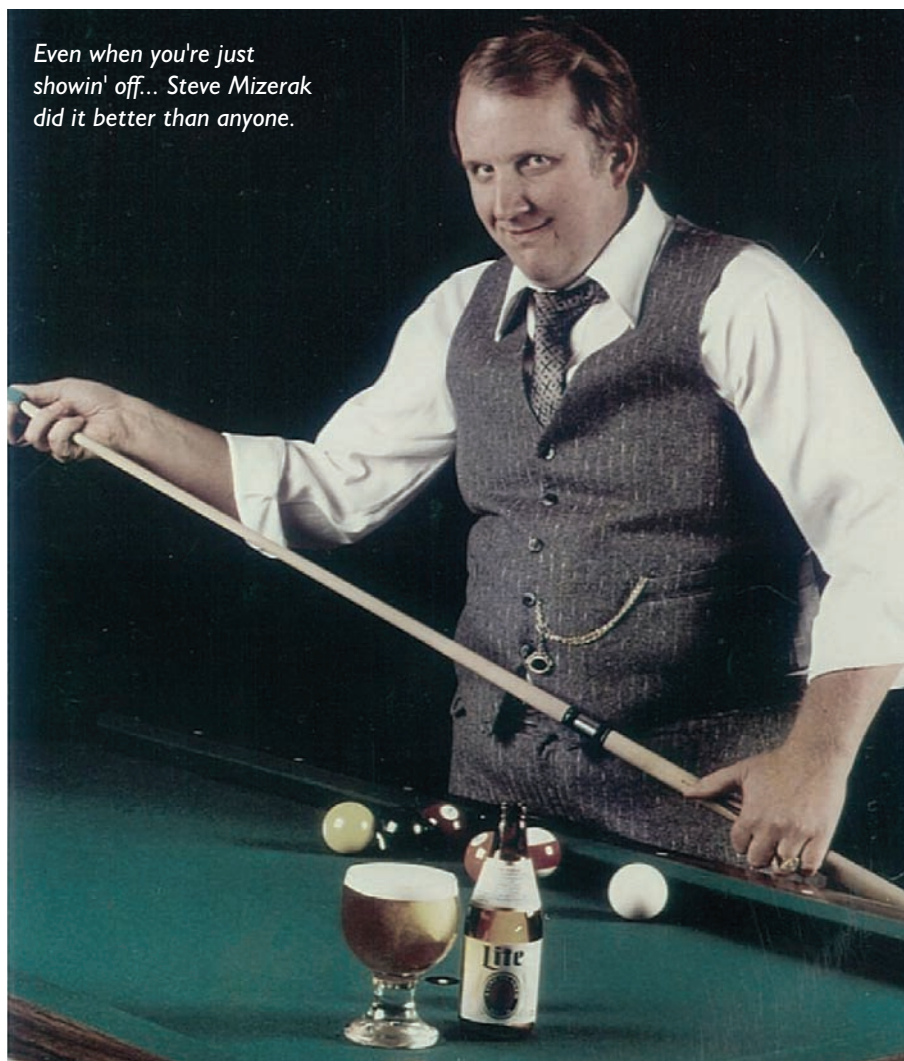
Predictably, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. "It was a beautiful service," Karen said. "I wanted it to be a celebration of Steve's life. Barry Behrman (promoter of the annual U.S. Open 9-Ball Championships, pool's most prestigious event) attended, and brought a movie he'd put together of many of Steve's great pool moments. "The priest was wonderful and said it could be shown in the service, too. Steve's son and his sister spoke, and Barry, and it was special."

Like Steve. Just ask anyone who knew him.

Miz the Man

Pro player Mary Kenniston, a fellow Jersey native, spoke fondly of the man most in the pool world simply called, *Miz*. "Not many fans knew what a generous side Steve had to him," Mary said. "I had him do an exhibition to open my poolroom in Vegas one year. He was never much of one for signing autographs or making small talk, but he knew it was important and so he did it anyway, for hours. At the end of the night I tried to write him a check and he wouldn't even accept it. He'd surprise you like that."

Indeed Steve Mizerak was full of surprises. Few knew when he was winning tournament after tournament, including four consecutive U.S. Opens (1970, '71, '72, '73), that he moonlighted at school, teaching seventh grade geography and American history. Few knew that beneath the blustery, New Jersey tough guy exterior was a guy with heart, one who never quit working in, or on behalf of, the sport he loved.



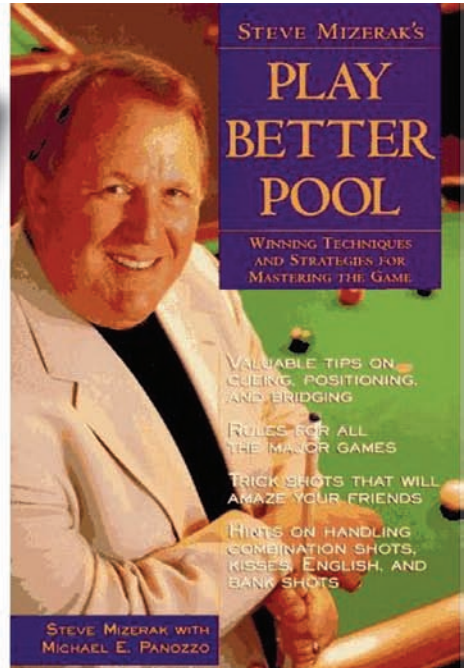
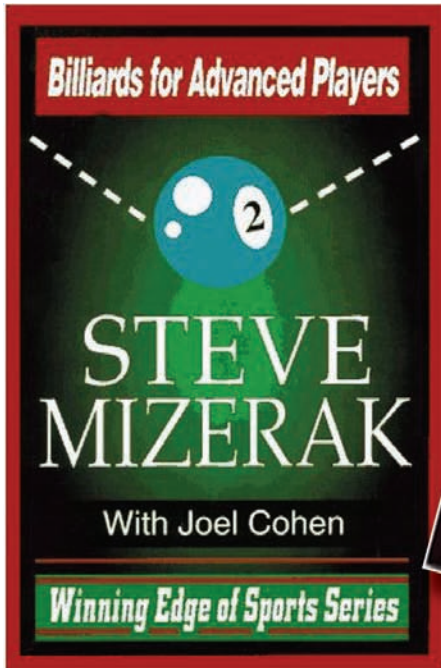
Even when you're just showin' off... Steve Mizerak did it better than anyone.

Steve Mizerak was born Oct. 12, 1944 in Perth Amboy, N.J. He learned the game, like other promising youth of that generation, standing on a box to reach the table. He was four years old. His passion grew from there. He always loved to play, always looked light on his feet, and was always in demand.

"When you're the greatest player in the world," said *P&B* managing editor Tom Shaw, "people have a tendency to chop your available time into tiny little

pieces, but Steve always had enough to go around. He created a Miz collection of cues, developed the sport's first (and only) Senior Tour and continued to give exhibitions and autographs, even though he wasn't comfortable doing it."

But by 1997 he was suffering from a sciatic nerve problem. After winning a Florida tour event, Steve said, "I was in so much pain I almost quit before the finals. I had to spend two days in bed recovering."



Yet Steve seemed as invincible off the table as he was on it. He continued to play and to promote the game. Together, Steve and Karen launched the Senior Masters Tour in 1996. He credited Karen for much of his business success and she was never far from his side.

“It didn’t matter whether or not the other players’ wives were going to an event,” Karen said. “Steve would say, ‘I want you there with me’ either way. And so I traveled with him regularly. He was my best friend.”

The year 2000 marked Steve’s last participation in a major event. He competed in Barry Behrman’s U.S. Open 9-Ball Championships, always a favorite tournament for Steve; he’d also won the title in 1978.

In 2001, fans were shocked to learn Steve Mizerak had suffered a major stroke. Still, he fought back through his recovery and was soon visiting local tournaments and back to promoting senior events. In 2002, he and Karen opened Steve Mizerak Billiards in Lake Park, Florida and hosted even more events.

In October of 2005, Steve was honored by Barry Behrman and friends at the U.S. Open in a special tribute that coincided with the event’s 30th anniversary. “When I contacted Steve and asked if he would mind if I planned this tribute, he was most grateful and said I am the only person he would travel a thousand miles for,” said Barry.

Steve’s last promotional effort was the November, 2005 Senior Masters stop. A month later fans gave him a standing ovation when he appeared briefly at the opening IPT event in Orlando, Florida. That would be his last public appearance.

In January, Steve was hospitalized with gall bladder problems. Subsequent pulmonary and respiratory complications resulted in a medically induced coma and tracheotomy. He was rushed to the hospital Sunday evening of the Memorial Day weekend with a mucus blockage in his trach and increased heart rate.

Steve passed away in the wee hours of the morning on Memorial Day, leaving behind an adoring family and millions of admiring fans. He is survived by his loving wife Karen of 25 years, as well as grown children; stepson Matthew (38) of West Palm Beach; sons Peter (31, New Jersey) and Stephen (35, Pennsylvania); and granddaughters, Karen of West Palm Beach and Amanda, residing in Pennsylvania.

Miz the Legend

In 1970, the schoolteacher from Perth Amboy stepped up to win the BCA’s U.S. Open 14.1 Championships, at that time the most prestigious event in pool. He defeated the legendary Luther Lassiter.

He came back in 1971 and defended his title, defeating Joe Balsis. In 1972 he bested Danny Diliberto. And in 1973 he

won the event a remarkable fourth time, again beating Luther Lassiter.

It was a record never to be broken. A look to the BCA Official Rules & Records book reveals other records set by the Miz: highest balls per inning average in any U.S. Open; best winning percentage, most consecutive match victories. And that represents just four of his over 100 first place finishes in everything from straight pool to 8-Ball to 9-Ball.

But ask Steve or Karen what his greatest pool moment was and the answer is always “the beer commercial.”

The beer was Miller Lite. In the 70s they ran a hugely successful series of commercials featuring sports heroes of imposing physical stature. Mizerak’s now famous “Just Showing Off” commercial featuring multiple trick shots was filmed in 1979 and became wildly popular.

So much so that they asked the Miz to do a second one the next year, a rare honor. And the next year he was one of the stars in the Miller Lite Christmas commercial, then host of the \$200,000 World Series of Tavern Pool.

Steve Mizerak was soon the most famous pool player in America. It didn’t hurt that he kept winning tournament after tournament and collecting honors like others collected bottle caps.

Steve was inducted into the BCA Hall of Fame in 1980, at the time the youngest player in history to be so honored. He won back-to-back world titles in the

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Steve and Karen, at each other's side for over 25 years of marriage.

PPPA World Opens in 1982-83. In 1983 he was BBIA's sportsperson of the year and was inducted into the New Jersey Sports Hall of Fame.

But it was the beer that led to other gigs, the beer that made Steve's name as popular as other mainstream sport athletes of the time. "The Miller Lite commercials turned it all around for Steve, and for pool," said Karen Mizerak. "Everyone knew Steve's name, and he was grateful to Miller to be recognized for all that he'd accomplished."

Indeed, when corporations were looking for sports-themed ideas for parties and conventions, Miz's name topped their list.

CBS chose him for their "Legends-to-Be, Beat the Legends" along with other popular greats Willie Mosconi and Minnesota Fats. A show called "That's Incredible" featured Steve. In 1982 he came out with a book of instructional tips; in 1985 he wrote another. He appeared in the feature film, *The Baltimore Bullet*, and in 1986, *The Color of Money*.

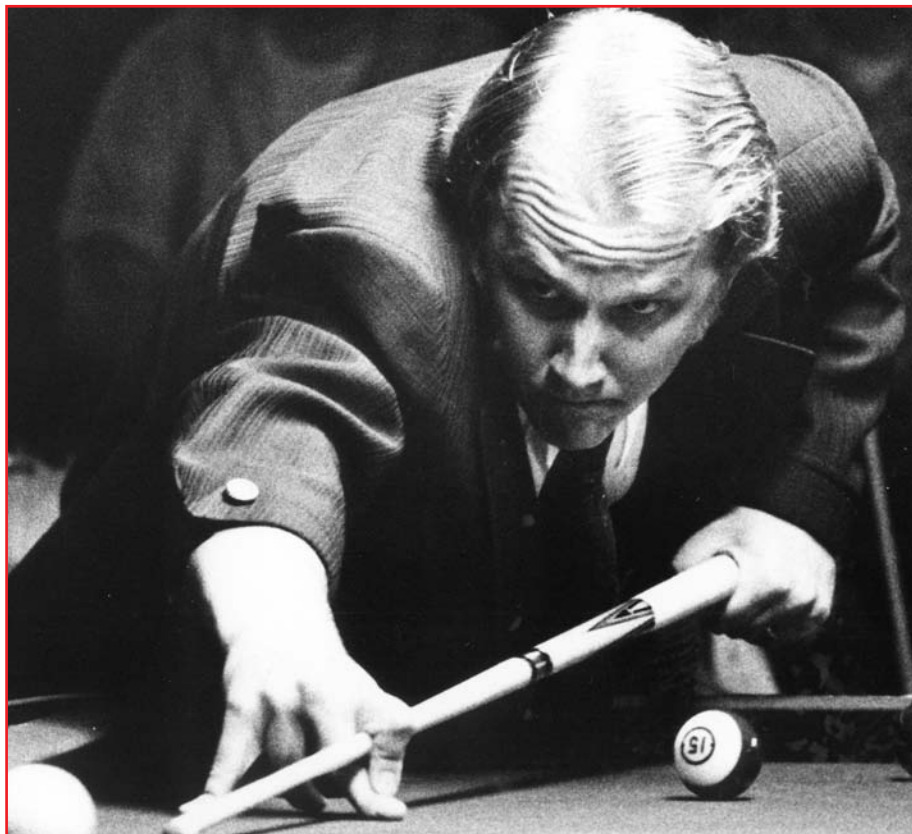
"When it came to pool, Steve was the name they thought of first," said *P&B's* Tom Shaw.

In 1995 he even designed a cue for the New York Yankees, sold exclusively at Yankee Stadium. He founded the "Senior Tour" in 1996 for players 50 years of age and older and often hosted Senior Tour events at his pool hall in Lake Park. He enlisted the aid of the Seminole Tribe of Florida who came aboard as a Senior Tour sponsor and later began sponsoring women's tour events.

Today, a visit to popular book/tape selling sites such as amazon.com or bn.com reveals more than a dozen books and tapes involving Steve's expertise, spanning three decades of dedication to fans and aspiring players.

Steve's contribution to our sport is unparalleled. He brought mainstream attention to pool at a time when it needed it most. One can only guess at how many aspiring players took a look at Steve working up a Miller Lite thirst and said, "Shucks, I can do that," and then sought a place to play and equipment to play with.

Miz the Man has left us; Miz the Legend lives on.



Steve at the 1971 Stardust Tournament. Photo courtesy of Mark Griffin.