

## Calling His Shots

By Kevin Breen

**'Robert Hunter has hustled to make a living at pool. He's one of the best in the country, but - his life is still always a gamble.'**

Robert Hunter was born with a rare gift, and it has helped him develop into the best pool player in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Called "geometric inclination," Hunter can quickly grasp angles and spatial relationships and plan out a game in seconds. He realized he was blessed with this knack when he first walked into a pool room 16 years ago.

"When I was a kid," says Hunter, "I knew a guy who was like a brother to me. He would gamble on about anything. He took me to the pool room one day and the whole scene fascinated me. Everyone was having a good time. He beat me at everything and he beat me at pool. But somehow I felt that I would be able to beat him at this game."

Today, Hunter, 33, is ranked number 28 in the nation by the Professional Billiards Association (PBA), and he feels he has the stuff to make it into the top 10.

Hunter currently lives in Grand Rapids with his wife Julie and their infant daughter Elise. In June they plan to move to Carson City, Nevada where he will be going into partnership in his own pool room.

A 4½-by-9-foot pool table occupies the center of the Hunter's living room where Robert is demonstrating nine ball, the game he plays in most tournaments. Large black-and-white posters of Jackie Gleason as Minnesota Fats and Paul Newman as "Fast" Eddie Felson, both lining up shots in the movie *The Hustler*, hang from one wall. Smaller posters of great pool players, including Harold Worst of Grand Rapids, adorn the opposite wall. Next to those is a black and silver plaque awarded for his second-place finish in

the Pool & Billiard Magazine sponsored 1984 9-Ball Classic Cup in Chicago, his best showing in a major tournament.

Hunter racks the balls. He breaks, spraying the balls over the green baize, and a ball drops into a corner pocket. It is the nine ball, making him an immediate winner, but he explains it's more luck than anything. Not even the world's best player can fully control the break to make the nine ball.

Hunter says nine ball is a better spectator sport than straight pool because there is less safety play and sometimes longer shots.

"There is quite a bit of luck in nine ball," says Hunter. "In straight pool I have complete control over everything. In nine ball, it's much different. You have to make a ball on the break and then have a good shot at the one ball. You have to try and keep the cue ball in the center of the table."

With the balls spread out, Hunter demonstrates how he would line up his shots in competition. The whole trick, he says, is to keep the cue ball in position for the next shot, a feat called being in line. That's where his "geometric inclination" - his key to making a living - comes in handy.

Each year Hunter travels to about 12 major tournaments with the first prizes averaging over \$8,000 and to many smaller ones. His second-place finish in Chicago netted him \$3,000 in 1984. Last November, his victory in the Midwest Open in Lansing, Michigan - a fairly small tournament, he says - earned him \$1,100.

Though one tournament in Atlantic City has had a

**Robert Hunter, pictured in his 1984 9-Ball Classic Cup Title Match in Chicago.**



top prize for the winner of \$40,000, and a few others have \$25,000 top prizes, pool purses are not as large as those in golf, tennis and bowling. To augment his tournament winnings, which totaled \$6,500 in 1986, Hunter has taken to the road to play matches in pool rooms across the country. He says he has earned more in private matches in the past than he has from tournaments.

Occasionally Hunter shoots pool at Anazeh Sands Billiards in Grand Rapids. "I actually play chess there more than pool," says Hunter. "I might not go there for three months, and then I might go three or four times a week... One thing that has made it a tough way to make a living is that it's often hard to find someone to play me."

Hunter disavows the image of pool halls as iniquitous dens inhabited by hoodlums, juvenile delinquents, thieves and drunkards. He says the people are there because they love pool, and though he has won more money in the past than he lost, no sore losers have beaten him up - or broken his thumbs, Newman's fate in *The Hustler*.

"I would absolutely love to make a living playing in tournaments," says Hunter. "I think it's going to go that way. As players we have to think that, otherwise we would be in a bad spot. It (pool) is what I do better than anything. I play too good to quit."

But he did quit during one stretch from 1977-1980. He was struggling to meet expenses and was about to be married. He sold real estate for over a year, his only serious job other than pool, but like numerous other jobs he has held for a short time, his heart wasn't in it. He says it's hard for him to punch a time clock and get up when someone else tells him to.

His wife, Julie, a part-time cashier, also shoots pool. She has competed, with mostly poor results, in professional tournaments, and most recently, she played in an amateur tournament of bar table eight ball in Columbus, Ohio. In this regional, she fell one match short of advancing to the national tournament.

"I feel like I'm right in the middle - below the pros and above the amateurs," says Julie. "I love pool. If I didn't, it would probably cause problems because Robert spends so much time with pool."



**Julie can usually be seen on the tournament sidelines pulling for her champion.**

As Hunter sidles around the table, he sinks most of his shots and keeps the cue ball in line. His custom-made pool cue is bird's-eye maple with an Irish linen wrap. In a case on the floor is another cue made to the same specifications of 20½ ounces, 57½ inches long and a 13-millimeter cue tip, but with a fancier design - two arrows inlaid with ivory to symbolize straight shooting.

Occasionally, however, Hunter misses a shot he would normally make and leaves the cue ball off line. His concentration isn't as focused as when he plays in competition. Sometimes he concentrates so intensely he blanks out all but the pool table and the balls.

"It's almost like you are alone," he says, "even if the place is packed with other people. It's called being in 'dead stroke'. You play much better. You get to the point where you don't even worry about the ball going in. You know it's going in. There are times when you know your opponent doesn't have a chance.

"It doesn't happen every day. It doesn't happen as often as I'd like it to."

If Hunter is to make a living from tournament pool, one of two things must happen: the purses in pool must increase, or he must improve to the top 10. Hunter believes there is a good chance of both.

Hunter's considerable traveling expenses plus the entry fees - which average \$300, are usually paid by a sponsor. For paying these costs, the sponsor, in most arrangements, receives a percentage of Hunter's tournament winnings.

"My sponsors," says Hunter, "are guys who at one time thought they might be good pool players, but who didn't make it. They can stay close to the game this way."

The other way for Hunter to support himself from tournaments is to consistently finish high in the money. He says with quiet confidence he thinks he will break into the top 10. To reach the top 10, he doesn't need to refine his physical skills, but he says there are talents he needs to acquire which aren't easily learned.

"There are times," he says, "when I am in dead stroke - or when I'm not even in dead stroke but just playing well - that I do play as well as guys in the top 10. Guys in the top 10 have already won their big matches. They are more likely to beat me because they aren't scared of me. Winning your first tournament is difficult."

Lack of sleep is one of Hunter's biggest problems. If he starts out well, he lies awake thinking about it. Because tournaments may last up to six days, Hunter says he would profit by better conditioning. If he is tired or weak, his confidence falters and his game suffers.

Despite Hunter's incessant battle to stay in the black, he feels his life is richer thanks to pool. He has traveled widely, developed confidence in front of a crowd, and he hasn't had to punch a clock. He also has competed against, and sometimes beaten, the best players in the world.

"I love the game itself," he says. "To me it's always been the most fascinating thing to watch. It's very difficult to master. There's always pressure on you to make a living, and you know in the back of your mind you could be at GM or digging ditches and making more money at it. But how can you quit doing what you are best at?"

(About the author: Kevin Breen is a freelance writer who resides in Michigan. He previously had his profile of Robert Hunter published in March's *Grand Rapids Magazine*.)