

Remembering the Pastime

Pool hall taught teens lessons about life

by Duane Carling

“Show me a man who’s a good pool player and I’ll show you a man with a wasted youth.” -W.C. Fields.

My best friend Bob Krolick and I learned a lot about pool, and life, in the sleepy 1960s towns around our high school in Livermore. “Wasting” our youth traveling to pool halls, Bob had become a master with the pool cue, and a master of psychology as well.

The Pastime Pool Hall in Pleasanton was the favorite of our hangouts. Rounding up enough money for a betting stake and gas to fuel Bob’s ’54 Corvette, or my ’52 Ford, we’d head out for P-town. Pleasanton was an agricultural town with a decided Spanish flavor, and the Pastime was on the old main street across from the tracks.

The windows of the Pastime were dirty from years of smoke and neglect, and some had plywood in place of glass. The proprietor had replaced the building’s original gas lights with electric fixtures with green metal shades hanging over the pool tables. The only other light was a bare bulb over the cash register. A long bar with a mirror ran down one wall, and a scattering of beer signs reminded us we were too young to drink. From a card room in the back came the pungent odor of cigars to complete the ambiance. It was usually quiet except for the earnest click of pool balls and the occasional expletive signaling a missed shot.

Bob and I would play some 8 ball against each other (8 ball is considered a kid’s game and not suitable for would-be hustlers). After a few games a voice would inevitably come out of the murk: “You guys wanna play doubles?” There was always one guy who thought he was pretty good, and a buddy who had come along for moral support and to verify victories. After a game or two of 8 ball, it was usually suggested Bob have a friendly game of 9 ball. It is played with only 9 balls, and the object is to put 1 through 9 into the pockets in order. Whoever puts the 5 in gets paid, and whoever puts the 9 in gets paid.

Money in our 16-year-old hands was a shiny new key, and we used it to find our way into the dark hearts of those who intended us to be their victims. After losing a game or two, Bob would usually ask for a chance to

make up his losses by playing for all he owed, “Double or nothin’.” Since the big winner had nothing to lose and twice as much to gain, how could he refuse! With high drama, Bob would just manage to win. I, who always provided the money (at least that’s my memory, Bob remembers differently), would protest that we should leave now while we were even. Seeing his big purse refunded and, worse, about to walk out the door, the hotshot would usually offer to sweeten the pot. A group of hangers-on had usually congregated to watch the game, and that helped everyone to be brave and not back down.

After suitable close games and increased bets it was time to set the hook. For one last game Bob would ask if he could get his other cue. He would bring in a tooled leather case, lay it on the green felt table and open it. Inside was a “take down” cue, a beautiful inlaid rosewood cue in two parts, with a brass thread to screw it together and real ivory between the joints. After seeing that cue stick, and realizing the fix he was in, the opening stroke for the fish’s last game was usually shaky, always off the mark, and the money was quickly in our hands.

Now that over 40 years have passed, Bob has a large home in Marin County with a room built to accommodate his custom-made pool table. About a year ago we were reminiscing about the old days, and we started talking about the Pastime and wondering if it was still there. Bob mentioned the time a 300 SL Mercedes Gullwing was parked in front and remembered it had a for sale sign in the back window for \$7,000.

Over the next few months, I tried to find a picture of the old pool hall for Bob. The Pleasanton historical society was able to provide me with the perfect black-and-white print of the Pastime, circa 1960. To make it complete, I digitally inserted an image of a 300 SL by the curb (which serendipitously had appeared for sale in my hometown).

On the Sunday afternoon I presented the photo to Bob, we decided we’d drive over to Pleasanton to see where the Pastime used to be. It was a lovely



Bob Krolick (left) and Duane Carling, shown in Vail, enjoy reminiscing about their youth.

afternoon, and people were sitting in sidewalk cafes on the old Main Street. It had been four decades since either of us had been back, so we asked someone if he knew where an old pool hall used to be, called the Pastime. He said “Sure, it’s just about a block from here.” Incredible! The Pastime still exists in the most upscale of upscale communities.

Approaching, we could see the façade had been updated (ruined!) but the general layout was the same. As we walked in, a raucous crowd was cheering the 49ers on a big screen TV. We sat at a back table and ordered mineral water from the waitress and started to look around. You could see where the wall dividing the pool room from the card room had been. The old tables with the massive carved legs and leather pockets were gone, replaced by coin operated tables. The lighting was definitely better. The back bar was a sea of neon advertising, and the noisy crowd overwhelmed the room. With the earnest concentration required for the physical and psychological challenges we faced in our day, anyone making noise like that would have quickly been ejected.

As we drove home we speculated that maybe our youth hadn’t been wasted after all. What had we learned in those forays into our own and our opponent’s psyche? We’d probably have to go back to those sun-filled days to compare what we know now to what we knew then. If you can arrange that trip, Bob, I’m packed and ready to go. ■

Duane Carling now designs and builds custom homes near Salt Lake City, Utah, and occasionally writes down his memories. Bob Krolick, a retired San Francisco State professor, owns a plastics manufacturing business in Marin County.

Duane Carling superimposed an old Mercedes on a photo of the Pastime from the '60s, to bring back memories for his friend.

