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Remembering the Dugout and Larry Lisciotti

A teenager discovers the game of pool, and meets the future world champion

I was thirteen years of age when I made my first visit to Manchester, Connecticut's own den of iniquity, the pool hall known as the 'Red Sox Dugout', or just the 'Dugout' for short. The year was 1963, and I was in the seventh grade at the Illing Junior High School. That year I also met the fine young pool player and future world champion, Larry Lisciotti.

The pool hall had quite a bad reputation among the parents in town. Most considered the place a haven for hoods and thugs, but the Dugout was not a hangout for the stereotypical tough of those years, a sneering youth wearing a leather motorcycle jacket. If you are old enough to remember the days of the 'Mods and Rockers', the Dugout was definitely a 'Mod' type of hangout. The people who gathered and played pool at the Dugout in the mid-1960s were primarily a well-dressed group who sported penny-loafers, chinos, madras shirts, and a white London Fog raincoat when required.

On Saturday nights, the older players, those that owned and drove cars, would stop at the Dugout for a game of pool before heading out on a date. They typically sported a crisp cotton shirt (usually with a pack of Kools, Camels, or Lucky Strikes in the front pocket), a pair of leather shoes, and a nice pair of slacks. A couple of shady characters did frequent the place, but the regular group was not comprised of the miscreants and degenerates envisioned by the local 'Legion of Decency' do-gooders.

The Dugout was located in the middle of town on one of Manchester's busiest intersections, Main and Center Street. A large building with a curved front sat on the southeast corner and it housed several businesses, including the pool hall, which was located in a basement beneath the Center Restaurant. The entrance itself was in an alley off Main Street where a set of cement steps led down to a portal on the right fronted by a large heavy green door.

The pool hall was a dimly lit world and during the daytime, your eyes needed a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. Once inside, you stood in a corner of the basement and the room extended off to the right. Eight pool tables sat between the large square concrete pillars that stood spaced throughout the dark cellar. Two lights, with large green metal shades, hung down over each table to illuminate the felt playing surface below. Several small rectangular windows with frosted glass were set in the wall of the building about seven feet above the basement floor, and they allowed a small amount of light to filter in from the alleyway during the daytime.

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From the entrance, a pool table stood just inside and to the right of the green door. You skirted around this table on the left and then turned right along a cement wall for a few steps. When the wall ended, a hard left brought you into the 'office', a small open area where the owner, Don Fitzgerald, conducted business. The office consisted of several small chairs next to a desk and a cash register, a dim desk lamp, a small TV, and cabinets filled with the sundry supplies required to operate a pool hall.

On a pillar by each table hung a dark wood box containing four small shelves, each just big enough to hold cigarettes, lighters, and small snacks. Attached to the walls were large flat wooden frames that held an assortment of house cue sticks of various lengths and thickness. The cement floor was perpetually dirty and dusty. High above one end of each table hung a string of beads on a heavy metal wire used for scoring straight pool games; the player used a cue to count and move the beads along the wire. Stools for spectators sat clustered near the walls of the cellar, and against the far wall stood several vending machines. One machine was an old Coke dispenser with a large flat paddle in the front that, for a dime, would rotate the circle of soda bottles until a full one appeared at the opening, a small 8-ounce Coca-Cola in a heavy glass bottle, served ice cold. Wooden cases for the empty bottles stood stacked against the wall.

The tables were old regulation tournament tables, the playing surface was a slate rectangle covered with green felt and measured 4 ½ feet wide by 9 feet long, and the cushions, or side rails, were covered in green felt as well. Every table had six pockets, one in each of the four corners and one in the middle of each long rail. The tables all had thick wood bodies and large legs that were fashioned from a heavy dark-stained lumber made darker by years of use and tobacco smoke.

I saw various pocket billiard games contested at the Dugout including straight pool, nine-ball, six ball, one pocket, pill pool, and eight-ball. A full rack consisted of 15 object balls, seven balls of different solid colors numbered 1 through 7, seven balls with different colored stripes numbered 9 through 15, and the black 8 ball. The shooter used a white cue ball to knock the colored and striped object balls into a pocket.

I started learning about pool by playing 14.1 continuous billiards; also known as straight pool. This game started with a full rack of fifteen balls arranged in a wooden triangle that shaped the balls prior to the start of play. In our straight pool games, the first person to pocket 125 balls was the winner. Other than a small wager, the bet was usually for 'Time', the rental charge for the table.

The basic strategy was to pocket fourteen object balls and then leave the last object ball on the table as a break ball. A player then placed the fourteen-pocketed object balls back on the table within the wooden rack once again, this time leaving the space at the head of the wooden triangle empty and placed over the table-spot. Strong players would leave the cue ball and break ball in 'good position', which meant that when they sank

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the break ball, the cue ball caromed into the rack of 14 balls and spread them out on the table, dispersing them for the shooter who continued on with the play (hence the term 'continuous billiards'). Professionals can win a game by 'running' (pocketing) 125 balls in succession without allowing the opponent a chance to score.

I studied other players with a keen eye, especially the ones with talent. Eventually, I learned how the good shooters approached the game when they faced each other in a match. I saw how uniquely each used position play and how, and when, they took chances, and I began to understand both the style and pace that each individual brought to the table.

There was one older gentleman, Frank 'The Bank' DeVoto, who took an early interest in my game. Frank was a Dugout regular; he was in his seventies and always wore an old suit along with a well-used fedora that covered a head of sparse white hair. A cigarette with a long curling ash continually drooped from his lips. Old Frank took me under his wing and instructed me on some of the pool game's finer points: he taught me about bank shots, how to use English (putting spin on the cue ball), and how to 'throw' balls that were touching.

Becoming a better player was a process and I enjoyed the challenge of it. Over time, the quality of my game improved and within two years, I was a top player in my age group and strong enough to challenge some of the older players at the Dugout in cash games.

During the early years of the sixties, Larry Lisciotti was a regular player at the Dugout. He was a slim young man with a great sense of humor who enjoyed a good laugh with his friends. He had intelligent eyes and a wonderful smile with lips that turned up at the end, lending him a type of Cheshire cat grin. When money was involved and Larry played in a big game, those eyes became focused and fierce, like a cat on the prowl. I will always remember those eyes, and the intensity that shone out from behind them.

He would stand at the table and study a logjam of grouped balls searching for a hidden combination with great concentration, moving and bending and changing his viewpoint as he looked intently for the hidden gem, and he often found one. He had a smooth and beautiful stroke, and a prodigious break when required. He was a gambler and a pool hustler, and even though he was young, the stories about his exploits traveling around New England playing pool were becoming the stuff of legend. His close friends called him 'Lice', and they said it with affection and respect.

All through that first year when I was a regular at the Dugout, Larry often played a Sunday evening game with a young man named John. He was a fine player in his own right but was not a gambler and had no desire to make pool the dominant pursuit in his life. Aside from being friends, Larry just seemed to enjoy the competition. I watched those weekly games

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at every opportunity and gained a broad insight into the nuance and strategy inherent in the game of 14.1 continuous billiards: how the battle ebbed and flowed, how and when they played safe, and of the determination and confidence required to see the match through and best your opponent. I also developed a deep appreciation for the beauty and grace that the great players brought to the game of straight pool.

John was a strong player but Larry competed at a different level; he was a juggernaut and regularly added new tools and tricks to his arsenal, and although Larry was young, he possessed a distinct physical presence when he stood at the table, a tangible power, and Larry's opponents needed to combat this force of will in order to maintain their own poise and self-assurance during a match.

There was another pool hall in Manchester during those years and it was a modern facility located in a large well-lit basement under a restaurant over on Middle Turnpike. This was an upscale pool hall; the basement was much bigger than the Dugout and it held twice as many tables. The owner sponsored large 'open' tournaments that drew fine players from all over New England and beyond.

On occasion, other professionals would come into Manchester to challenge Larry. If they played at the Dugout, the stools would be set out three-deep around the best table for the crowd to sit on. If the game were in the other pool hall, we would travel across town to watch Larry play. I enjoyed watching top shooters compete in such a close and intimate setting, and my respect and admiration for the game and the best players grew as I came to understand that, underneath it all was the intensely personal and combative nature of pocket billiards that was both the essence and the beating heart of the game of pool.

When I was fifteen, I discovered nine-ball, and the world of pool, and gambling on pool, changed for me in an instant. The nine-ball game only uses the balls numbered 1 through 9, with the balls arranged on the table using a diamond-shaped rack with the 9 ball placed in the center of the other balls. The object was to sink the 9 ball, and you had to shoot at the other balls in their numerical order first. You could use a multi-ball combination to win, which meant that you could hit the 1 ball into the 9 ball and win if the 9 ball fell into a pocket. Instead of renting a table on 'Time', Don arranged the balls in the small diamond rack and charged a fee of fifteen cents a game. Nine-ball was a real gambling game and compared to straight pool, nine-ball was like playing speed chess instead of 2-hour tournament matches. When many tables were busy with nine-ball games, you would hear someone yelling "Rack!" almost constantly.

I continued to play and practice as often as possible, and the improvement in my game was noticeable. Over the years, I became a feared nine-ball opponent, especially at the Dugout, and the stakes I played for grew in size as well. I even acquired my own name at the Dugout, the 'Niz'. The word 'Niz', long a slang word for the 9 ball, now became my nickname.

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Larry Lisciotti would watch us play and if I sank the 9 ball on the break, or made one later with a nice combination, he would smile that Cheshire cat smile of his and say, "Niz", drawing the name out in a long snake-like hiss of a syllable. Soon, other shooters began to call me by that name and I had arrived as a pool player.

During this period I, too, joined the coterie of friends who called Larry by the name 'Lice', and when I did, I said it with the same respect and affection as everyone else.

Those were turbulent times and the Dugout, along with the rest of the country, was not immune to the currents of change that swirled through America during the period of the late sixties. Drugs, and the violence that seemed to follow them, were becoming more prevalent throughout society and the country as a whole, and this scourge affected some of my friends. As the war in Asia grew, more people visited the dark confines of the Dugout in uniform. I, too, would join this line of soldiers soon after my graduation from high school.

In the month before I entered the Army, I had my longest run at straight pool, forty-five balls. Yet I knew intrinsically that I was not a good player; all I possessed was enough talent and intelligence to shine in a small local pool hall like the Dugout.

Then, for almost two years, I found myself separated from the game of pool. After joining the Army in 1969, I completed six months of training and followed that with a 30-day leave before departing for a twelve month tour of duty overseas. After serving a year in Vietnam, I rotated back to the States for the remainder of my enlistment, but I never returned to my old pastime as a regular player. For one thing, my heart was no longer in the game. I despised the small coin-operated tables that dispensed pool balls in bars or Army clubs around the country and I hated the game usually played on those tables, eight-ball. For a while, I missed the game of nine-ball and the action that went with it, but new possibilities presented themselves and I turned my attention towards other pursuits. Nevertheless, every now and then when the conditions were right, I could rise to the occasion and catch some local pool playing bar stud unaware. I could still do that.

The last time I set foot in the Dugout was early spring in 1971. I was in Manchester with several Army friends on a short vacation from our unit at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. While my friends had coffee, I came down the well-worn set of cement steps one more time and entered the dark room of the pool hall. I stood inside the door as my eyes adjusted to the darkness; it felt warm, comfortable, familiar. Several tables had games in progress but I did not recognize any players. I walked into the office and Don gave me a friendly welcome. We chatted for a few minutes about how the pool hall was doing, and about old times and friends. Then I shook his hand and left. I never saw Don again.

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After the Army, I lived in Connecticut for a dozen years before moving to New Hampshire. Redevelopment came to Manchester and the town razed the old building that housed the Dugout. During those years, I crossed Larry's path only occasionally, but when I saw him, he always greeted me warmly. Friends would keep me abreast of Larry's exploits and relate tales of his life out on the road.

Those were good years for Larry. In 1976, he won the World Open Pocket Billiard Championship, and gained recognition as the world's best 14.1 continuous (straight) pool player. The following year the September issue of Hustler Magazine profiled his life as a professional player and gambler in an article written by Jay Levin titled 'Larry Lisciotti, Pool Hustler'. In 1980, Larry chalked up another major victory when he won the Professional Pool Players Association Nine-ball Championship. After living in New Hampshire, I moved to California in 1990 and heard little more about Larry Lisciotti or his exploits. I did remain connected to those times however, as even today, I have seven or eight friends scattered around the country who, when we talk, still call me by the old Dugout name of 'Niz'.

In early 2004, my brother mailed me a small obituary he had clipped from a newspaper back east in Connecticut; it was an obituary for Larry Lisciotti who had died on February 9. A flood of memories and images of the old hometown, and of the friends I knew at the Dugout, came cascading back into my mind. Yet one thing in particular struck me about that small newspaper piece, something hidden among the words: whoever wrote that obituary had an appreciation for Larry as a player and as a man, perhaps even loved him.

Various pictures of Larry, and stories of his accomplishments, exist on the internet. One of my favorite images is the famous 'Roadrunners' photograph, taken in California in 1975 during the Los Angeles Straight Pool Championship. In that picture, Jim Rempe, Danny DiLiberto, Larry Lisciotti, and Mike Sigel pose in front of a white Rolls-Royce. Larry leans back on the car, supported by his right arm, wearing a white sport coat. In that picture, he is long and thin, handsome, and forever young. It is a beautiful photograph of a magical moment, a moment now immortalized for future generations of players.

Another great image available on the internet is a picture of Larry's cue, a beautiful specimen with two ivory inserts near the butt; one insert displays his signature, the other displays, '~ 1976 ~ 14.1 WORLD CHAMPION'.

You can also find a picture of a young Larry wearing a double-breasted coat and sporting big hair and an even bigger tie. The prominent feature on this picture of Larry is that engaging and enigmatic smile, his Cheshire cat grin.

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I can close my eyes and see Larry now, and watch that Cheshire cat smile morphing into the eyes of a feral cat on the hunt. He was young and handsome in the Dugout days, and so very talented. There was such a mixture of power and possibility in the raw beauty of how he played the game back then, the way he held a cue, how he looked at the table, in the fluidity and grace of his movements.

There are also the hidden words I see shining through the obituary, and they are the words I want to use to describe Larry Lisciotti. He was a pool player and people loved him; he was more than a pool player.

He was beautiful.