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Billiards

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Billiards league franchise stays on cue

By Jonathan Maze

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A growing number of people are turning their love of billiards into a business by running franchised leagues.

Jason Blanski has a pool table in his basement. He has been in several pool leagues and is on a first-name basis with many billiards hall owners around the Minneapolis area. He married a two-time national amateur pool champion and—without getting into details—their daughter was born nine months after a billiards tournament. “Let’s just say that what happens in Vegas doesn’t always stay in Vegas,” the 37-year-old said with a sheepish grin.

Not surprisingly Blanski makes his living off the sport, thanks to his ownership of the Minneapolis franchise of the American Poolplayers Association, or APA. Blanski discovered the league five years ago while researching billiards information on the Web.

“I have a true passion for the game,” he said during a break while managing his league’s annual tournament at—where else?—a dark, smoky billiards hall in suburban Minneapolis called “The Two Stooges.” “I found a key” in the APA, he added. “It fits my personality and my lifestyle.”

The association is a hybrid between a billiards league sanctioning body and a for-profit franchise chain—one that keeps growing. Revenues have increased 10 percent over the past two years. The league now boasts some 275 franchisees in the U.S. and Canada and just started its first franchise in Japan. Membership has increased every year since 1979, when professional players Terry Bell and Larry Hubbard started the league after “bemoaning the state of affairs with professional pool.”

The league wants 1 million members by 2020, which APA President Renee Poehlman does not consider out of reach. “It’s definitely an achievable mission,” said Poehlman. “We’ve never had a year in our organization that we’ve had less members playing than the previous year.”

A key to that growth will be moving the sport beyond its traditionally seedy reputation. Billiards started in Europe in the 1500s when lawn games such as croquet were turned into tabletop games and moved inside. It quickly became associated with gambling and has been banned by both churches and governments at times over the centuries. Professional players have made side incomes as “hustlers” enticing wagers from unsuspecting amateurs in bars and pool halls.

“I don’t think there are a lot of those types of players anymore,” Poehlman said. Still, billiards’ popularity has been aided by movies about hustlers, including Paul Newman films “The Hustler” in 1961 and its latter-day sequel, “The Color of Money.”

The APA is moving beyond that image with a relentless focus on beginners and novice players. The handicap system assigns skill-level rankings to players based on their experience and number of wins. Five-member teams must recruit



Top teams from each league are invited to the national tournament in Las Vegas each year.

newcomers and have a diversity of skill levels to advance. "Teams can't be loaded with top players," Blanski said. "It keeps it fair."

Blanski added that the vast majority of beginners who enter the league stay there. The association also bills itself as a night out among friends, similar to the social nature of neighborhood bowling leagues. Teams have names like "Rack



APA President Renee Poehlman.

Pack," "Cue the Duck," "Beergoggles" and "Bloodbath Beyond." "We sell fun, entertainment, my evening out with friends and, by the way, we happen to be playing pool," said Poehlman, who became involved with the APA herself 20 years ago when her mom entered both of them into a league.

Getting into the billiards business is relatively simple, though a person's entry fee varies greatly. The initial fee is \$5,000 plus \$100 for every 20,000 people in the territory. Thus, a big territory with 1 million people would cost \$10,000. The estimated initial investment is up to \$14,470.

League and tournament play takes place in locations throughout an area, including bars, pool halls and even church basements or recreation centers—"anywhere there's a pool table," Poehlman said. "The locations like it because we don't charge a fee. All that we ask is that they help us build league activity."

Franchises typically start out of the home and are commonly mom-and-pop type franchises. As they grow, bigger ones require offices and employees, but they are all small businesses. The largest franchisee, Terry Justice out of Baltimore, has 1,750 teams and a staff of 12 full-time workers, 22 people overall. His franchise is considered extraordinary not just because he has roughly 700 more teams than anybody else but because his company offers its workers health insurance.

A league operator can make a good living doing this, but it takes work. "It's not a get-rich-quick operation," said Justice. Yet, he added, "it can be lucrative if it's run professionally." Revenues depend on the number of teams a franchise can sign up. Teams pay between \$25 and \$50 per week to play, depending on the franchise. Thus, revenues depend on the number of teams a franchise can recruit—and thus potential revenue depends on the size of the market.

Funds are set aside for franchise fees, awards, tournaments and travel costs for the franchise's teams to go to Las Vegas for the annual national tournament. If a franchise with 100 teams has \$15 per team each week left over after all of its fees and expenses, a 40-week season could yield \$60,000 in profit.

Blanski started his franchise in 2002, the same year he got married. Any profits his franchise earned during its first two years were pumped back into the company, he said, requiring his wife, Kerry, to keep her job in the mortgage business. With 114 teams the franchise now stands on its own. "If it wasn't for (Kerry), I wouldn't be here talking with you," Blanski said.



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