

# ***Remembering Mike Asch and the Hi Cue Billiard Lounge*** **America's House of Champions**

By STEVE LILLIS

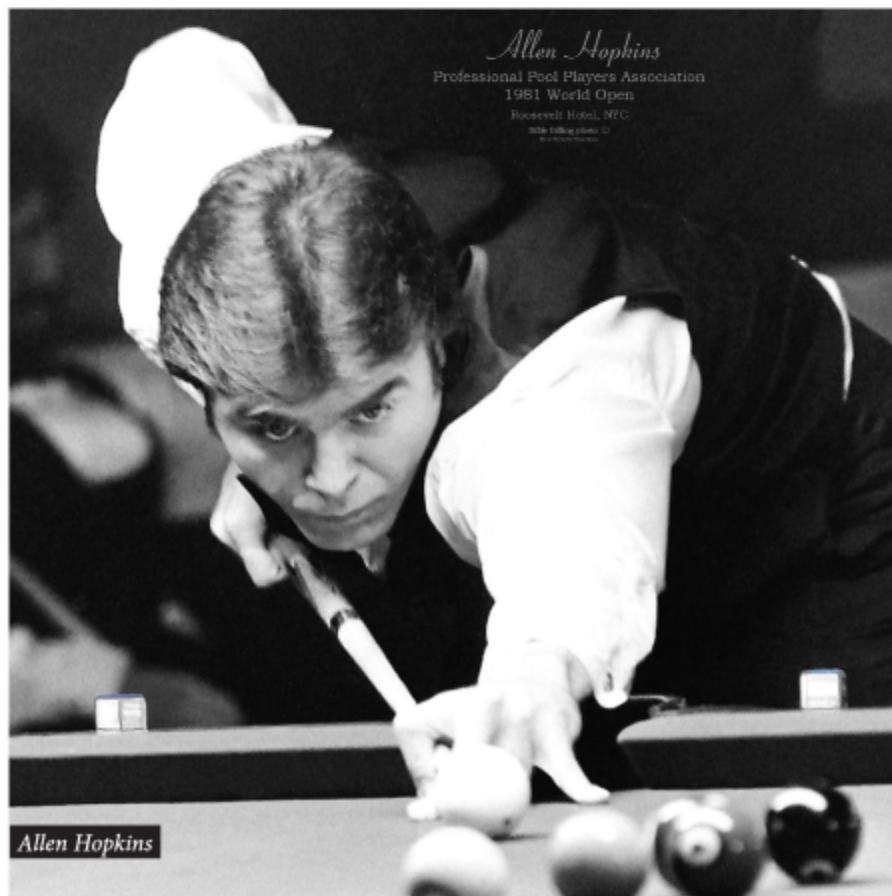
**The year was 1973 and I was a very impressable 22-year-old aspiring professional pool player. After 4 years of honing my skills in North Jersey at various local pool rooms like Guys and Dolls in Belleville, O'Dowd's in Pinebrook, Verona Billiards, Clifton Billiards, and the Main Street Recreation Center in East Orange, it was time to step up and play the big boys at the Hi Cue Billiard Lounge in Elizabeth, NJ.**

**T**his pool room was known as "America's House of Champions" and champions were known to play there every night of the week. 14.1 straight pool was still the king of all billiard disciplines and the king of pool was BCA Hall of Famer Steve Miznerak who was in the middle of a run of four BCA U.S. Open 14.1 Straight Pool titles in the early 1970's. On a side note, I was delighted to hear while writing this article that the American cue company McDermott is sponsoring a free entry 14.1 straight pool event at the BEF Junior Nationals in Quincy, IL this year July 8-13 and Pat Fleming is hosting the International Straight Pool Open Nov. 23-26 in St. Augustine, FL. All the best to our 14.1 competitors!

Back to our story, on any given night you could walk into the Hi Cue Billiard Lounge and find a dozen legends of the game matching up and playing mostly 14.1 straight pool. Plaques were on walls and posts in the pool room hovering over various tables signifying on a given date what player had run 300 or more balls. Local New Jersey players like BCA Hall of Famers Allen Hopkins, Ray Martin, Pat Fleming, along with other New Jersey legends like Jack Colavito and Neptune Joe Frady were consistently on

hand to match up. Other legendary players like Pete Margo, Mike Sigel, and Earl Herring from New York, and the "fighting" Fusco's, Mike, Jimmy, and Pete from Philadelphia with Jim Rempe from Scranton, PA would all frequent the Hi Cue for tournaments

and action. Top road players would come through only to find tough action and often bitter disappointment. The highlight was always the tournaments and the man behind it all was legendary pool room owner and pool promoter Mike Asch.



## Peter Margo

Professional Pool Players Association

World Open 1980  
Roosevelt Hotel, NYC

Billie Billings photo  
BillieBilliards.com



Pete Margo

The tournaments were a happening as a massive 30-foot-high thick curtain would close off 4 majestic Brunswick Gold Crown 9-foot pool tables in the back room with tiered seating for about 150 people. With his distinct Jewish cultural roots, maybe for Mike that huge curtain was symbolic of the veil in the Temple of King Solomon in ancient Israel leading to the Ark of the Covenant in the most Holy of Holies. That back room seemed so sacred especially to an aspiring young pool player like me! The projector and a large screen with a scorekeeper would go into place to project the ongoing match scores for all to see. Legendary 14.1 straight pool referee Cue Ball Kelly who went all the way back to the days of Greenleaf and Mosconi would lead a contingent of top referees from New York and New Jersey. Tickets would go on sale at the front desk for \$5 each with a doorman waiting to take your ticket stub to get into that sacred back area arena. Every table in the front part of the pool room would be buzzing with action while the stage

was set in the back for the best of the best to have it out tournament style with the legend himself Mike Asch as the great chorographer of it all!

Entering my first professional pool tournament in 1973 alongside of all

these legendary pool players in a legendary pool room was to say the least memorable. I entered the all-important 14.1 straight pool qualifier for the 1973 BCA U.S. Open 14.1 Straight Pool Championships in Chicago. If you did not qualify then you did not go to this fabulous event which was without a doubt the most prestigious event of that era. My first match was against Pete Margo formerly from New Jersey but now located in Staten Island, New York. Pete was generally considered at that time one of the top 4 straight pool players in the world along with Steve Mizerak, Allen Hopkins, and Ray Martin all from New Jersey. Our match began with me delivering an opening safety after losing the lag with Pete finding 8 balls to run before being forced to play a safe back at me. I found a shot and ran 18 balls and missed! Pete got up and ran 117 balls and out for the win! I sat for maybe 45 minutes without a shot and watched a master straight pool player run rack after rack for a 125-18 victory. After the match, Pete gallantly walked over and shook my hand and said these famous words that I still hold near and dear in my heart, "welcome to the big leagues kid!" For me that ex-



Ray Martin  
1987 Miller Time 9 Ball  
Davenport, IA  
Billie Billings photo ©  
billiebilliards.com

Ray Martin

## History

perience and those words provided an inspirational turning point in my career as I still compete and play professional pool some 50 years later. I have also performed my Gospel Trick Shot shows all over the world in 35 countries to help inspire people with stories of hope and faith!

For over half a century, I continue to be propelled by the vision Mike Asch imparted to me for professional pool tournaments and professional pool players. He gave many nicknames to the top players of the day for the purpose of promotion and many are still in use today. He staged legendary challenge matches in his Hi Cue Billiard Lounge arena which changed the trajectory of famous pool players careers like an older legendary Luther "Wimpy" Lassiter vs Allen "Young Hoppe" Hopkins in a 1000 point straight pool match won by Allen and the well-seasoned pro Steve "The Miz" Mizerak vs. Jim "King James" Rempe in a 9-Ball race to 100 won by Jim. Mike even gave me a nickname Steve "Leapin" Lillis and told me that people bought tickets to see me play as I had quite a leap back then! We became great friends and I was inspired and learned much from him. While traveling on the road as a professional pool player in the late 1970's and early 1980's I was blessed to have the oppor-



Steve Lillis

tunity to share the knowledge learned from Mike to help run some landmark pool tournaments with people like Scott Smith and Grady Mathews in Colorado and Mike Massey in Tennessee. Additionally, I had the privilege to work with Pat Fleming and Mike Asch at the Hi Cue Billiard Lounge in the early 1970's helping to promote and run the beginnings of what was to become the pro lady's tour with legendary female players like Jean Balukas, former WPBA President Billie Billing, Fran Crimi, Debbie Smith, Glo-

ria Walker, and a very young Loree Jon Ogonowski.

We have a great history of American pool and people like Mike Asch need to be recognized and remembered. There are many more American pool stories that are being shared by those who are still with us and can thoughtfully remember our American pool roots! With the help of many friends in and out of the billiard industry, I had the wonderful opportunity to write two books about my pool journey. Both books are available on Amazon.com by typing in Steve Lillis. It is my hope that others will be encouraged to share their American pool stories as I feel particularly blessed to have shared in this article a little bit about my New Jersey pool story of where I grew up. Learning the game and competing with some of the greatest American pool players of all time here in New Jersey at the start of my career was indeed a privilege. Legendary pool promoter Mike Asch was in the middle of it all in the 1970's at the Hi-Cue Billiard Lounge in Elizabeth, New Jersey which was appropriately named "America's House of Champions."

