



Illinois Billiard Club

The Country Club of Pool and Billiards

8446 Archer Avenue, Willow Springs, IL 60480 . 708.839.1331 . www.IllinoisBilliardClub.com
Lessons . Leagues . Tournaments . Memberships . Private Functions

A tribute to the king of televised championship billiards in America

By Jim Parker

If in the 1950's when walking down Chicago's north side 5100 block of west Dakin St., you happened across a man some five and a half feet tall carrying a leather cue case, aside from the case, you'd never recognize anything unusual about the man himself. ...That is of course, until you overhear his conversation regarding his concept of promoting billiards in America. His name was Mr. Frank Oliva, an energetic visionary that left nothing to chance when it came to promoting his endeared game, that he preferred to refer to by its correct name, pocket billiards, and not simply, pool. The term "pool" was and still is a suggested gaming term the game inherited some 200 years ago by its association with gambling. And the last thing Oliva set-out to promote was gambling. In 1958 Frank designed a pocket billiards game he had copy written and titled: "Ten -Twenty." Unlike today's popular tavern games of eight and nine ball, Frank's version was championship 14.1 straight pool, yet with a new angle.

Oliva realized for billiards of any form to gain public popularity it required exposure only television could provide. Yet with its more challenging and time consuming design, straight pool, to be adapted to television would be as difficult as hosting the entire Olympic games in one single day. All high-end levels of competition require commitment to intense concentration. In addition to luck verses skill, when pocketing undeclared balls on the opening break shot, the level of concentration required in today's championship eight and nine ball games is extremely limited. Limited simply because the span of concentration doesn't exceed the consecutive pocketing of more than nine balls. ...With championship straight pool often realizing consecutive runs in excess of 50 balls in a single inning.

Oliva brought together the best of both worlds. He created a concept that would hold the interest of spectators within televisions limited air time, yet not allowing luck to be overbalancing as in today's eight and nine ball tournaments. Frank's game of "Ten-Twenty" was an innovative concept that allowed the pocketing of up to ten balls, in each of his format of eight innings. Each ball was valued at one point. While in any sequence, each ball and pocket had to be declared. If during the final eighth inning either contestant successfully pocketed their tenth ball, they were allowed to continue their consecutive run that ultimately could include an additional twenty balls. Thus came hope of a trailing players come back,

along with the name, "Ten-Twenty." A perfect score would be 100 points ...the pocketing of eight runs of ten, plus an additional twenty points in the final inning.

To step up the drama and also control the programs air time the creative billiard maestro included a time clock. When nearing the close of the program and displaying a large time clock, to pocket an additional ball or two, the intimidating movement of the clocks second-hand speeded up not only the shooters hand, but his feet as well! While Frank's concept was a wonder in itself, his ability to sell it to television bordered on pure genius. And genius he was. The clever insurance broker not only sold his idea to television, he sold a thirteen-week series to television! ...And by doing so, Frank was already in his sixth consecutive rack of winning our nations title of America's greatest promoter of televised professional billiards.

Oliva's next step was to orchestrate a network of top national challengers that by their position in the rank and file of America's best pool players would have equal opportunity to compete against one another over the weeks that lie ahead. He solved that problem by allowing each week's winner to return the following week to do battle with a new qualifying top contender. Seldom did anyone hold the championship beyond two weeks. One of our IBC members now retired, Mr. Bob Sterling pocketed his way into a fourth week, until losing to "Cowboy" Jimmy Moore. Cash awards were modest, yet public exposure and related business opportunities were enhanced.

Not unlike the creative directing of Hollywood's Steven Spielberg, Frank Oliva set his stage with an exuberant gallery of well-interested and well-dressed spectators. This was during the 1950's and early 60's. A time in America that in respect of the occasion, and not simply self-interest, men still wore ties and sport jackets and women wore dresses and hats. ...All of which conveying the suggestive message of both family and corporate attendance.

Director Oliva then enhanced his carefully thought out performance by enlisting the aid of sports announcer, "Whispering" Joe Wilson. Wilson was to sports announcing in the 1950's and 60's, as what Howard Cosell was in the 70's and 80's. ... Only Wilson didn't have a Mohamed Ali or Monday night football to help boost his popularity. Wilson's style of sports announcing was comprehensive, emotional and simply unbeatable when combined with Oliva's enthusiastic officiating and fancy footwork. When time permitted, the dynamic team even



Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Tess Oliva "When love and talent work together ... expect a masterpiece."

played the roles of educators when giving instructions in both the games rules and proper handling of a billiard cue. After its second week, "Ten-Twenty" was well on its way of becoming a smash hit.

Between the amazing duo's ability to broadcast the action to their cheering studio audience, combined with the super shot making of their cast of fast moving billiard pros that included names like Cicero Murphy, Irving Crane, Jimmy Moore and the fastest, most exciting player of the 20th century, New York's, Little Joey Canton, they sold the TV producers an additional 13 weeks of air time! Netting not

only the first consecutive twenty-six week series of nationally televised billiards entertainment in the United States, but today, some forty years later ... the last and longest running series of public, nationally broadcasted billiards entertainment ever recorded in the history of both American television and the game of billiards!

Long before "King Frank Oliva" left this world, he gave birth to another enduring segment of his illustrious legacy. He organized and

Continued on page....