

The History of the WPBA

The WPBA began in the seventies, a time that saw feminism at its peak. Women's billiards was no exception. This was the decade for women players to stand up, shout out, and be recognized. Only, there weren't many to be heard.

Jean Balukas was undisputedly the hottest woman player on the table. She captured her first U.S. Open win in 1972 at the ripe old age of twelve, and went on to win four consecutive U.S. Open titles. In that same year -- at the same event -- another young East Coast upstart arrived on the scene. Six-year-old Loree Jon Ogonowski (Jones) had to stand on a box to reach the table but was already a wizard with a cue, performing trick shots for fans.

Palmer Byrd, another top-flight player, became the first real outspoken missionary for women's billiards. She signed an exhibition deal with Brunswick Corporation as the firm's first female player rep and took full advantage of her position. She spoke out against unfairness and inequality between women's purses and men's, and she challenged the fact that women's matches were scheduled in the wee hours of the morning. In 1976, several women players, including Palmer, Gloria Walker, Vicki Frechen (Paski), and Madelyn Whitlow, along with National Billiard News editor Larry Miller, met at Mitch Housey's restaurant/lounge in Livonia, Michigan, on Memorial Day weekend. That meeting gave birth to the Women's Professional Billiard Alliance. Their efforts, spearheaded by Byrd and Whitlow, got the ball rolling, and the Alliance began taking charter members.

Palmer Byrd recalled, "There was a controversy going on about the dress code. Women were not allowed to compete in slacks; we had to compete in culottes or skirts. So, Madeline [Whitlow] ran this ad in the National Billiard News that said, 'Are you a woman who doesn't have to wear a skirt to prove it? Join the Women's Professional Billiard Alliance!'"

More than 100 female pool players sent their dues. Byrd and Whitlow's greatest desire was to garner respect for the women players, with the goal of having a women's tour large enough to create full-time pro players.

Enthused by their initial efforts, the WPBA set their sights on convincing promoters to host WPBA sanctioned events. Two events materialized from their initial efforts, the World 8-Ball in Burlington, IA, and the 6-Ball Masters in Lansing, MI.

To further legitimize the group, the WPBA established its own Hall of Fame. In 1976, Dorothy Wise and Ruth McGinnis (who had passed away two years earlier) became the first inductees, later joined by Japan's Masako Katsura, and Michigan promoter, Joe Farhat.

Unconvinced the WPBA would make women's pool an instant success, 18 year old Jean Balukas announced in the same year that she may turn to golf, looking at the alternative sport as a more lucrative career choice. According to reports at the time, after just a few weeks of lessons, she was breaking 90 on the links. Jean of course did not go pro in the golf arena, opting instead to become a dominant force on the women's fledgling tour.

In 1977, Jean claimed her first world title in the Women's World Open, promoted by the WPBA. The event was held in conjunction, but separate from, the PPPA World Open Pocket Billiards Championships, won by Allen "Young Hoppe" Hopkins.

It wasn't long before the toddling WPBA ran into its first bit of trouble. Membership plummeted after the initial year's excitement wore off, and Byrd, in the midst of a career change, reluctantly handed the reins of the organization to New York player and photographer, Billie Billing.

Billing enlisted the aid of Paul Balukas, (Jean's brother) and later executive director of the WPBA. He studied models of the LPGA (golf) and the WTA (tennis), and thereafter introduced the WPBA's first formal ranking system and wrote the group's by-laws.

Billing, as the first official WPBA President, remained in her presidency until 1981. She is credited with developing the first women-only National Championship. She also began to develop amateur circuit events, resulting in the development of the WPBA's first amateur national championship, won by Jo Ann Mason (Parker), who later became a top touring pro. Still, the association continued to struggle for events with purses worth traveling to compete for. Those few players who did compete, did so for love of the game, and no other reason.

In 1978, the two big events for women were the PPPA World Open and the newly formed WPBA National Championships. Both were won by Balukas.

The first WPBA President's Award was given one year later in 1979 by Billie to top player and WPBA Vice President, Gloria Walker for "dedicated service and innovative ideas." The President's Award is still present annually.

Women players began actively seeking more events on their own, with slowly growing support from East Coast and Midwest room owners. As a measure of how seriously the women's games were now being taken, Jean Balukas, Palmer Byrd, Shirley Caine (Weathers) and Vicki Paski are all seen in print as the first women billiard columnists, offering sound advice on everything from equipment to skill building to concentration. Gloria Walker finally made the spotlight by nabbing her first national title in the BCA National 8-Ball Championship.

While cue sports continued to struggle for notoriety among Americans, the women pros slowly and painstakingly gained ground. The 1980's kicked off with a 32 women player field at the 9-Ball World Pro-Am at Las Vegas' Tropicana Hotel, and Sherri Sewell, a poolroom manager from Oklahoma, nailed down the most lucrative first place prize in women's billiards to that date -- \$5,000. By contrast, the men's division (240 players) offered a first place prize of \$25,000. The women were nevertheless encouraged and continued to plod on. Balukas won the World Open once again, and the Eastern States Championship, but Gloria Walker kept her from the title in the WPBA Nationals, which changed format from straight pool to 9-Ball. It remains 9-Ball to this day.

Soon after, Gloria was invited to play against Steve Mizerak in the Billiard Battle of the Sexes, sponsored by Southern Bowling and Billiard. Thousands of fans turned out in Columbus, Ohio to witness the event. Coverage from CBS, NBC and ABC made it another important step for women players to become known to the general public as serious athletes.

Meanwhile, Barry Dubow, who served as WPBA publicist for a short time, left the WPBA to be executive director of the PPPA. Dubow didn't agree with the direction in which the women were headed. "I see its membership being either integrated into the women's division of the PPPA, or else I see it fading away."

The WPBA continued its struggle. Billie Billing remained president until political problems became insurmountable. According to Billing, "The membership started to blame me for things over which I had no personal control." Billing pressed harder, but met with resistance from some promoters and sponsors, who found her methods too aggressive. She finally relinquished her presidency to fellow New York player, Fran Crimi.

Paul Balukas offered Fran his assistance, and took on managing director duties in 1981. While Jean Balukas was on a short sabbatical from the sport, new names began cropping up. Young Loree Jon won the World 14.1 Open, defeating Vicki Paski in the finals. Loree Jon also won the New Jersey State Championships, but was ousted in the Eastern States Championship by another hot young player from Michigan, Lori Shampo.

1981 was also the year that BCA National 8-Ball Champion Belinda Campos first stormed onto the scene. Unlike counterparts Ogonowski and Balukas, Campos didn't take up the game until 18, but was dedicated from 1975 on. "I became addicted. I fell in love with the game," she said. Campos quickly became a proponent of women's pool.

During Crimi's first year as President, five major events were staged for women. Balukas came back and won the World 14.1 Championships, and Vicki Paski captured her first national title in the NPCA National Classic Cup. Sweeping the remaining events of the year was Lori Shampo. She won the 1st Annual McDermott Masters, successfully defended her title in the Eastern States event, and won the Chattanooga Open, promoted by pro player and trick shot artist, Mike Massey. When not competing in a pro event, Shampo toured the country as one of history's few true women road players, and there were men who wouldn't give her a spot. Said one top male player of the time, "That girl breaks like a guy. I might give her the seven, but never the break!"

A record eight major events were held the following year. Balukas won half of them, including the BCA U.S. Open 14.1 and the WPBA Nationals. Campos took two titles, leaving one for Lori Shampo, and one for Sweden's Striking Viking, Ewa Mataya (Laurance). After plenty of media attention, first as a new U.S. resident, newlywed to pro player Jim Mataya, and then as a Playboy Bunny working at the Lansing, MI Playboy Club, Ewa quickly got the attention she really sought as a legitimate U.S. titleholder.

Barry Dubow returned to the WPBA from 1983 - 85 as the organization's managing director after the demise of the PPPA.

By 1984, the WPBA had changed its "A", from Alliance to Association. "'Alliance' implied a struggle," Crimi said. "We wanted our focus to be more professional, more businesslike." She backed up her

businesslike attitude by introducing the association to industry members at the first BCA Trade Show.

"One of my fondest memories is walking into the BCA Board of Directors' meeting at the trade show. I arrived to the first trade show and walked around with my little briefcase as president of the WPBA, not having any idea what I was going to do. All I knew was that I needed to network with the industry, and I just went to each booth and started meeting people and shaking hands with them. I must have met enough people, because when I showed up at their board meeting and walked in the door - it had already started, and I don't remember who was speaking, but the speaker stopped and said, 'Oh, look who just came in. I want everyone to meet the President of the Women's Professional Billiard Association, Fran Crimi. And we'd like to welcome the WPBA to the world and to the industry of billiards.' And everyone applauded. That was really a great moment. We were accepted as the governing body of women's pool," stated Crimi.

Things progressed on the playing front as well. Joining the title winners in 1984 was a new name: California's Robin Bell (Dodson). Robin's southpaw aggressive style was unlike that of the traditional Midwest and Eastern players raised on straight pool. Robin was a 9-Ball player, and the first real presence felt on the women's tour from the west coast, winning both the Caesar's Tahoe Classic and the Great American Classic, in addition to her victory debut at the \$50,000 Miller Lite (Amateur) World Series of Tavern Pool.

1984 also marked the first time that the longest running men's 9-Ball event, the U.S. Open 9-Ball Championships, included a women's division (won by Belinda Campos). Promoter Barry Behrman included the women for eleven years, though the last year it was separated from the men's event due to conflicts with the PBTA.

Full-time career matters soon forced Crimi to give up her presidency. Paul Balukas, along with promoter Barry Dubow, held onto the reins until Campos was elected the new president in late 1985.

The "Texas Belle's" presidency offered a new spirit of community. She encouraged membership meetings designed to get the members talking. Belinda was the first to really sell the concept of promoting the WPBA to promote one's own career. "If the WPBA wins, we all win," she often said. Meanwhile, Robin Bell (Dodson) continued her dazzling display of 9-Ball talent, and was 1985's leading money winner (one of her wins was the top-heavy Resorts International 9-Ball tournament, with a \$10,000 first prize).

A year later, Gloria Walker, five months pregnant, became the 1986 WPBA National Champion. She would not be the last player to compete -- and win -- with a child on the way. Other players to follow suit included Belinda Campos, Laura Smith, Robin Dodson and Loree Jon Jones. They agreed that "being in a family way" was even an advantage, as it prevented many a "front-loaded" player from jumping up off a shot in a tense situation!

Wisconsin sharpshooter, Peg Ledman was elected president in 1987, taking on two successive terms. The office got computerized for the first time, and several events comprised a full calendar of competition. Post "Color of Money" excitement was a catalyst for sponsors to put bigger dollars into pro pool, hoping to keep the wave of media attention going. The WPBA benefited greatly, with more events, and more sponsored players.

Then, at the 1989 Brunswick World Open (Las Vegas), the WPBA got its first severe test of mettle, when disciplining player conduct suddenly became a major and unfortunate issue. Robin Dodson filed a citation against opponent Jean Balukas for "unsportsmanlike" conduct. Unlike other sports with independent refs and officials, pool at that time allowed players to settle their own disputes and be governed by their peers. Jean was miffed when the WPBA ruled in Robin's favor and withdrew in protest of what she felt was partisan policy. The WPBA, saddened by the loss of their best player, nevertheless maintained that the democratic process was the best that they could offer in the absence of an independent appeals committee. Balukas, fined \$200, refused to pay, and stated, "It's very sad, because I've lost all respect for the WPBA and I will never again have anything good to say about them. They've lost my support." As a result, the WPBA was accused by many of driving its greatest player from the game.

Shortly before the incident, Balukas had signed on with Brunswick as a player representative, sponsored by them to play in men's events. After Las Vegas, she quit competition completely, despite being free to enter men's tournaments. Balukas admits today, "It was something I definitely do regret. You know, the WPBA has been very good to me. I have no hard feelings toward the WPBA; they did what they had to do. That was their bylaws, and that's how they dealt with the situation, and I respect the WPBA for that. At that point in my life, I just was not in a very happy place and I needed to take a break. And I look back, and I think that was my out. You know, to take a break from the sport."

In retrospect, she was ready for a break. Jean simply retired. Thoughts of returning have surfaced over the years, but have never materialized.

Nevertheless, the WPBA now had its first black eye. Rumors and ill will threatened to undo the group. With Jean gone, and bad PR surrounding the tour, top players refocused their efforts towards better exposure. Several top players landed in the mainstream media spotlight, among them Ewa Laurance and Loree Jon Jones, whose talent at the table, combined with their beauty, poise and grace, made them excellent spokeswomen for the sport. Stints on magazine covers and morning shows were garnering a whole new level of attention for women cueists, and for perhaps the first time, men players saw the value of the women's game.

In 1989 the men and women began talks. Seeking to combine their strengths, they formed a promotional arm for their respective organizations (the WPBA and MPBA), the Professional Billiard Tour Association (PBTAs).

P&B Mag publisher, Harold Simonsen, became the PBTAs's first president, a marketing group comprised of three women and three men players, and three business members. Peg Ledman, along with former McDermott marketing rep Jacky Moeller, ran the PBTAs office out of Wisconsin. A sports marketing agent was hired, and ESPN entertained the idea of a televised tour for both sexes. The new World Pool-Billiard Association (WPA) staged the first true world championships with Earl Strickland and Robin Dodson bringing home the titles in both 1990 & 1991. The future of pro pool looked promising.

The men, however, felt, from the outset, that because of their greater number of players, they should have more than an equal say. Simonsen resigned after one year, realizing the group had major political differences that were swaying them from their marketing priorities. Soon after, the men elected Don Mackey as the PBTAs's commissioner, without the women's approval. WPBA players were issued an ultimatum – accept the way things are or leave.

While political tensions continued to brew, players played on. Titles were generally split between Robin, Loree Jon and Ewa, but then a new face broke through the ranks, and finished in the top 10 in her first year on tour. The Texas Tornado, Vivian Villarreal had blown in, and took her first WPBA title at the Wahine Open in Hilo, Hawaii.

It was at this event that Vicki Paski was first nominated for the WPBA presidency, and was elected at the December Nationals in 1991. As Vicki remembers, "Everyone was telling me it was a piece of cake, we had the PBTAs and they did everything. I was just a figurehead president. Then less than 30 days later, they decided we would split from the PBTAs and go it alone. Would someone please check with whoever got second place and see if they want to be president?"

She got more than she bargained for.

The WPBA withdrew from the PBTAs in 1992, choosing to once again go it alone. While rumors flew and the billiard world looked on curiously, the WPBA stoically maintained that their goals had to focus on an organized pro tour, instead of random events lacking full fields and proper promotion.

Harold Simonsen, consulting with the WPBA, invented the Classic Billiard Tour concept. "The women needed bigger events, more prize money, a way to keep themselves visible to the eager media, and a system that enabled the industry to invest their dollars in return for real exposure on tour throughout the year."

The Classic Tour was a co-op advertising package, designed with the industry and media in mind. Each tour stop had to be staged in a Top 40 media market. In addition, a sponsor, for just \$10,000 in the first year, would have title sponsorship of one of the twelve events, and arena banner visibility in each of the remaining tour stops. It was an attractive package to industry members, and a way to guarantee a twelve-stop tour, each with \$25,000 purses.

The board of directors got to work. Shari Stauch lined up title sponsors and publicized the tour to mainstream media. Vicki Paski created a qualifying system and gathered volunteers to head up regional tours across the country. Peg Ledman acted as site coordinator, assisting tournament hosts across the country with every aspect of tournament production. A lot was on the line. The WPBA, after its divorce debacle with the PBTAs, had less than \$2,000 in its coffers. Don Mackey, still promoting the men under the PBTAs banner, foretold that the women would be back "begging" in a year.

Previously unable to fill a 32 player women's field, the new WPBA Classic Tour created so much interest that 48 player fields were filled, and by the end of the year, thanks to Paski's careful nurturing of the qualifying system, waiting lists accompanied each event. The Classic Tour was on its way.

But there were still struggles behind the scenes. When Paski and Stauch traveled to the ESPN offices to negotiate a TV contract for the tour, they were informed they had no track record with the network, and therefore no bargaining power, despite having been part of several previous televised events that included men's and women's divisions. The WPBA was starting from scratch as far as ESPN was concerned, and that meant limited hours and limited funding. The first few years, they settled for four hours television

time, incorporating highlights of the year's Classic Tour events into coverage of the culminating Nationals. It was barely enough to hold sponsor interest, but industry companies remained supportive, and that support eventually paid off with an ESPN contract for six events a year.

Following 1993's Classic Tour debut, *Pool & Billiard Magazine* launched a p.r./marketing arm (SPL Group) to publicize WPBA events and solicit sponsorship. As a result, Gordon's Gin and Vodka came on as the sport's first-ever corporate tour sponsor. Gordon's produced and televised several \$50,000 events for women players on ESPN and the Sports Channel, in addition to increasing tour purses with bonuses for run-outs.

With the brass ring in sight, players became eager for quick success, creating more inner turmoil at the WPBA. Some felt the association should find sponsors for individual players because of the increased number of events, and therefore expenses. The board was approached by a contingent of unhappy contenders. Said Paski, "We explained that we created this tour, this 'job', for them. They needed to find their own 'ride to work.' We were charged with improving women's pool for all the players – we couldn't be put in the position of negotiating for individual players' sponsor arrangements." Grumbings died down as Gordon's increased sponsorship and the WPBA increased Classic Tour purses to over \$40,000 per event.

In 1995, Sigma Marketing took on management of the WPBA, under executive director Mark Cord, who from 1988-1993 had served as the BCA's executive director. The WPBA had, for the first time, an office and a staff. In the same year, ESPN sweetened the pot with an ESPN-produced tournament that included 16-player men's and women's divisions, scotch doubles events and the individual man and woman champ playing each other in a \$100,000 Battle of the Sexes. Interestingly, that \$100,000 was originally planned as a \$25,000 battle. When WPBA reps Paski, Stauch and Mark Cord attended the ESPN meeting, they insisted the match would not take place without a six-figure purse. One week later, ESPN agreed.

The WPBA's Texas Tornado Vivian Villarreal faced fellow Texan C.J. Wiley in that historic male-female TV match. She was bested, but a threshold had been crossed -- the women made equal money in the event, got equal time, and, bottom line, they were here to stay. Vivian's purse (over \$60,000) for that week assisted her in becoming the first woman pro to break the \$100,000 annual purse earnings barrier.

After four years as president, Paski stepped down. Friend and top player Ewa Laurance took the post. Her term saw Sigma continue in tour operations; a two year ESPN/ESPN 2 contract featuring coverage of five Classic Tour stops plus the Nationals; and, in 1997, a Classic Tour purse jump from \$41,000 to \$50,000.

By this time, news of the tour had reached across the great pond, and European women players began seeking athlete visas to reside in the U.S. and compete full time. Adding to the already awesome talents of players like Loree Jon Jones, Ewa Laurance, Robin Dodson and Vivian Villarreal, Gerda Hofstatter arrived in 1993, followed by Helena Thornfeldt in 1994, both quickly establishing themselves as top contenders. Then, seemingly from out of nowhere, New York's Jeanette Lee, still short on experience but long on drive and ambition, garnered her first title and quickly rose up the ranks. Her flamboyant style and outspoken manner drew a whole new audience of young fans. Lee got her #1 ranking, but not for long.

Close on her heels was none other than Europe's reigning snooker queen, Allison Fisher. The British import first came to play in '95, liked what she saw, and -- unhappily for many top players -- decided to stay. The next several years became the era of the Duchess of Doom, as Fisher swept the field in a number of events, and continued to raise the bar for competitive play. Poised and witty, she also swept the hearts of American fans.

Aileen Pippin took the WPBA reins in 1998, and oversaw production of the WPBA's first video venture, an instruction video featuring twenty ranked WPBA pros. Mark Cord resigned his executive director post in that year and Steve Tipton, the WPBA's tournament director and emcee took over Cord's duties.

In late 1999, under president Dawn Hopkins, Sumner, Rider, & Snyder, a public relations and association management firm based in NYC, was contracted to take over total management and operations of the WPBA. SR&S hired Lisa Stancati, a corporate attorney with a degree in sports marketing, as the WPBA executive director. Lisa was handed the massive job of solidifying the tour, renewing industry sponsors, and soliciting new ones.

For Cord, Tipton, and Stancati, the challenges included similar obstacles – to run an ever-growing organization and tour, while still finding time to market the WPBA to corporate America. The task was overwhelming. Sumner, Rider, & Snyder ended their relationship after just one short year.

After five years of holding the #1 ranking position, and almost total tour domination, Allison Fisher was

due for a break. Enter another import, Ireland's Karen Corr. Corr won her first titles in 2000, and after tasting sweet victory, became a 9-Ball machine.

Behind the scenes, Allison Fisher became WPBA president in 2000, and was instrumental in helping Stancati achieve many of the tour's financial goals with her industry relationships, including the first exclusive table sponsorship contract with Brunswick Billiards, and renewing with Simonis Cloth. But Allison was dealing with her father's terminal illness, and her priorities were shifting. She chose not to run for re-election in 2001.

Soon after Stancati's exit, and with it the WPBA's management firm, the association was back to ground zero, with no office, no director, no producer and no plan. Jan McWorter walked into the 2001 presidency with the least certainty and the most responsibility of any leader since the inaugural Classic Tour. But, proving once again that "you can't keep a good woman down," the WPBA gathered together their resources, their energy, and their wits, and regrouped.

Recognizing that non-televised events were costing a lot to produce and profiting little, at-risk tourneys were scrapped in favor of a smaller number of tour stops, seven total in 2001, including five Classic Tour events, the Cuetec Cues National Championship, and the BCA 9-Ball Championship, all ESPN/ESPN2 televised. This marked the first year the entire tour was televised.

Peg Ledman was brought back as the WPBA's site coordinator, and immediately began stepping up production values of tournaments and seeking new, exciting tournament venues and additional sponsors, including the American Poolplayers Association as an associate sponsor.

Trifecta Entertainment (who became familiar with the WPBA through their public relations work for the Gordon's events) was brought on to do tour marketing and publicity. Their ongoing efforts have produced several strong sponsor possibilities, and a savvy new marketing package, including an updated WPBA video. For the first time ever, a marketing group is working solely on procuring sponsorship, without the baggage of running the office or the tour.

In mid-March, the Women's Sports Foundation's Executive Director, Donna Lopiano, met with the WPBA board for a long-term strategic planning meeting. Jeanette Lee became chairperson to continue the strategic planning to target both short-term and long-term goals for growth and prosperity of the association. (Former president Dawn Hopkins and former board member Shari Stauch are among strategic team members.)

Jeanette Lee also continued to make headlines. In August, she added another notch to her belt, winning pool's first ever medal-sport competition, bringing home the Gold in the Akita, Japan World Games. As the sport's best-known player, and as ESPN's 3rd sexiest female athlete in the world, she's a highly prized commercial commodity.

Classic Tour purses, which had stagnated at the \$50,000 mark in 1997, were boosted to \$60,000. The BCA event featured an \$80,000 purse, and the Cuetec Cues National Championship was \$90,000.

Through the efforts of McWorter and Lisa Stancati, ESPN/ESPN 2 renewed its contract for 2002/2003.

As 2001 came to a close, the WPBA celebrated with a 25th anniversary party at the Annual Banquet held prior to the WPBA National Championship. Honored guests included the founding sisters of this great organization, Palmer Byrd and Madelyn Whitlow Roberts, who were appropriately inducted into the WPBA Hall of Fame on their baby's 25th birthday.

In 2001, Corr assumed the #1 ranking by winning every Classic Tour stop, including the Cuetec Cues National Championship. In 2002, Corr remained the #1 ranked player with three tournament victories but Fisher re-energized her game and also won three tournaments closing in on the top spot.

As the WPBA enters 2003, its growth is impressive. The WPBA has proudly teamed with the best equipment sponsors in the industry, Brunswick Billiards, Centennial Balls, Simonis Cloth, and the Sardo Tight Rack; with title and presenting sponsorships by Cuetec Cues, and the American Poolplayers Association. The tour is boasting larger event fields of 64 players, an increased prize fund of \$70,000 for each Classic Tour stop, and even larger purses for the U.S. Open and the National Championship. The Women's Professional Billiard Association will continue to strive to take her place among other major media sports. In short, we're here to stay.

The information provided here was edited from articles that appeared in Pool & Billiard Magazine written by Shari Stauch and Billiards Digest written by Keir Graff.