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MAGIC ACT

England's Chris Melling Wins
Titles and Fans With Daring Play

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Versatile and daring, England's Chris Melling is one of the game's most exciting players.

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IN THE end, all he was trying to do was simply pull out all of the stops and put a beating on Mika Immonen.

With a spot in the final 16 of July 2017's RYO Rack Classic World Pool Series 8-ball event at stake, Chris Melling trailed Immonen, 1-0, and was left with a treacherous table layout after making a ball on the break. With British website Unilad streaming the event live to a worldwide audience, the game was a perfect opportunity for Melling to be Melling.

Forced to accept solids, Melling opened his death-defying runout by intentionally cutting the 4 ball into the 13, causing the object ball to drift towards the corner pocket after the carom. The cue then ball bounced off the opposite side rail and kicked the 4 into the corner pocket. With the 13 ball now blocking down table shots, Melling lifted the butt end of his cue and jabbed down at the cue ball, causing it to swerve diagonally down the table to pocket the 2 ball in the opposite corner pocket. After clearing the remaining balls, he couldn't find a clear pocket for the partially blocked 1 ball. After pondering the shot, Melling lowered his cue and aimed the 1 ball directly into the nearest end rail.

"I knew the shot was there," Melling recalls while attending the Super Billiards Expo in the Philadelphia area in early April. "Obviously playing it and getting the pace and the angle correct is



a different story. But I had seen the shot there three or four shots earlier."

The stocky Brit sent the ball four rails around the table, watching as it traveled past the eight remaining balls and into the corner pocket.

"That's unbelievable. I might kill myself if someone made that on me," said broadcast commentator and Billiards Congress of America Hall of Famer Johnny Archer after watching a replay.

The series of shots propelled Melling to win the match against Immonen, 9-3, and thrust him back into the spotlight, not just of American pool but the entire internet — with the video shared

throughout social media moments after he sunk the game-winning 8 ball.

"That one runout gave him more exposure than any tournament he's ever won," said event creator and close friend Darren Appleton.

With a new commitment to pool after a third attempt at a snooker career, the 39-year-old Melling is showing up at the top of tournament leaderboards as often as the internet highlight reels. He took top honors in the 9-ball division of the Derby City Classic and finished second at the Chinese Pool World Championship 8-ball earlier in the year. With his game and popularity trending



Melling always has a few cards up his sleeve, as evidenced by his miraculous runout at the World Pool Series last year.

back to where it was before the move to snooker, he's still hoping to find success similar to that of fellow United Kingdom natives Appleton and Jayson Shaw.

Raised in the town of Keighley in West Yorkshire, England, Melling was first introduced to the game as a nine-year-old when his dad took him to the local pub while his mother went shopping. Even as a youngster, Melling quickly had a knack for pocketing balls as well as leaving opponents with very few opportunities after a miss. One of Melling's neighbors saw his abilities with a cue and asked his parents if he

could take the young man to his snooker club. Within his first week of playing on a regulation-sized table, Melling became a part of the pub's snooker team and recorded a 68 break. Melling scored a 103 when he was 10 years old, tallied a 138 by age 12 and racked up a 147 maximum break by age 14.

"He was an incredible talent at snooker. I still believe that had he concentrated on snooker he would have made it to the top," said Glen Pilkington, operator of the snooker club who has been watching Melling almost since the day he first picked up a cue.

Around this time, however, the

young Melling became friends with two other up-and-coming English players: Mick Hill and Appleton, with the latter living 20 minutes from Melling. The three of them developed a competitive friendship, practically living at Appleton's home and practicing together between 50 and 60 hours a week. After they qualified to play for the county English 8-ball team, Appleton and Melling traveled to events and tournaments together — with Melling's mother giving Appleton her son's spending money so that it wouldn't all get squandered on slot machines.

"Right away I could see he was very



honors, as the Europeans squeaked out an 11-9 victory.

"His MVP performance that week was probably the best I've ever seen next to Dennis Hatch's," said Shuff.

The Shuff match showed a worldwide stage Melling's ability to pull off the miraculous. Trailing 1-0 after a Shuff break and run, Melling faced an awkward table layout, with the 5 ball blocking the cue ball's path from the 2 to the 3 at the other end of the table. Rather than attempt a safety, Melling hit the cue ball with enough power and backspin that it collided with the 5, then drew off of one rail to the opposite end of the table for position.

"When he made that shot I was like, 'He's going to win MVP if they win,'" Shuff said.

Melling's flare, engaging personality and competitive spirit make him a fan favorite wherever he plays, even China.

talented at 14," said Appleton. "He's such a shot maker. He doesn't want to play safe. When he was on, he was basically unbeatable."

Melling was a force to be reckoned with in English 8-ball, taking home the 2001 English Pool Association World Rules World Championship in Cardiff in front of his parents — which was a surprise for both of them. He was convinced that he didn't play well when they were in the crowd, so Melling asked them not to attend the championship. The couple told their son they would stay home — only to be snuck into the venue by his friends. The plan almost worked until Chris went to the restroom during a match intermission and bumped into his father.

"I said to him, 'You better hope I win now,'" Melling said, laughing.

He did, breaking and running in the 21st game to win, 11-10.

Through most of his cue sports career, Melling has been one to try and play every discipline available. At one point Melling was the only player ever to be a professional at English 8-ball, American pool and snooker simultaneously. He added another 8-ball title in 2003 and won the International Pool Masters back-to-back years, beginning in 2001. He also earned the top ranking by the World Eight-Ball Pool Fed-

eration in 2003.

Around the same time the young Brit also was beginning to dip his toes into the 9-ball scene, defeating Steve Davis at the 2001 World 9-Ball Championships and finishing ninth. With snooker opportunities dwindling in the late 2000's, Melling focused more on 9-ball, competing 18 times in 2010 and winning a Euro Tour and GB9 tournament, and posting nine top-10 finishes.

Hot off of winning the 2011 China Open, Melling earned a spot on the first of his two Mosconi Cup appearances. In his rookie campaign he went 1-2 in doubles competition and won both of his singles matches as the Europeans defeated the United States, 11-7. The following year's Cup was tailor-made for Melling. Playing in front of a home crowd at York Hall, he won all three of his singles matches — including the 19th match of the event against Brandon Shuff with the teams tied 9-9 — and earned event Most Valuable Player



Melling wasn't finished with the theatrics. Trailing 4-2, Shuff looked poised to run out but misplayed position on the 6 ball. He played safe, kicking the 6 down table and hiding the cue ball behind the 8 ball. After looking over the shot, Melling stepped to the table and used a short one-rail kick to sink the 6 ball in the corner pocket. He then watched as the cue ball bounced off of both corners of the side pocket but somehow stayed on the table.

"It wasn't the kind of shot where I

could kick and make safe so I was trying to pot it," Melling said. "I thought I was scratching in the side pocket but it rolled around."

"That's Chris Melling. He's like a showoff. The bigger the crowd, the better he plays," Appleton said.

"I remember Darren flying over the boarding after the 9 to win the match. That was a great moment," said Niels Feijen, who was also on the European team that year.

Melling thought he would be selected as a wildcard for a third Mosconi Cup team in 2013. Although he didn't win any top events he earned fifth place

finishes at the U.S. Open 9-Ball Championships, World Pool Masters, World Cup of Pool and World 9-Ball Championships while mixing in four top-five finishes at GB9 events. Plus, he was the reigning Mosconi Cup Most Valuable Player and had climbed as high as third in the rankings at one point. Regardless, Melling was passed over for Karl Boyes, who won a GB9 event as well as the Diamond Bigfoot 10-ball Challenge.

"It was massively deflating," Melling said. "For about five or six months, I was one of the best players in Europe."

"The MVP used to carry a lot of weight.

Now, there are so many good players in Europe that it doesn't guarantee success," Appleton said. "Everyone has been in a situation where they thought they should be picked but weren't."

Shortly thereafter he put down his pool cue and picked up the snooker cue. Actually, he went out and bought the snooker cue because Melling no longer owned one. The game's landscape had changed from a structural and financial standpoint. The sport was starting to offer more advancement opportunities for newer players, whereas in the past only the top seeds were protected in top events. Most importantly, the

earning potential was massive, with the World Snooker Championships offering a prize fund of nearly 2 million pounds. Fresh off a seven-year hiatus, Melling started working on his game and recorded a 147 break in his third day of practicing.

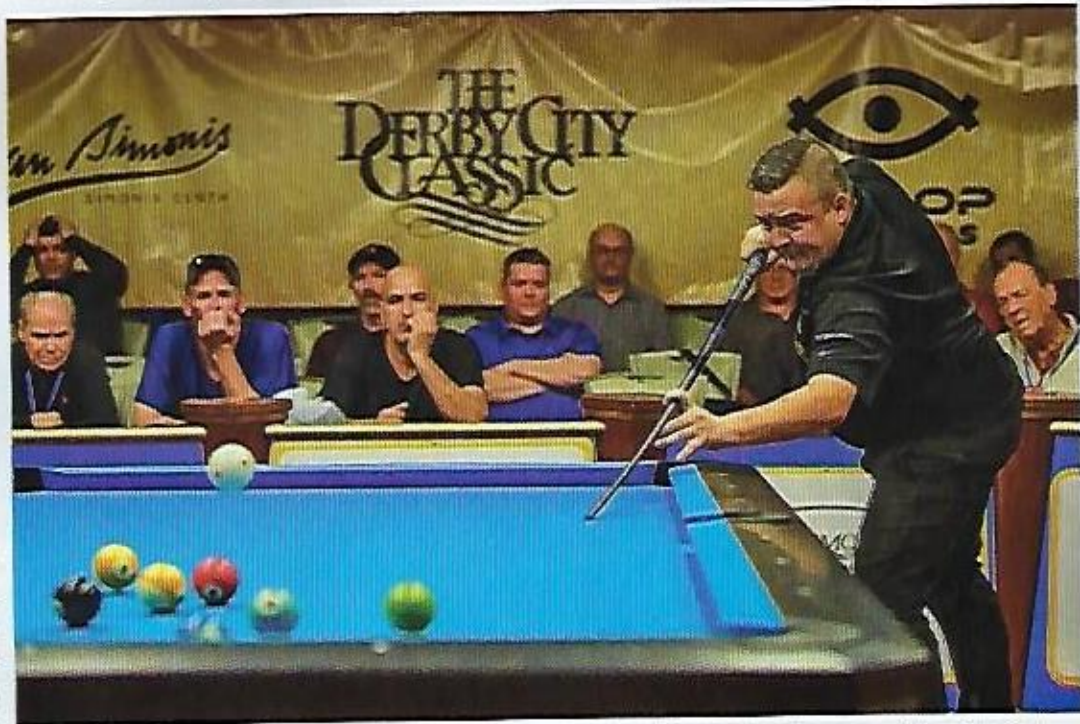
"So, I thought, maybe I've still got it. And, of course, the money in snooker is humungous," Melling said.

Although he made his way through qualifying school and obtained his two-year tour card, Melling struggled to gain any kind of traction. He wasn't able to make the fast tournament money that he had been able to with pool

snooker at the age of 35, fellow competitor and former Mosconi Cup teammate Ralf Souquet isn't one of them.

"I can see his thinking," Souquet said. "If you make the top 16 in the snooker rankings you can make enough money to be set. In pool, you can make the top eight and still don't have a chance to settle down."

When Melling returned to American pool fulltime following the 2016 snooker season, he was essentially starting from scratch. His ranking was in the 500s and all of his sponsors except Predator had cut ties. He borrowed a cue at the Derby City Classic



Melling latest escape came in the final of the Derby City Classic 9-Ball event, where he overcame an 8-3 deficit to defeat Canadian John Morra, 9-8.

and also came down with a wicked case of the yips. Mix in the fact that his heart wasn't in it as much as it could have been, and Melling estimates that he was playing at maybe 30 percent of his potential.

"I've told him that the decision to try snooker again cost him financially because around the time he qualified for the snooker tour he was a hot commodity in American pool," said friend and fellow European professional Arfan Dad.

Although some friends and professional acquaintances have questioned his decision to take a third shot at

last year and won the 14.1 discipline. Roughly six months later, Melling was in New York's Steinway Billiards at old friend Appleton's RYO Classic putting together that roller coaster ride of shots that went viral.

Even Immonen applauded and gave Melling a hand slap after the rack.

"It was a pleasure to watch," Immonen said. "He kept getting himself in trouble and he kept getting himself out of trouble. In 8-ball you have to play aggressive."

A couple of hours after the match, nearly 4 million people had watched the run out. Almost a year since it oc-

curred, the video has over 58 million total views on multiple internet platforms.

Skyler Woodward would ultimately win the tournament, with Melling finishing tied for ninth, but the second game of that match was the talk of the tournament. In the days after the tournament, he received congratulations messages from British rock band Reverend and the Makers, comedian Joe Rogan, trick shot artist Florian Kohler.

"The thing just went mental. It was unbelievable," Melling said.

"We were just very fortunate it was on the streaming table. Had it happened on table 10, no one would be talking about it," Appleton said.

To anyone who knows or has competed against Melling, the shots were just business as usual.

"His knowledge of using the cushions is second to none, but what he has more than most players is vision to see these shots," said Dad. "If you can't see them, you'll never play them even if you know how to. That's why he does the ridiculous so often."

"We've been seeing him do this stuff for 20 years," said professional Lee Vause. "The last shot he played was unbelievable. He pulls something difficult off every time."

Although Melling's popularity has grown in the United States because of the video and has always been robust in the United Kingdom, both may have been eclipsed by his notoriety in Asia. The last

time Melling was in China he joined the social media site Weibo — the country's version of Facebook — and gained 58,000 followers in three days. Since Melling doesn't speak or read a word of Chinese, he's hired a translator to operate the site.

One reason so many in China might be paying attention to Melling is that he nearly won the country's Chinese Pool World Championship back in March, finishing second to Yubo Zheng and

taking home a \$45,000 prize. With its snooker-style pockets on a regulation-sized pool table, the game almost feels tailor made for Melling.

"I feel like 8-ball, whatever game and whatever table, is my best game," said Melling, who was also runner up in 2013. "Just because of the patterns and the knowledge."

He jumped out to a 10-4 lead against Zheng in the finals but struggled to pocket the 8-ball — missing four total during the match. Despite the unforced errors, the Brit took a 12-11 lead into



Melling was on the verge of winning the World Chinese 8-Ball Championship (above), but let a late lead slip away.



the intermission and jumped out to leads of 15-11 and 18-13 in the race to 21 championships.

The errors continued to plague Melling, missing position on the final solid

ball in the 32nd game. Zheng cut the lead to 19-18 and then tied the match after Melling missed a routine striped ball in the corner. Melling had one final chance to tie the score but scratched in the side pocket on the break.

"The night I lost and the day after I was absolutely devastated," he admitted. "It's not often you have a chance to be a world champion, especially at a sport you don't even play."

Back at the Super Billiards Expo,

Melling — The Guy With That Crazy Run Out — is continuously stopped for autographs and pictures. After a rare two-and-out bounced him from the men's professional 10-ball event on the first day, Melling is simply enjoying the event's trade show. Sporting a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt with a Predator patch on the sleeve, he's spent most of the weekend chatting and shooting a few racks with customers and spectators. While working his way through an 8-ball rack at the table at the cue manufacturer's booth Sunday

afternoon, Melling slowly generates a crowd, with many knowing they could see something miraculous.

An hour or so later, Melling packs his cue away and works his way into the pro arena to watch close friend Jayson Shaw's match with eventual champion Mike Dechaine. Shaw and Melling have known each other for nearly 20 years, when Jayson's father and fellow professional, Charlie, introduced them.

"The first I saw him was in England," Shaw said, laughing at the memory. "He had a car with his name on it that was given by a sponsor and I thought, 'Who's this idiot.'"

Since then the two have become close, with Melling frequently staying with Shaw whenever he's in the United States for events. He stayed at Shaw's home the week between the Expo and the Aramith 9-Ball Players Champion-

ship in New York, and lived there for three weeks earlier in the spring.

A few of Melling's friends would like to see him take the same path that Shaw and Appleton did — moving to the U.S. full-time to play in American national and regional events.

"I personally think he should have followed Darren in moving to the States about 10 years ago and made American pool his sole focus the way Darren did," Dad said.

"I 100-percent think he's realizing the States are the best place for him," said Vause. "Chris had the opportunity 10 years ago."

Easier said than done, currently. Melling lost his mother, Ellie, in 2010 and his father, Derek, stays with him whenever he's not traveling for events. He's also a guy who enjoys his current life in Keighley. When he's back home he can be seen hanging out at local pubs like The Royal Oak, owned by his friend Patrick Gaskin, and helping fellow players with their games.

When Gaskin met Melling earlier in the decade, he was one of the hottest European players, fresh off that China Open victory and on his way to his first Mosconi Cup team. Gaskin said you'd never know it by talking to him.

"He was just another bloke. There was no bravado with him. He's just an ordinary guy," Gaskin said.

Gaskin is one of the people whom Melling has tried mentoring at the table. So complex are the angles and geometrical equations that Melling considers during kick shots and snookers that when he tried explaining it to Gaskin it felt more like math than pool.

"He was trying to explain how he gets out of a snooker but I had to tell him to stop," Gaskin said. "It was too much for my little brain to handle."

Melling is also generous with his time and money. When a local pool player Alistair Baile suddenly passed away earlier this spring, Melling donated 100 pounds for the funeral.

Five years ago, Melling's hometown was shaken when four-year-old Riley Turner was murdered by a houseguest. When the town pulled together to raise money for Turner's family, Melling donated his jersey from the 2012 Mosconi Cup, which fetched about 900 pounds at an auction.

"Sometimes he's been careless with his money over the years. He'll admit

while Melling was staying with him, he would often opt to watch television instead of joining Shaw for practice time on the pool table downstairs.

"He does not practice," Shaw said. "And if he does it's for an hour and he's done."

Melling admitted he's not at the practice table as much as he used to be when he was young, when he played around six hours a day during the week and up to 15 hours on the weekends. With Melling retaining much of the knowledge he gained from those early years practice sessions, he believes it's really more a matter of needing to get in stroke rather than work on his game.

"If I play well, I know my A game is as good as anybody," he said.

Melling is counting on his A game to carry him to a selection on Team Europe for the 25th Mosconi Cup, which will take place at Alexandra Palace in London this December. With sponsorship deals in the U.S. and China, Melling is entering every tournament he can in both countries. Last month he turned a trip to Las Vegas to celebrate a friend's 40th birthday into a working vacation, taking second place in the Asian Culture Day.

"I think I have a great chance of getting on this year. I feel like I'm in a good position," he said.

Should he manage to make the team, win a world title or be selected one day for the Billiard Congress of America Hall of Fame, one thing is clear: Melling will remain just a guy from Keighley who makes his living with a pool cue. If 58 million views haven't changed him, nothing probably will.

"I'm the type of guy who, whatever I win, I'll never change," he insists. "I always talk to people, I always get along to people. I think that's very important. No matter what job you do, you always have to have your feet on the ground." ❶



Melling hopes to hear his name called when invitations go out for Team Europe ahead of the 2018 Mosconi Cup.

that himself, but overall I would say he's a kindhearted person," Dad said.

"He's one of these guys who likes his own life. He likes his friends and his town. He's like a stay-at-home kind of guy," Appleton said.

Appleton doesn't feel Melling living in the United States is as important as it once was, but added that he still needs to continue traveling across the Atlantic as well as to other countries to compete in events. Additionally, he and other colleagues believe Melling needs to work on his indifference towards practicing. Shaw remarked that