

*** Pool History ***

The name "billiards" was derived from the French word bille (a piece of wood, or a curved stick) or billes (a variety of spherical objects, including balls). These words were used to reference ball games as far back as 1164.

Today, we associate innocent fun with the notion of sharing a game of pool with family and friends. It was not always this way, however. The Church once frowned upon the game of billiards as "too dangerous" (double-speak for enjoyable), and in 1369, Charles VI of France attempted to suppress these games by limiting their play to one day a year. It was his contention that billiards was a direct cause of hatred and malice. Thankfully, this notion never stuck.

The first definitive account of the existence of a billiard table was found in a 1470 inventory of the possessions of King Louis XI of France. The table had one hole in the center and he got to make up his own rules for his table.

Upon gaining popularity with the monarchy, the need for tables increased. The monarchs vied with one another for the best table and gaming rooms-hiring the finest artisans in an unspoken quest to create the most magnificent tables and gaming rooms.

One of the more noted enthusiasts was Mary, Queen of Scots. Upon her incarceration, she was allowed the use of her billiard table inside her prison cell. When this privilege was revoked months prior to her beheading, she wrote a letter of complaint to the Archbishop of Glasgow. Though she was never allowed to play again, one final wish was granted which reflected her undying love for the game. Upon her beheading, her body was wrapped in cloth from her beloved table.

The Table

America made its mark in the billiards industry with the quality of its table construction. Until the mid-1800s, most table implements were imported from Europe. But by the 1850s, the entire pool and billiards industry in the United States was well established. Companies specializing in cues, balls, cushions, and slate beds had spread to every corner of the country. As in Europe, professional billiards players began to emerge, and contest between them became huge spectator events. Thousands of people attended the contest, and the prize money--\$15,000 for the first major stakes match-rivalled that of any other sport.

The Importance of Slate

In 1826, England's John Thurston made a change in the composition of table beds that would alter the game forever. Unsatisfied with the playability and warping tendencies of wood, he set out in search of a new material. His discovery came in the form of slate, which offered many advantages to both producer and player. Slate all but eliminated the problem of warping. Its only problem was weight-which led indirectly to a further advancement: tables had to be constructed far sturdier. This design improvement also led to a dramatic improvement in play.

Controlling the Cushions

With vast improvements in table construction, focus shifted towards the quality of the cushions. The earliest cushions were nothing more than short walls of wood. Lining the walls with leather or cloth-even stuffing them with hair or cotton-did little to achieve the desired result. Crude rubber from India was utilized around 1835, showing immediate promise;until the seasons and weather changed. India rubber turned soft in the heat and rock hard when the temperature dropped. Various remedies to keep the cushions at a playable degree-candles, ice, pots of hot water-were far more bothersome than they were worth. Today, top manufacturers use 100% gum rubber for its consistency in all conditions.

Precision Cloth

The Iwan Simonis Company became the most famous billiard cloth manufacturer in the world. Founded in 1680, in the Belgian town of Verviers, they remain, to this day, the most respected and prolific producer of fine billiard cloth. By producing their own spinning mule designed to their exacting standards, they were able to revolutionize the game. Even when used on wooden table beds, the results were near perfection.

Cue Balls

Most of the earliest billiard balls were made of wood. It was easily shaped, inexpensive and readily available. Ivory balls came into use in the 1600s. While far more playable than wood, they were relatively scarce. Only the wealthy could afford the material. While beautiful to look at, ivory balls were never very dependable. They were also time consuming to make-properly seasoning a tusk could take up to two years, and unless fully dried, temperature changes could cause the ivory to fracture or split. New balls had to be broken in gently, struck softly for the first couple of months. Even then, they tended to lose their shape quickly when subjected to a high impact game.

Still, ivory all but entirely replaced wooden balls by the early 1800s. As the demand for balls increased, so did the number of slaughtered elephants (in a sign of the times, the concern then was not for the treatment of the elephants but the safety of those who hunted them to their deaths). One elephant tusk generally yielded only four or five balls - far from an efficient process.

In 1869, however, all that would change. An Albany chemist named John Wesley Hyatt mixed nitrocellulose with camphor under very high pressure to create a shiny, hard, moldable substance he named celluloid. Unbeknownst to him at the time, he'd just invented the world's first plastic. By adding another compound he'd created, collodion, to the celluloid he was able to make this hard surface perfectly smooth as well - just right for pool and billiard balls.

Except for one thing: the balls had a tendency to blow up. Shortly after the first shipment was sent, reports of exploding billiard balls surfaced all over the country. Rumors spread that the new materials were highly explosive and dangerous. And they were, but only during the manufacturing process. In truth, the balls weren't explosive at all. The problem was simply a design flaw. The inner weight of the ball was simply too great, causing the collodion casing to shatter, upon heavy impact.

Thankfully, these issues have been resolved-meaning you can enjoy a fun, safe game of pool with friends whenever you like.

Take a look at our quality pool tables.