

Dressed up in a new look, pool is making a big commercial comeback as "pocket billiards"

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO POOL?

By T. W. TIRANA

THE GAME of pocket billiards, once called pool, is enjoying a new boom in Washington as well as other cities. The small, smoky poolroom of yesteryear, which had all but disappeared, is being supplanted by new places that have soft music, multi-colored tables, wall-to-wall carpeting and women customers.

Even some members of the Billiards Room Proprietors Association are surprised at developments. For example, there are two new rooms on Long Island, N. Y., that have 40 tables each, as well as piped-in music, soft carpets, air conditioning, food-vending machines, television, ladies' powder rooms and several kinds of fancy new pool equipment.

"We old-timers get shocked," says Bob McGirr, president of the BRPA. "Real billiards is a quiet game."

In the Washington area, the billiards boom has so far accounted for 24 poolrooms of varying sizes.

One of the newest is the Cue Club, in the Glenmont (Md.) Shopping Center. In addition to the usual gold-colored tables and wall-hung draperies, the place includes a closed-circuit television system, so the patrons can watch themselves play.

Another new place and one of the plushest is Cue 'N Chalk, opened last March at North Glebe road and Fairfax drive in Arlington. The owners, Joseph M. Gruber and Fred Seemiller, spent \$25,000 on the place, which is decorated with orange carpeting and antique ash paneling. Mr. Gruber describes the clientele as "shirt and tie people" who keep the 10 tables busy until as late as 3 a.m. Players pay \$1 per person per hour, or 75 cents if three or four are at a table, a little higher tab than most poolrooms charge.

Bert Smith, a former exhibition three-cushion billiards player, says he expects to become "the first poolroom owner to make a salary in six figures." He and his wife run a room in Bethesda another in Langley Park, are building one in Queenstown and are planning a fourth for Marlow Heights.

Bowling establishment owners are cashing in on the billiards boom, too. Many bowling alleys have begun tearing apart expensive lanes (an automatic pin setter alone costs \$8,000) to make room for billiard tables, which require little overhead and bring in more money per invested dollar.

Pentagon City in Arlington combines bowling and billiards. Players bang balls around on 12 new gold-colored tables (costing \$1,500 each) while waiting for one of the 80 bowling lanes to open. A cashier issues sets of balls to players. There is no attendant in the billiard room, and people used to steal the



balls. Now players must leave their drivers' licenses at the cashier's counter as security.

Few poolrooms offer old-time straight billiards any more. "People don't have the patience to learn billiards now," says Joseph E. Mitchell, a Washington equipment dealer. "But pocket billiards is different; it's a fast game and there's lots of action."

Brunswick Billiards, at Irving and Fourteenth streets N.W., is the only public room left in Washington with old-time billiard tables, properly called carom tables. Even the University Club, among the last of the men's clubs in Washington to have billiards, plans to get rid of its carom table. Two older members used to use it until fairly recently, but one of the two left and the other has died.

The complaints of old-timers, who are horrified at the sight of the new-fangled tables covered with tangerine, gold and lavender instead of the traditional green baize, are echoed by some equipment dealers.

Pool rooms have a new look—bright as eye makeup.

Tables used to be built of heavy, virtually indestructible mahogany with carefully-tooled leather pockets and slate beds weighing 840 pounds. Now they come in aluminum with plastic-laminate rail tops, molded rubber pockets, and thin slate or even composition board beds.

"They're really sorry things," Mr. Mitchell says.

Despite—or because of—all the changes, poolroom owners see big things in the future. To get an idea of what a poolroom may look like in 10 years, they point to bowling places like Pentagon City, open 24 hours a day, with bars and restaurants and nurseries for children. Only, in place of the bowling lanes, they visualize scores of billiard tables with men, women and children large enough to hold a cue shooting pool happily at every one of them.