

by ROBERT BYRNE

The Boom You Hear Is Snooker

With an explosion of popularity that has sports fans gasping, the staid old game of snooker has captured England, showered its champions with fame and money, and sent waves of interest around the world.

IN TERMS OF television coverage, what is the biggest annual sporting event in the world? No, it's not the Rose Bowl, the Super Bowl, the World Series, the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament, or the Grand National Steeplechase. The answer would astound the average American sportswriter or sportscaster and would make Howard Cosell's toupee jump right off his head along with his eyebrows. The answer is the Embassy World Professional Snooker Tournament in Sheffield, England.

Never has a mere game been given such massive television coverage. BBC-TV (British Broadcasting Company) assigns 256 people to the event for seventeen days and broadcasts more than a hundred hours of *live* action...if you can call it action. I was in England in April of this year to cover the tournament and was amazed at the attention such a slow-paced game is given by the media. As an American accustomed to a daily dose of electronic violence, I found it eerie to watch the tube in the home of a London friend and see minute after long minute spent on two men exchanging carefully-thought-out safeties. The cameras studied their faces, their hands, and the position of the balls, and in contrast to sports coverage in the United States, the commentators generally kept their mouths shut unless they had something useful to say.

Before boarding a train to the tournament site in Sheffield, an industrial city north of London, I asked my friend's grey-haired grandmother why she glued herself to the screen. This was a woman who had never played the game and had only



Steve Davis, the first man to become a millionaire with a cue, exults after winning the world's greatest tournament for the third time in four years.

a vague understanding of the rules. "Because it is so serene," she replied. "No killing or bombs or car chases. Sometimes I turn off the sound and just watch the picture. The young men are handsome and the colors are restful."

Whatever her reasons for watching, she is not alone; the tournament attracts more than half of the British television audience. So handsome are the young men and so well dressed that more than fifty percent of the viewers are female.

Except for a few morning sessions early in the tournament, the 1,000-seat arena was filled three times a day. (By my own estimate, about a third of the paid admissions were female.) Without spending a penny on advertising, the promoters sold 30,000 tickets by mail a month in advance.

While snooker has been around for a hundred years in England and its former colonies world wide, it hasn't always been so popular. The boom started about six or seven years ago when corporations, finally persuaded by the impressive ratings for televised snooker, began sponsoring tournaments and BBC began covering them. Since then the number of major events, the yearly prize money totals, the number of televised hours, the size of the audience, the fame and fortune of the players, all have climbed together to breathtaking heights.

Ten years ago, England's four television channels broadcast about 20 hours of snooker a year. Starting in the '78-'79 season the incredible boom began and the yearly hours advanced to 55, then to 88, then to 120, 180, and 240. In the '83-'84 season, snooker players, snooker fans, and those who simply like to see well-dressed men bending over tables were able to enjoy 320 hours of snooker on television.

In 1976-'77 there were only two major tournaments, in '81-'82 there were eight, and in the season just past there were twelve. Next year, with the addition of a foreign tour that includes Canada, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand, countries where snooker is the game of choice, there will be twenty-four.

Yearly prize fund totals have grown from \$30,000 in '77-'78 to \$185,000 in '79-'80, \$530,000 in '81-'82, and to a stunning \$870,000 in '83-'84. Next season — hang on to your hat — the total will be around \$2,700,000, about ten percent of which will come from the foreign tour.