

Ahead of the nine ball

*Monk Costanzo put down his cards,
picked up a cue and blew out the pros*



Costanzo's victory came on two superb shots.

Warren Costanzo deals blackjack for a living in a Reno hotel. With his round, gentle face and thick salt-and-pepper hair, he looks as if he could be some kind of cleric, which may be why his friends call him Monk. It may also be because Costanzo takes to conversation as if he were a Trappist. A while ago he was a nationally known pool player, especially when the game was nine ball. In 1976 he won a thing called the Showboat Open on such a table in Las Vegas. Then Costanzo put away his cue until just nine days before the start of the first annual Nine Ball World Pro Am tournament in Las Vegas, an event he won last week by stroking, back-to-back, two perfectly magical shots to upset the 1979 Professional Pool Players World Open pocket billiards champion.

Almost as surprising as Costanzo's victory was the fact that the Nine Ball World Pro Am was held at all. The tournament was the brainchild of a pro player named Richie Florence, who couldn't find a backer until last December when he

phoned Mike Battle, the former New York Jets special-teams wild man. Battle now makes his living in oil and natural gas and from a 1,800-acre cattle ranch outside Amarillo, Texas. Florence laid it on him. With 36 million players, pool is the U.S.'s sixth-largest participant sport, he said. Nobody had ever run a class tournament with big money. If you offered a million-dollar purse you could charge a \$600 entry fee and draw at least 1,000 entries. Corporations would line up to be sponsors, and TV couldn't resist. Battle loved it. And so did his accountant.

But by September the vision had soured. Corporate contacts said sorry. Television said no, run it by yourself and we'll see how it goes. By Oct. 15, only 300 players had entered. At this point Battle Enterprises, Inc. was out between \$160,000 and \$200,000. Coming up with \$242,000 in prize money would break the bank. Then someone figured that if as many as 250 of the 300 entrants would accept a 50% cut in the prize money, the purse would still be the largest ever in pool and Battle Enterprises would at least have hope for the future.

So it was that a field of 254 convened at the Tropicana tennis pavilion in Las Vegas on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, about a quarter of them pros and the rest amateurs from 23 states and Canada. The reason amateurs were willing to put up \$600 to play against pros was that the format gave any good shooter a chance to win. In nine ball, the rules are simple. The balls, numbered 1 through 9, are racked in a diamond with the 9 in the middle. Players shoot the balls in rotation, the lowest numbered first. Whoever makes the 9 ball wins. As long as a player hits the lowest-numbered ball on the table first, whatever ball he might sink counts—including the 9. In Vegas, short matches—best of three games to a set, best of three sets to a match—also helped the amateur. So did playing on bar-sized 4'x8' tables, rather than regulation

4½'x9's. It was a single elimination, loser breaks. "It's a crap shoot on a pool table," said one pro.

By 1 p.m. on Wednesday all but eight players had crapped out, and four of the survivors were amateurs. Then Mike Sigel, the pocket billiards champion, put away two amateurs in his side of the bracket, and Costanzo knocked off two pros, including Keith McCready, considered by many to be the top player in the West.

For the final match three changes were made: play shifted to a 4½'x9' table, the sets became best-of-seven games, and the winner took the breaks. The changes all favored the better player, so it was no surprise that to bet on Sigel one had to lay 7 to 5. And early in the match, after Costanzo blew an easy shot, 7 to 5 seemed generous. "It's a stickup," yelled a fan. "Hey, Monk, got those four-by-nine blues?" cried another. Sigel won the first set 4-2, but it was when Costanzo scraped out set No. 2 that the crowd went wild. "Monk! Monk! Monk!" resounded in the pavilion.

In the final set Sigel led 3-2 and was just two shots away from victory. Costanzo had showed no emotion while Sigel built the lead. He only smoked a lot. Whenever Sigel made a critical shot, Monk would applaud politely. But he never said a word. Now the 8 and 9 balls were lying tough—pinned to a side rail about four inches apart. Sigel had just enough room to fit the cue ball between them and make the 8 in the corner—a difficult cut shot. For a moment he considered a safe. But no. He shot at the 8, and it dropped in the corner. The cue ball rolled back toward the side pocket on the rail where the 9 ball was situated. And it rolled. One moment it looked as if Sigel would have excellent position. The next it appeared that the cue ball might carry right to the pocket and drop for a scratch. Finally it stopped, perhaps a quarter inch from the hole. The cue ball was so deep into the pocket opening that the lip of the cushion blocked its path to the 9. Sigel closed one eye, studied the shot, smashed the butt of his stick on the floor and screamed, "I can't see

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it!" The best he could hope for was to graze a piece of the 9 and leave Costanzo a toughie. Which he did. When the two balls came to rest, the 9 was at one end of the table midway between the two corner pockets and only about four inches off the rail. The cue ball was way down at the other end, in just about the same place.

Now Costanzo seemed cooked. A safe was impossible. So was a bank. His only chance was to cut the 9 ball straight into the corner—a wafer-thin cut. A miss and it was out, goodbye and goodnight. Costanzo lined up the shot and then walked away. Up in the bleachers the experts were figuring the odds. Rough estimates: the chances of sinking the 9 were at least 3 to 1 against; under tournament pressure, 10 to 1 was closer; considering that the shot meant \$15,000—the winner got \$25,000, the runner-up \$10,000—it might be 20 or 30 to 1. An old hand turned to the row behind him and whispered, "Twelve-to-one for a hundred he misses." No one accepted.

Costanzo stepped up to the table again, bent over the cue ball and, with a quick, brisk stroke, drilled the 9 ball home. "Monk! Monk! Monk!" was the cry. Sigel looked at his shoes. The match was dead even with one game to go.

Costanzo studied the break. With all the power he could muster, he stroked his stick. The rack exploded, and instantly a cluster of balls burst toward a corner pocket to his left. Amazingly, the 9 ball led the way, stopping a few inches from the pocket. But then the rest of the cluster rumbled toward it, smashed into it and funneled it into the corner and down the hole.

"Monk! Monk! Monk!" could probably be heard way off in the casino. A friend leaped out of the bleachers, bear-hugged the winner and lifted him off the floor. A delirious circle formed around Costanzo, who was crying and gasping for breath. A good 10 minutes passed. Finally, security guards got to him and helped him toward a sofa, where an oxygen mask was strapped across his face. He had yet to say a word. When the mask was finally removed, Monk still was speechless. His eyes scanned the faces of a dozen friends and officials who stood around the sofa, looking gravely concerned, wondering if the first annual Nine Ball world champ was feeling O.K. Then Monk finally spoke: "Does anybody have a cigarette?"

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