

3-Ball Charlie

By
Jay L. Carlton

3-Ball Charlie flipped the coin and the young stranger called heads. "Heads it is," said Charlie, as he lifted the quarter from the green felt of the pool table. "You break the first game." Charlie reached for the rack. He rustled up the balls numbered one through nine, covered them with the rack then guided the pack taking care that the '1' ball was properly positioned in the center of the break spot. Once Charlie was satisfied that they were frozen together and properly placed he removed the rack, stepped away from the table and waited for the opponent's okay. The challenger double-checked the placing then nodded his approval.

Getting the all clear, 3-Ball Charlie walked back to the counter where his equipment lay. He unzipped his case, slipped out his 19 and a half ounce personalized Doug Patrick Custom Cue, 'The Rack Runner', from its sleeve and prepared it for his turn at the table, hoping he would get one. Afterall, the stranger came to town looking for him. It was quite obvious this hustler knew of 3-Ball Charlie's reputation. When Charlie asked what kind of stakes he had in mind, the stranger replied with a bracing tone, "How does five-hundred a game grab'ya?"

Charlie thought for a second. He glanced at his girlfriend and winked. How many times have they heard that sound over the years? It was meant to intimidate - to rattle him. Charlie thought of throwing it back in the hustler's face by saying that 'five-thousand sounded a lot better', but thought better of it. He didn't want to scare him off, not yet anyway. Instead, Charlie simply said, "Sounds about right."

Hustlers and road players didn't bother Charlie in the least. He went up against some of the best over the years. Many of his best friends were gamblers and stakehorses. Pool players, back-room card players and crap games were his way of life for many years. Charlie traveled the back roads and played every one-horse town from Maine to Montana. It was an exciting existence when you won to stay one jump ahead of bill collectors. Everyone was entitled to make an honest living. But Charlie took exception when they came after his bucks. He would give this young hustler a good lesson in humility.

It was no secret that Charles Champagne was the current Illinois State 9-Ball champion. He is only one of two players to repeat as such. His father was the other and that was over twenty years ago. In addition, Charlie took out the 'One-Pocket' championship once, and was 'Straight-Pool' champion once. No one has ever accused Charlie of ducking strong competition. That was a right-on fact. But, from the sound of the challenge from this road player, he

obviously didn't think too much of Charlie's reputation. And with Charlie that was as cool as the other side of the pillow.

3-Ball Charlie Champagne was one tough customer when it came to playing '9' ball. It was more than a coincidence that he literally grew up on a pool table. His father was the celebrated and original '3-Rack' Charlie who made his reputation by putting a stall in his matches after running three racks so as to keep the pigeons from flying the coop. His famous line was: "The longer they played the more potatoes I made."

All around the Chicago area, and point's east, many well-known players knew him as 'Champagne' Charlie, or 'Champagne' Charlie Champagne. So it was only natural that young Charles take up the game and follow in his famous father's footsteps.

There were a lot of famous stories and rumors about 3-Rack Charlie. Some were about the monster money action that took place in Johnston City, Illinois back in the 60's. Another was that he and the legendary Whitey Lassiter bummed around together several years before Charlie met his lovely bride to be and decided to settle down and raise a family. No one thought him serious about giving up the road and nightlife. In fact, many gamblers were so sure that he would be back in action within a year that several of them placed a five-thousand-dollar bounty on him. Charlie himself instigated several side bets to prove just how serious he was about retirement. Of course there was a time limit on the wagers made. One couldn't say, for instance, 20-years or something as ridiculous. Whatever the length of times agreed upon, Charlie collected on all of them.

3-Ball Charlie took a couple of easy swipes across the triangle tip with the Scuffer. A firm layer of blue-cube cue chalk followed. A small sheet of 400 extra fine sandpaper took care of whatever residue might have settled on the shaft.

"Slick as a newborn baby's rear end!" That voice came from behind the counter. It belonged to Miss Sunshine Pilot, Charlie's girlfriend and partner of the establishment. Everyone calls her Sunny. The last couple of years Sunny and Charlie decided not to travel as much and opened up a little place of their own. They call it The Pilot Light Bar. It has eight bar-boxes and Charlie runs leagues and tournaments to keep busy when road-players aren't coming around. Sunny smiled when Charlie winked. Charlie ordered a beer and tipped the waitress the rest of the five-dollar bill he laid on her tray. One onlooker at the bar offered to put up fifty if a bet could be had. "Sure thing," said Sunny. "You're covered."

The challenger broke open the pack sending the balls scurrying around the table. It produced a good even spread and two very close calls, but nothing fell. 3-Ball Charlie lit a

cigarette and pulled in a long drag. He released a steady stream of smoke aimed at the ceiling. He put the sandpaper aside and walked toward the bar-box. A quick assessment of the terrain was made. That was followed by a walk around the table. This is a 9-ball player's dream, he thought. Even a weak skill-level '3' couldn't screw this up. Charlie nods to Sunny, a signal that he has the situation in hand. Sunny moved back to the stranger that placed the 50-dollar bet.

“You wouldn't want to up the ante to a solid C-note, would you?”

The stranger laughed. "Not on your life, lady. The way those balls are situated, even I could get out. I'll settle for the fact that I've blown half a hundred, but I haven't completely blown my mind."

Sunny began to laugh along with the stranger. She introduced herself and reached out her hand. The stranger shook hands and introduced himself in return. Sunny has been in the bar business several years and was very good at sizing up first-time customers. His was the type that would fit in well with her regulars. He was a nice friendly sort with a good sense of humor. Sunny offered him a drink on the house. He accepted with a thank you.

Charlie was ready. He picked off the '1', the '2' and the '3' ball. Now it was his turn to psyche out his opponent. Even though this was a five hundred-dollar game, Charlie didn't hesitate. He grinned, then played a killer safety on the '4'. He walked to his place at the bar, sat down and waited. Sunny came over and nudged his arm. "You rascal," she whispered.

At the bar the stranger looked at the patron standing next to him. "What's this all about? He was out!" he said. "The balls are just laying there."

The man at the bar answered, "I know, but that's why they call him 3-Ball Charlie!"

The hustler took his place at the table. His expression told the story. He wasn't overly thrilled with the situation he was faced with. He pondered the predicament for a moment. He had two ways to go. After a few seconds he decided on the path he wanted the cue ball to travel. It would be a 3-rail kick. He missed hitting the '4' ball by a fraction. It may as well be by a car length, he thought. He ambled back to his spot at the bar.

3-Ball Charlie picked up the cue ball as he walked around the table. He strategically placed it near the '4' ball. He needed the perfect angle so as to get the position needed for the '5' and '6' balls. After he pocketed the '6', Charlie clipped the '7' running the cue ball off two rails. He watched as it married up behind the '9' ball for another safety. He was really playing the intimidation ploy for all its worth. The opponent looked around at the bar patron. Once again he said to the gentleman, "He was out. He could have run those three little balls. What kind of game is he playing!"

The customer leaning on the bar laughed and repeated what he had said earlier; "I know friend, but that's why they call him '3-Ball'. He never runs more than three balls at a time. A lot of players go half nuts trying to figure him out."

The challenger walked to the table. Obviously frustrated, this time he didn't so much as take aim. He fired a two-rail kick at the '7'. It was a good hit, but no luck. Nothing dropped.

Charlie got to the table and chalked his cue. Without hesitation he dropped in the '7', '8', and '9' balls for the win. The young hustler approached the bar-box. He already had the money in his fist. Disgusted, he flopped five C-notes on the table. Mumbling, he headed for the bar. "That's it for me. I don't mind losing, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna be humiliated again."

3-Ball Charlie Champagne picked up the five one hundred-dollar notes, looked at them and kind-a popped one a couple of times. He scanned the room and with that great sense of humor asks, "Sunny... who's next?"

Sunny Pilot glanced around. "Step up gents... don't be bashful!" She reached in the cooler for a beer and poured Charlie a celebratory drink. "No takers... then it's time for Happy-Hour."

If you would like to read more about 3-Ball Charlie and Sunny Pilot they will appear in the book "Billiards on Broadway".

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