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THE MAGAZINE FOR POOL PLAYERS

THE *Stroke* MAGAZINE



COLLECTIBLE CUES

*The World's Largest Exotic
Cue Collection*
by Elaine Smith

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New Fiction by Linda Durbin**

**Color Photos Of Some Of The Most
Valuable Cues In The World**

Limited-Edition, Collectors' Issue

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COLLECTIBLE CUES

The photos used in the following articles were graciously provided by the Glenn Family, owners of the world's largest rare cue collection

Editor's note: *The opinions on collectible cues expressed in this issue represent those of a cross section of collectors and dealers, and are in no way intended to promote or otherwise show favoritism to any particular cue maker. There are hundreds of cue makers throughout the world, most of whom make excellent cues, and we do not in any way wish to steer you away from those not mentioned. The future value of a cue is determined by its excellence in design, workmanship, hit and reliability. And these qualities can be seen in different ways by different people. Keep this in mind as you look for cues to collect, and, if you discover a little known cue maker whose work is first class, congratulations! You may have discovered the collectible cue of the future.*

THE LARGEST RARE CUE COLLECTION IN THE WORLD by Elaine Smith

Have you ever seen a Balabushka cue stick? A Gus Szamboti? A Rambo? For that matter, have you ever seen a Gina? A Tad? A Barry Szamboti? A Billy Stroud (Joss West)? A Richard Black? A Tim Scruggs? Have you ever *held* one?

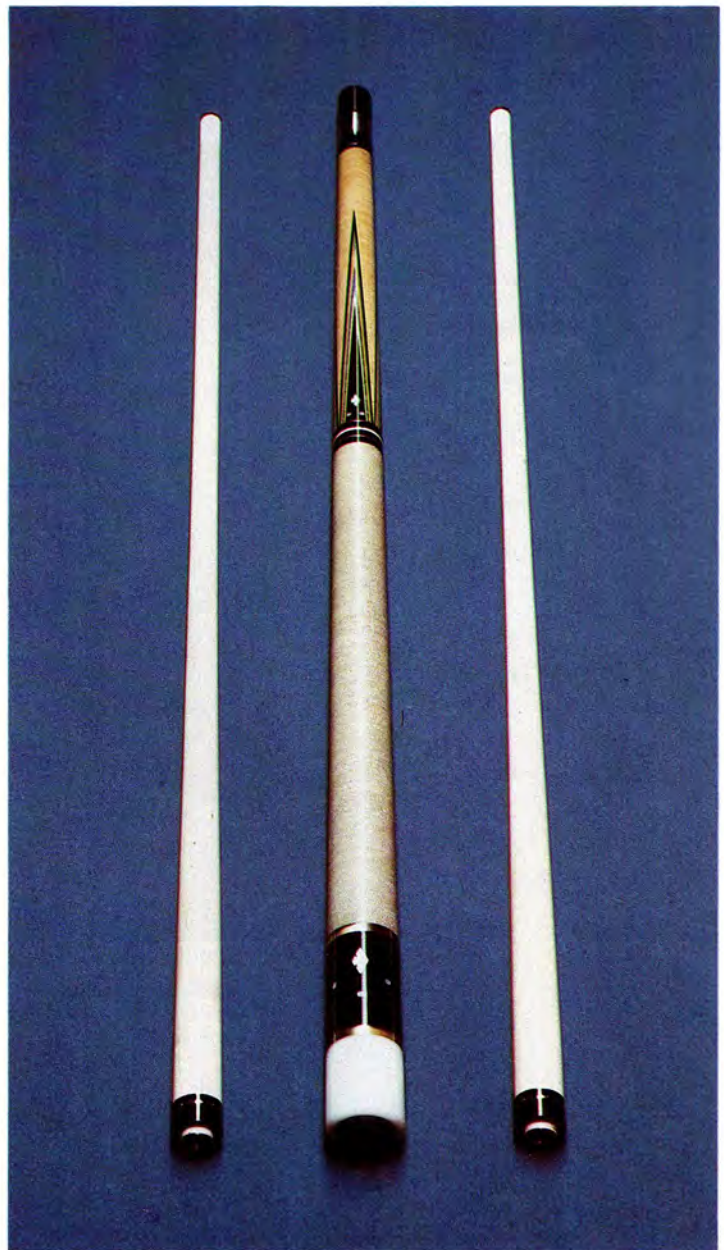
The Glenn family, based in Texas and Arizona, *owns* over thirty Balabushka cues, a couple of dozen cues made by Gus Szamboti, and half a dozen or so original Rambos. They also own a dozen old Ginas, six Tads, samples of Barry Szamboti cues, Billy Stroud cues, Richard Black cues, and many others. Even cue makers don't get to see so many of their own cues in the same place at the same time -- they finish one and ship it off to the owner.

The Glenn collection is an anomaly. It is the largest rare pool cue collection in the world and is kept in gun and business safes at large locksmith offices in various locations. Pete Glenn, father of four sons and one daughter who all like to play pool, was the initiator of the collection. In and around 1965, he used to buy sticks -- Rambos, basically -- and bring them home to the kids. It was like Christmas any time he brought one home, says Dennis Glenn. Steve (the eldest child and the one who is the best pool player), Denny (who was kind enough to grant me this interview), David, sister April, and Del all caught the collecting fever one way or another.

Denny had a Palmer cue, a very nice cue, he tells me. This was years ago. Fly Boy Jimmy Spears from Columbus owned a Balabushka. Fly Boy could play better with the Palmer, so he traded Denny his Balabushka for the Palmer. Denny was delighted, and fell in love with the Balabushka -- so much so that he wanted an original made for him alone.

In 1969, when Denny was eighteen, he made a trip to New York and asked George Balabushka to make a cue for him. George said he would. That he would make the finest cue stick ever made -- and it would cost Denny \$125. Denny didn't have the money and asked would George take as trade the Balabushka he already owned. George Balabushka laughed so hard he had to hang onto something to keep from falling on the floor with hilarity.

"I'm not a used car lot," he choked through his mirth. "I can't take the cue in trade."



One of only two built, this rare Balabushka's twin was originally made for Irving Crane

After he controlled his laughter, he wrote a note: *Please give this boy \$100 for this Balabushka cue. Signed, George Balabushka* and handed it to Denny. "Take this to any New York pool room, and you'll get your money," he said.

Denny never cashed in the note, but he got his original cue anyway and became friends with George Balabushka. They remained friends until George died in 1975. To save time and money, the Glenns often sent Rambos to Balabushka for him to make new cues out of.

Included in the Glenn collection is Buddy Hall's Balabushka. He won his first world championship while using it, then the cue went on to Keith McCready who played great pool with it, and then it came to Denny.

In Dallas, a few years ago, Buddy wanted to see his old Balabushka cue. He wanted it back and asked Denny what he would take for it. Denny said the family didn't sell cues.

"Will you take a new Cadillac for it?" Buddy asked.

"No," said Denny, "Will you teach me to play 9-ball for it?"

"I will," Buddy said, "I'll make you a champ."

But Denny wouldn't sell.

By the way, Buddy now has his own line of limited-edition cues, made by Bludworth Custom Cues in Houston, Texas, and from all reports, they are proving to be of great interest to collectors and players alike.

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A rare, elaborately inlaid Szamboti, built for Pete (papa) Glenn in 1984.

Denny's special interest is in collecting cues from famous players. Ninety percent of the cues in the Glenn collection came from champions, and there are too many to list here. Denny talked to Buddy Hall and a few other famous players recently and got permission to mention them. For example, along with the cue owned by Buddy Hall, other cues with history in the Glenn collection are Billy Incardona's Balabushka, Ronnie Allen's Balabushka and his Gina, a cue previously owned by Geraldine Titcomb, and a number of cues once owned by Jersey Red.

How do they acquire these cues?

Pete Glenn travels a lot, all over, getting cues. And all the Glenns are interested in the collection and work at it.

But it's an expensive hobby. In the 60s, they could get a cue for \$200, but, in these more costly days, they have paid ten- to twelve-thousand dollars for one. They've been offered blank checks for some of the items in their collection, but as Denny says, they don't sell cues.

There is an international interest for them to display their cues, and talks are on-going with famous brewers and players and businesses to do just that. Today, however, the Glenn family collection is not offered for display, except in rare cases. "If Jersey Red is ever giving an exhibition," says Dennis, "we will allow our cues to be displayed in conjunction with his show. This, however, is presently the only instance in which we will display our cues." This exception, he says, is made because of the family's tremendous respect for good friend Jersey Red, "the greatest all around player in the history of the game."

When I asked Denny how one could go about beginning a cue collection, he told he that when he was a kid, Rambo, Balabushka, and Szamboti were alive and making cues, and it was easier to get them. Today, your best bet is to look for those builders who are producing a limited number of high-quality cues by hand.

If you want to begin a collection of famous maker's cues, Denny tells us that no one has ever made a better cue than Billy Stroud of Joss West. "He [Stroud] is into changes that will astonish everyone," Denny says. "His

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new cues are--" Here Denny comes up against the deficiency of the English language and is at a loss for words. He finally finishes with, "astonishing. His new cues are astonishing."

Richard Black, Denny says, is one of the finest cuemakers building today, and anyone who hasn't collected him should get in touch with him immediately. Just ask Steve Mizerak. The Miz, it is said, attributes his revitalized career to his Black Custom cue, a cue he has played with for five years, and one he refuses to even let another player hold.

Denny is getting Barry Szaboti cues as fast as he can. He had doubts that anyone could surpass Gus in workmanship, but he believes Barry will, and will go into areas that no one will believe. He says Gus Szaboti cues are more valuable than Barry Szaboti cues simply because Gus is dead.

Ernie Gutierrez, maker of Gina cues, is a genius, Denny says. Ernie always made the most beautiful cues in the world, but his new work makes the old work look like he was just fooling around then. Like the old work was just practice, and now he's serious.

"I can't say enough good about those four," Denny says.

Just behind them, and on the way up, are Tim Scruggs who is doing beautiful work. Billy Schick who will surprise you pleasantly. Jerry Franklin of South West cues in Las Vegas who makes the only cue that players will put down a Balabushka to play with. And there's a new guy in Dallas, Jack Potter of Libra Cues. "Everything I've heard about him is good," Denny says.

One thing, however, should be kept in mind. That is that new cue makers are coming along all the time, and the cue maker whose name is unknown today, could be the Balabushka of tomorrow. If you intend to collect, keep an eye out for cues with excellent workmanship, precise inlay work, and a great hit.

If you want to collect cues, Denny gives sound advice, and here are some things you should be sure of. 1) Is the cue truly custom made -- a limited availability? 2) Does the cuemaker have a shop full of people? Or is his work personal? A helper to turn down rough

CONTINUED

Editor's Note: Nowadays, according to several sources, it's cues from Barry Szaboti, Gina, Tad, Richard Black, Tim Scruggs, Joe Porper, Schon, Bill Stroud, Paul Mottey, Jerry Franklin, Libra, David Kersenbrock and others too numerous to mention, that could provide the backbone of a collection. Also, some of the high-end cues from the major builders, such as McDermott, Meucci, Joss (East), and Viking will no doubt rise in value as the years pass. Or you could collect cues from famous people, or cues with distinguished histories. Some up-and-coming cue makers we hear positive comments on are Mike Wheeler, Rick Howard (Mace Custom Cues), Wayne Gunn, Mike Johnson (Jensen Cues), Randall Fry, and Peterson. But be careful not to limit yourself to known makers, or those mentioned here. There are bound to be excellent builders we have forgotten to mention, or of whom we have not yet heard. Look at every cue you can and make a judgment based on the workmanship, and -- with the help of a pro player -- the hit.

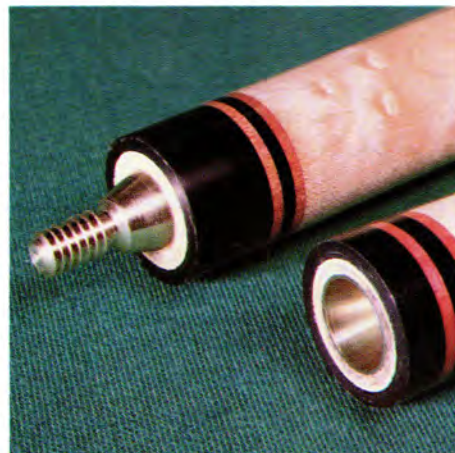
COLLECTORS TAKE NOTE

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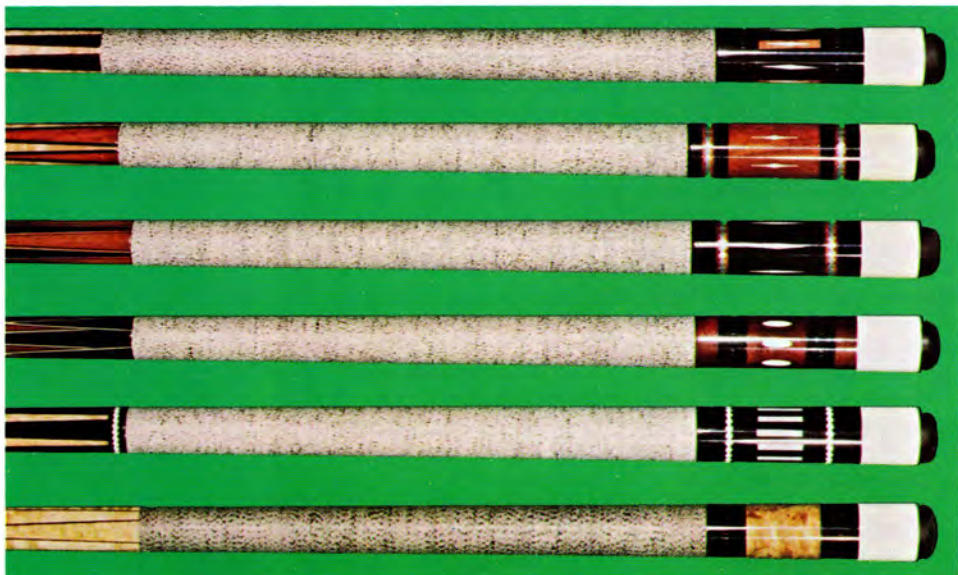


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Shown here are a few examples of the limited number of cues Joe has built. He plans to build no more than 75 cues each year, with no two exactly alike, so collectors and players will find Joe's cues to be not only the best playing, but among the most valuable in years to come.



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The cue on the left is a Tad, originally made for Jersey Red. On the right is the cue built by Billy McDaniels for James Coburn to use in the movie, *The Baltimore Bullet*.

wood is acceptable, but many cuemakers never put their hands on the cues sold under their names. These cues aren't collectible items. Gus Szamboti, for example, rarely let anyone into his shop, and no one ever touched his lathe or the bed of the lathe. Barry is following in his father's footsteps on that point.] 3) Is there something about the cue to make it different? a) the design of it, b) who owned it previously, c) who the cue was made for, d) the history of the cue.

When you collect a cue, you should always try to get the original case, Denny continues, and you should know the cue's history or send it to someone who can verify it as authentic -- but be sure you send it to someone who will return it! There are 26 ways to verify authenticity, but it is still difficult. Balabushka, for instance, didn't always do the same thing.

Denny also tells us that when you have a cue made, you should ask the maker to do something special and to document the stick. Get weight, balance points, length, and so on. Also, if you can, get any sketches or ideas jotted by the cuemaker in the early stages -- any notes made on the construction of your particular cue. After you get a cue from a cuemaker, always phone and thank the maker for it. Keep up good relations, it pays off in the long run.

Written references are important if you buy an old cue. Gus Szamboti would spend an hour on the phone with you, deciding on how to make a cue, but after it was finished, he would say over the phone only, "It's the nuts." And it always was! But in letters, he would write how the cue was made, and how he did it. Get everything you can.

People often send Denny Glenn cues for identification and/or verification. He says that if you care to phone him at 713-666-6600, he would be happy to answer questions and help out any neophyte collector.

So you don't have any valuable cues at the moment, you say. Or you have only one, and don't see the possibility of developing a decent selection. The Glenns have been in the business of collecting for just over a quarter of a century -- but now they have the largest collection in the world. What are you planning on doing for the next twenty-five or so years?



JUST HOW VALUABLE ARE COLLECTIBLE CUES?

According to Dennis Glenn, the value of a particular cue is contingent on several things. If a cue is one of only a few made, this can be a definite plus, but other factors are also important. Who a cue was made for, who has owned and played with the cue, what tournaments were won with it, and other historical facts about a cue can be very significant. Documentation, such as numbers, signatures or dates on the cue, and letters or photos testifying to the cue's uniqueness, can add to the value as well. Also, the condition a cue is in, the amount and quality of the inlay work, and the value of the materials used can have an effect on the price a collector will pay.

Dennis says that were he selling an individual cue, the asking price would be quite handsome, but would be nothing compared to the value of the cue as part of a huge collection like the Glenns have. For this reason, a collector should do just that: collect. Instead of constantly buying, selling and trading (as many players and would-be collectors do today), a better long-term plan might be to accumulate a large number of valuable cues before putting them on the market as a collection, instead of individually.

As an example of the value of some collectible cues, the cue you see on the cover of this magazine would probably sell for \$30,000.00 to \$40,000.00 (if it were for sale). This cue is singularly unique because it is an early (1977) Gus Szamboti, with a one-of-a-kind, matching Fellini case. Others in the Glenn collection -- for instance, one of the Balabushkas or Szambotis -- might have sold for \$8,000.00 to \$12,000.00 last week, but because these cues often increase in value quite rapidly, Dennis cannot put a solid figure on any particular item in the collection.

The Glenns have been offered as much as \$30,000.00 for an individual cue, however, they are not in the business of selling, only collecting. They have, at times, traded or sold cues in order to replace them with others more unique to the collection, however, this was only to increase the collection's value by making it more diverse.

To give you an idea of the value of the Glenn collection, we can tell you that it is presently insured for \$1.4 million, and that this figure represents an increase of some 40% over what it was insured for shortly before the death of Gus Szamboti some two years ago.

BUT ARE COLLECTIBLE CUES REALLY A GOOD INVESTMENT?

In the world of investments, it appears that collectible cues could be one of the best going right now. According to Dennis, there are several cue makers who could make a cue tomorrow for \$5,000.00, that will almost instantly increase in value. This is because, to have another one made, even if you could get the builder to make an identical cue, would take months, or even years. A custom cue, recently built by a top builder, will often be worth at least 20% to 40% more than its initial selling price almost immediately upon delivery. This is why cue dealers can (and do) sell brand new cues at prices above what the builder charges, and why people are willing to pay the price.

If you see a particular cue you want, one that was built by a well-known custom builder, it is likely that the cue you are looking at will not be duplicated, so you have no choice but to pay what a dealer asks. Not only that, but if you decide to order a cue yourself, you must be willing to wait, and many players and collectors will buy at a higher price rather than wait months or years to receive their cues.

It is this sort of instant rise in value that makes collecting cues a profitable enterprise.

If you look at other investments, such as CDs or stocks, there will (hopefully) be a certain percentage increase in



Two Balabushkas, with original shipping boxes

value over time, which should translate into a yearly increase in that investment's value for you. However, with a custom cue, bought from the maker, you immediately see a substantial increase in value, plus an incremental rise in value as the years pass.

Says Dennis: "If I receive a new \$5,000.00 custom cue tomorrow, built by one of the more reputable builders, it will immediately be worth about \$1,500.00 more than what I paid. Plus, it will continue to appreciate with time. And this is just with living cue makers. To give you an idea of what happens after a cue maker dies, look at a fairly standard Gus Szamboti that sold for \$1,000.00 two years ago. That cue would sell today for about \$3,000.00, which represents a 200% increase in value in just two years. Not many investments can provide even a fraction of this return, and we are only talking about an average Szamboti. If you take one of his cues that has a great deal of ivory, or is in some other way unique enough to have sold for \$2,500.00 new, that cue may be worth as much as \$12,500.00 today. And this represents nearly a 500% increase in value."

It is easy to see that carefully collecting cues can be much more profitable than many other investment avenues. When compared to an investment that may return around 10% per year, it would take nearly 16 years of compounded interest to equal the 500% appreciation a unique Szamboti might have brought in around two years. Plus, that cue would continue to increase in value as the years pass.

As we mentioned, a cue's value is based on many factors, including its uniqueness, the number made by the builder, who owned the cue, what tournaments were won with the cue, and several other things. One of these value factors can be the amount of rare substances and intricate inlay work found in a cue, however, this is not often the central factor effecting the cue's value. For instance, a Balabushka made for Willie Mosconi, even if simple in design, would be worth a great deal more than other, more heavily inlaid, models.

WHY, THEN, HAVEN'T CUES BECOME MAINSTREAM COLLECTOR'S ITEMS?

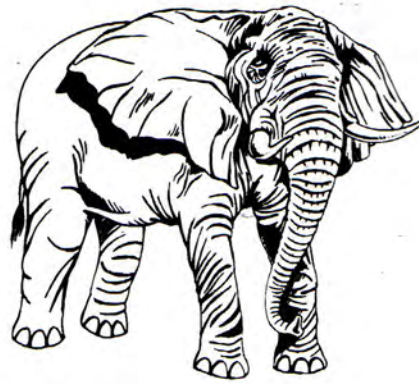
Most probably, the reason cues have not yet been seen at the famous art and antique auctions, is that the billiard industry is relatively obscure, and little is known of cues outside a fairly small group of players, industry people and collectors. Another reason is that custom cue building is a relatively recent phenomenon, consequently there are few valuable cues to be found.

"You have to understand," says Dennis, "that it was Rambo who, in the 1950s, made the first decent cue, and that even these were not up to today's standards of hit and feel. No cues before that are considered by today's players to be of value except as collectible items. Actually, it amazes me that the players back then were able to do what they did with such primitive cues."

"After Rambo came Balabushka, Paradise, Ernie [Gutierrez], and a few others who began improving on the design, quality and play of the pool cue, and who made cues that were of great value to the players. However, if you look at the fact that Balabushka and Gus Szamboti only made approximately 1,200 cues each, and that many of these have been lost, destroyed, or are sitting in someone's closet, without them even knowing what they have, you can see that the number of cues valuable enough to be considered by the major art auctions and collectors is miniscule."

BUT THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS

The fact that the major auctions and collectors have not yet picked up on this unique and valuable area of collecting, means that we, the billiard enthusiasts of the world, are in a good position to develop cue collections of great value. Once the pool cue is recognized for its real value in the world of art and collectibles, you can be sure that prices will rise considerable, and that the quality cues we buy today will be worth far more in the future.




**WHITE
GOLD;
OR
WHERE
TUSK
MEETS
CUE**

by Linda Durbin

Almost as long as there have been pool cues, ivory has been used in and on them. In Pauline Masterton's "Historical Cue Trips" (Vol. 1, #3, p. 14 THE SNAP) she notes that the billiard mace of the 1600s (a stick with a club-like head, with which you pushed rather than stroked the ball) was "slightly curved, with its club-head shod with ivory where it contacted the ball." Whether this was intended as decoration or protection for the head she doesn't say, but both uses have existed, and still exist, between ivory and pool cue.

For years, the material of choice for ferrules was ivory. The ferrule is that part of the stick down near the tip, usually one-half to one-and-a-half inches long, that serves to protect the wood of the shaft by absorbing the punishment of repeated blows as cuestick meets cueball. Though a brittle material, if properly selected and cut, ivory can, because of its inherent stiffness, firm up the hit of an otherwise springy cue. Besides, there's something about the look of ivory -- the siren call of a creamy,

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fine-grained lustre. The use of ivory for inlays and other decorative work increases the value of an already fine piece of work.

Necessitated, in part, by international laws against poaching of African elephants (presently the chief source of the 'white gold' on the world market), ivory is being replaced, in many instances, by a variety of materials. Non-ivory ferrules run the gamut from simple plastics to 'fiber' to ABS to phenolic resins. Aliges (pronounced 'ages') and jewelry-grade Micarta are two phenolic resins that provide a suitable substitute for ivory in ferrules.

The elephant has been killed for its ivory at least since the time of the Holy Roman Empire. China imported African ivory 1300 years ago. The elephant in southern Africa was decimated by poaching for the ivory trade well before 1900. During the 19th century, the elephant population was reduced to even fewer animals than exist today. At that time, tightened controls on hunting, and establishment of protected areas, enabled the African elephant to come back from the brink of destruction.

It would seem, then, that though consistently killed for its ivory down through history, the elephant is still around. So why the great flap today? Why the worldwide ban on the trade of ivory? Just what is the situation, and how much impact on the cue industry can we expect the ivory ban to have?

The African Elephant Conservation Act, signed into law on October 7, 1988, in essence imposed sanctions on countries dealing in 'illegal' ivory (as distinguished, at that time, from 'legal' ivory -- the product of herd-culling and natural elephant deaths). This was not a ban on trade in ivory. Not yet.

In January of 1990 a moratorium on international trade in ivory from African elephants went into effect. Seven nations declined to honor the ban: Botswana, China, Malawi, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Surprisingly enough, Japan, probably the largest market in the world for ivory, and a nation not exactly known for being ecology-responsive, did agree to the ban. And, in January of 1991 China joined in.

Why such a drastic move?

In researching this article, I talked to several of the top cue makers in the country, from California to Texas to Maryland to Florida. I received the impression that, for those who wanted to use ivory in their cues, the ban had not set any obstacles in their way. In some cases this was because they already had a large enough stock of pre-ban ivory on hand. After all, very little of the material is used in a single cue. Those cue makers who said they would go on using ivory in their cues were talking about a pre-existing stock of the stuff. Others who had ivory on hand indicated they probably would not use it, but did not feel it would adversely affect their business.

However, in my research, I also got the feeling that reports of the catastrophic nature of the poaching situation were greatly exaggerated. I couldn't help wondering if this was another case of denying reality -- like saying the Holocaust never really happened -- or if, indeed, the severity of the effect on the total number of African elephants left had been blown out of all proportion.

This is not a question that will be answered in this article. However, all the research I did pointed to the fact that throughout Africa, the pressures of human population growth (with its attendant loss of wildlife habitat) and increased poaching in answer to increased human greed has mounted exponentially and that the fate of all wildlife in Africa has been affected by those pressures. And there are just too many reports from too many disparate sources to doubt that elephants have been illegally slaughtered -- not just in the wild, but from within protected areas as well.

The ban on ivory seems to be working, in terms of increased numbers of elephants in some areas of Africa and a decrease in poaching, but it is still too early to claim a total victory. What is clear is that ban or no ban, there has been little effect on the cue industry.

THE \$85,000.00 CUE STICK

According to several sources, the highest price ever paid for a cue stick involved Jim "King James" Rempe, and his "King James" cue, custom made by Bob Meucci. The cue, which is loaded with ivory and is one of the most elaborate ever made by Meucci, was reportedly sold to a Japanese collector for \$17,000.00, who almost immediately turned around and sold it for \$85,000.00. There is no absolute documentation of this transaction, but the story is well known among players and collectors, and, if true, represents the largest amount of money ever paid for a single cue stick.

CARING FOR COLLECTIBLE CUES

The rules for protecting collectible cues are basically the same as those for protecting any cue of value. Of course it is obvious that security should be of utmost concern, and that your cues should be protected from theft, fire and other means of damage or destruction. Beyond this, your cues should always be stored in super hard cases, and the cases should be kept laying flat. Do not store cues standing up, either in or out of their cases. Also, they should be kept in a temperature and humidity controlled environment, and should never be exposed to extreme heat, cold or moisture.

If you must travel with your valuable cues, never leave them in a car with the windows rolled up -- or down, for that matter. In the first place, sealed cars can get extremely hot, and in the second, if you leave the windows rolled down, you shouldn't expect to find your cue when you return to your car. Also, do not leave cues in the trunk of your car for prolonged periods, as the temperature and humidity can become extreme in such environments.

Dennis Glenn tells us there is a new cue storage and carrying system coming out soon that represents the ultimate in protection. The system involves rigid plastic sleeves, that hold shafts and butts separately and snugly. These tubes can then be incorporated into a system for storing or carrying cues with any number of shafts or butts. According to Dennis, this system, which is now awaiting patent approval, is the best he has ever seen for protecting cues, in that it holds cue halves perfectly straight, allowing no chance for them to lay or lean in such a way as to warp or become damaged.

"I've ordered several dozen of these sleeves," he says, "and I believe that all collectors in the future will be using them. The sleeves are so well built that you can even put them inside a soft case and still have excellent protection for your shafts."

The system is being produced by John Hager, out of Dallas, Texas, and should be on the general market soon. Stay tuned, and we'll let you know when it becomes available.

VERIFYING THE AUTHENTICITY OF COLLECTIBLE CUES

If you've ever been approached in a pool room with a good deal on what the seller says is a valuable, famous cue, you probably understand the conflicting feelings this can bring on. On the one hand, you may be looking at the deal of a lifetime. On the other, you may be looking at the rip-off of the week. How do you tell the difference? Is it a real Balabushka, or is just a cue that looks like one? For that matter, what does a real Balabushka look like?

The answers to these questions are not easy. Even the best of collectors and dealers will tell you that absolute

verification of a famous cue is nearly impossible. Professionals in the verification business can check numerous aspects of a cue, and verify that it has the exact construction, inlay work, wrap, measurements, etc., used by a particular cue maker. Some professionals even offer an X-ray service, which allows examination of the interior of the cue without harming it. However, even with all these safeguards, it could be that the cue is only a perfect copy.

Of course, the best way to be sure you are getting the real thing is to deal with a reputable cue collector or dealer. Those who advertise their wares, offer authenticity guarantees, and maintain reputations for honesty, are your best bet. However, it is not always possible to do this, especially if you find a "real buy" from someone you do not know personally, or by reputation.

In order to shed some light on this problem, we consulted with our resident cue expert, John McChesney, owner of Champs Billiards, and one of the country's most respected cue dealers. John buys and sells every type





The late, Gus Szamboti in his shop

of cue known, and has held in his hands numerous examples cues built by all the famous cue makers. His advice may be of some assistance to those who are interested in collecting, however, he cautions that absolute identification of a cue is often impossible.

Because many of the suggestions stated below for preliminarily identifying various cues involve terms and aspects that only a cue builder or repairman will understand, you should consult with someone who is familiar with these before purchasing any valuable cue. And, if you are making a substantial investment, it is a good idea to have the cue you intend to buy professionally verified in writing before making any purchase.

That said, here, in John's own words, are a few pointers and some pertinent facts concerning counterfeit cues and ways to at least preliminarily tell a fake from the real thing.

THE PROBLEM BEGINS:

Let me preface this by saying that, because of THE COLOR OF MONEY, and the name Balabushka becoming known through that movie (and the normal greed of human beings) there came a time when some unscrupulous people (some cue makers, and some who employed cue makers) learned that they could create cues that could be passed as those of dead cue makers. For a time, the problem was outrageous, and there were quite a few of these copies going around.

As a result of this, it is now very difficult to know what you have. There are, however, people throughout the country who know the specifications for various cues -- shaft and butt measurements, joint types, inlay designs, etc. -- and they can verify that the cue they are looking at meets the specifications used by a certain cue maker. Without supporting evidence, however, they still may not be able to verify that a cue is an authentic original, only that it was built in exactly the same way as an original.

For these reasons, the first thing you should look for when buying an expensive, collectible cue, is some kind of supporting evidence for its authenticity. Some of the support materials you should ask for are: letters from the cue maker or from former owners; photos; original shipping boxes; or documents of authentication from a professional cue collector or dealer. Unfortunately, with the great majority of collectible cues, such support material is not available, and, in these cases, you are faced with a choice: do you take a chance based on visual identification, or do you send the cue to a professional for verification?

My advice, especially if you are spending \$1,000.00 or more, is to opt for the latter, and be as sure as possible of the cue's authenticity. There are, however, a few preliminary things you can look for to give you an idea of whether it is even worth it to spend the money for professional verification.

GENERAL POINTERS:

1) Be suspicious of any cue that someone claims is a Balabushka, a Gus Szamboti, or any other famous older cue, if it looks brand new. Of course, if the seller has the original shipping box, a letter from the builder, photos, etc., it is possible that they bought the cue and never used it, so it could look brand new. But remember, most of these cues, at least early on, were bought by players and were played with.

2) Be wary of anyone selling a famous maker's cue far below the going market price. Consult with your local repairman, room owner, or someone you trust, who is in a position to know the present market value of the cue.

3) Older cues (if they have the original wraps) will usually have a thinner linen in the wrap than what you see today. This linen was often white with green specks, and felt smoother than the linen used today. Also, the early builders often signed, dated or otherwise identified their cues under the wrap. However, to discover this you would need to unwrap the cue, thus destroying some of its originality.

4) Older cues often had thicker butts than newer cues, but this is not an absolute, as some early cues did have thin butts.

These pointers are, of course, only general, and it is possible a valuable, older cue could meet none of these criteria. However, the more of these aspects you do not see in a cue purported to be an old, valuable, collector's item, the more suspicious you should become.

POINTERS FOR IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC CUES:

BALABUSHKA: Since the most copied and counterfeited cue is a Balabushka, more effort has been spent in the industry on ways to spot fakes of this famous cue maker's work. Here are several things to have your local repairman or builder look for when considering purchase of a cue someone claims is a Balabushka. 1) The first thing to look for is whether the joint pin is a 5/16, 14. This means that the joint screw is 5/16" in diameter, with 14 threads per inch. Balabushka's pins were also a little bit longer than you would see on, say, a Szamboti. And, though they used the same type of joint pin, Balabushka's joints were often a little bit larger than Szamboti's, so the shafts would not interchange between the two makes exactly.

2) Some of Balabushka's early cues were made very similar to Rambo's, in that they had an ivory butt cap, a four-point, "Titlist" butt, and a brass sleeved joint

3) Later Balabushkas incorporated points from Burton Spain, silver rings in the joint collars, and the pilot in the shafts (the brass insert) came up and wrapped over (if you turn the shaft sideways, you see part brass and part wood), similar to a Szamboti.

4) A typical Balabushka was a four-point, four-veneer cue, with a silver ring, black phenolic joint bands, a stainless-steel joint, and a long pin, rounded at the end.

5) In the butts of many Balabushkas, you can find a piece called a "tang." This was an insert between the rubber bumper and the weight bolt, inside the butt end of the cue. This tang was of certain dimensions that are known to many collectors and cue makers.

6) Balabushka always used a brown rubber bumper in his butts.

7) Balabushka's points were generally very wide where they began above the wrap, and were generally long, the actual "point" coming closer to the joint than most cues made today.

GUS SZAMBOTI: The best way to protect against buying a counterfeit Gus Szamboti cue is to send it to Barry Szamboti for verification. Barry is by far the best authority on his father's cues. Other than this, there are only a couple of things you can look for when verifying a Szamboti.

1) Some Szambotis had the initials "G.S." inscribed in the butt cap. These initials could, of course, be forged, so be aware of this possibility.

2) It is rumored that Gus used an Indian head nickel for joint rings, because it had just the right alloy composition and was inexpensive. However, this is only a rumor. If true, a chemist may be able to determine if the joint rings are of the right alloy.

TAD: Tad always used a 5/16, 18 pin, with the pin being tapered and flattened on the end, similar to a Gina.

RAMBO: Rambo signed many of his cues, but he made so many types of cues that they are almost unidentifiable if not signed. He signed them on the butt cap and sometimes in the points.

EDITOR'S NOTE: John charges \$135.00 for X-ray cue verification, with supporting documentation. For visual identification only, he charges \$35.00, plus shipping both ways. John can be contacted at: 1-800-235-4714. Or you can write him at: Champs Billiards, Box 504, Addison, TX 75001.

Barry Szamboti can be contacted at: (215) 757-7280.

