

EXCLAMATION POINT!

Just in case there was any doubt, Jeanette Lee punctuated her rise to No. 1 by winning the WPBA's year-ending Connelly National 9-Ball Championship.

by MIKE PANOZZO

FOR AN INSTANT, the "Great Race" looked as though it would end in a "did-not-finish."

As was the case in 1993, the Women's Professional Billiard Association Classic Tour points title and player of the year crowns hinged on the final tour event of the year — the Connelly Billiards National 9-Ball Championship. But unlike '93, when Robin Bell and Loree Jon Jones rolled through the field and into the tournament's semi-final (with Jones winning and Bell finishing third), '94 front-runners Vivian Villarreal and Jeanette Lee laid early-round eggs, threatening to reduce the much-anticipated tour points decision to a no-contest.

Only 40 players entered the early-December tour finale — one of the WPBA's smallest fields in '94 — which was staged literally at "the home office in Sioux City, Iowa," *a la David Letterman*. (The WPBA recently moved its administrative offices to Sioux City, with former Billiard Congress of America director and Sioux City native Mark Cord taking over as WPBA executive director.)

Hardly fitting the Classic Tour's "top-25 markets" formula, the Connelly Billiards Nationals was nonetheless a local success. An engaging wood-floored basement ballroom in The Bellevue Apartments building served as the event's site, and in the third round both Villarreal and Lee played as if their leases were about to expire. On three occasions Lee failed to run out with cue ball-in-hand and three or fewer object balls remaining during a 9-6 loss to Nikki Benish. And Villarreal made just enough mistakes to allow Mary Guarino to pull out a 9-8 victory.

Maintaining the slimmest of leads in



Lee wasn't reaching when she declared in '93 that she was gunning for No. 1.

the yearlong tour points rankings, Villarreal needed only to tie Lee in Sioux City to secure the WPBA points title. But in her second loser's bracket match, the three-time '94 Classic Tour winner suffered another heartbreaking loss, this time to Ewa Mataya-Laurance, 9-8. Lee, meanwhile, bested Belinda Bearden, 9-4, and Guarino, 9-7, to move into a flat-footed tie with Villarreal.

Lee's goal of ascending to the top of the WPBA charts was realized when she toppled reigning world champion Mataya-Laurance, 9-3, assuring herself no worse than third place in the tournament.

"I was very ambitious this year," a relieved Lee admitted. "I didn't play well against Nikki, but I wasn't ready to give up my dream just yet. Then I got into gear against Belinda. I was trying to be too smart, too cautious. I'm sure the pressure had something to do with that."

With her No. 1 objective solidified, Lee shifted her focus to the Main Event and zeroed in on what would be her *fifth* WPBA tour title of the year.

Meanwhile, jaunting merrily through the winners' bracket were Jones and Bell — arguably the WPBA's toughest competitors. Bell, with two Classic Tour titles, the \$20,000 Gordon's Championship and a pair of recent second-place finishes, cruised to lopsided wins over Julie Nogiec (9-6), Laura Smith (9-4) and Mataya-Laurance (9-4) in the early going. A narrow 9-8 win over Guarino moved her into the winner's bracket finale against Jones. Jones, titleless in '94 after a six-title year in '93, established herself early as the player to beat in Sioux City. Jones pounded Christie Stroud, 9-6, in her opening match, then outlasted Kerry Hartsfield, 9-8. From there, the 29-year-old New Jersey native bounced Bearden, 9-5, and whitewashed Benish, 9-0.