



"Black Widow"  
Jeanette Lee:  
highest-profile  
female player.

## Bank Shot

**GAMES** | Who plays pool? Sharks and hustlers, still. But more and more players are young, white-collar and curvaceous.

BY LYNN COOK

**F**OR CENTURIES CUE SPORTS HAVE been the mainstay of scoundrels, rogues and ne'er-do-wells. Now, though, at such posh parlors as Chalkers in San Francisco and Amsterdam Billiard Clubs in New York, a new generation of young, upscale players, including many women, wield \$25,000 Balabushka cues. Between games they snack on Brie. Is nothing sacred?

Though seedy storefronts still get the lion's share of business in the highly fragmented \$1 billion billiards industry, well-appointed nightclubs are on the rise. Sue Backman and Peter Hangarter launched the first Chalkers in 1990 in a converted candy factory in Emeryville, Calif. Antique opalescent lamps hung over refurbished 1920s Brunswick tables, covered with worsted wool so fine a green suit could be cut from it.

Today at Chalkers' downtown San Francisco location, well-dressed customers pack the club after work. The male-to-female ratio runs 60-40. A full-service restaurant turns out peppered pork pâté and Ahi tuna, delivered right to the pool table.

On West 21st Street in New York City, former Chelsea Billiards recently reopened as Slate—Manhattan's first billiards club-cum-full-service restaurant—thanks to a \$1.8 million makeover by owner Telly Hatzigeorgiou. Business at rival Amsterdam Billiard Clubs is so good its owners are scouting for another location, near Wall Street. Amsterdam's owners, Greg and Ethan Hunt and comedian David Brenner, revamped the original club on West 77th Street in 1999, adding brick interiors and a massive fireplace that roars all year round. A second location opened in 1996 on East 86th Street. Patrons include actor Paul Sorvino and comic Jerry Seinfeld.

Thanks largely to the blandishments of such establishments, female participation in the game is up almost 20% (from 11.7 million in 1987 to 13.9 million in 1999). Though the men's Pro Billiards Tour collapsed in 1997 after Camel Cigarettes withdrew sponsorship, the Women's Professional Billiards Association (WPBA) is going strong. Prize money—up to \$90,000 per tournament—is provided by Brunswick

## Widowmakers: Five Tips to Improve Your Shooting

- 1 Chalk up every time you shoot.** Minnesota Fats said it best: "I always chalk my tip just before I would have miscued."
- 2 Hold it like a baby bird.** So advises pro Michael Massey, describing proper cue-grip. Cradle your cue with your middle three fingers, thumb pointing straight to the floor. Your little finger shouldn't touch the cue.
- 3 Stroke smoothly.** Then follow through for about 5 inches. "Don't poke or punch the ball," says Chalkers co-owner Sue Backman. "You never see a pro slam the ball around the table."
- 4 Stay down.** If you raise your head before the shot is complete, it's doubtful you'll hit the cue ball in the intended spot.
- 5 Use your hand as a bridge.** Jeanette Lee, a.k.a. the Black Widow, once roamed New York City with her left hand taped into a claw, to train it to assume bridge position. Plant your fingers, the heel of your palm and your forearm (if possible) on the table. —L.C.

Billiards and Cuetec Cues. ESPN covers WPBA's six tour events.

Perhaps the most appealing player on the circuit is Jeanette Lee, a 29-year-old Brooklyn native who got her start slinging drinks as a waitress at the original Amsterdam Billiard Club. Known as the Black Widow for her gothic leather-and-lace attire, Lee started shooting pool at 18, against the advice of doctors who warned that pool might hurt her back. (She suffers from scoliosis.) For three years, beginning in 1994, she was the top-ranked female player. Now ranked eighth, she gets endorsement money from Canadian Club whiskey and Imperial International, an equipment distributor. She even has a Jeanette Lee-themed virtual-pool videogame made by Interplay Entertainment. "You're an artist and an athlete," she says of her sport. "Every time you break the balls you have a completely different picture." **F**