

J O H N V I R G O

WITH A FOREWORD BY JIMMY WHITE

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT

ALEX

**CRAZY DAYS AND NIGHTS ON THE
ROAD WITH 'THE HURRICANE'**

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JOHN VIRGO

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JOHN BLAKE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My aim in writing this book was to present the serious and lighter side of an extraordinary talent. Alex Higgins made snooker sexy, racy and massively entertaining and changed the face of my beloved sport. He put it on the world stage and made it a game now enjoyed by millions globally. Certainly, there were times when we didn't see eye to eye – but as a colleague and a friend we had some great times. Thank you, Alex, for the ups, downs, laughs and hysteria. The snooker world will miss you, bud.

This book is a true labour of love and would not have been possible without the vision of my publisher John Blake. Thank you for your belief in both me and Alex. Huge thanks also for teaming me up with the highly talented Chas Newkey-Burden. Thank you, Chas, for your time and endless patience. I have learned a lot from Chas and I would like to think he is now a bit of a snooker expert, not to mention a horse racing pundit! I hope we work together again, Chas, I enjoyed our days reminiscing and pasties!

I had a great time working with the first class team at John Blake Publishing – not least my amazing editor, Lucan Randall. Forever gracious, Lucan worked tirelessly to accommodate my late changes and impossible scrawl and miraculously still got this book out on time!

I am also indebted to many people without whom this book would not have been possible. In particular I would like to thank my dear friends Jimmy White, and Geoff Lomas who knew Alex as well as I did and helped to remind me of some of our times with him. Thanks also to Eric Whitehead, David Muscroft, Roger Lee and Trevor Smith for searching their archives and producing the great photos of Alex.

Lastly to my darling wife, Rosie – the heart and soul of John Blake Publishing – without whom this book would not have seen the light of day. This book is dedicated to her.

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FOREWORD

When Alex Higgins passed away, all of those who knew and loved him were devastated. I was so aware of Alex and I cried all day when I heard the news. It was not just that the sport I love has lost its most influential ever figure – I had lost a much-loved friend and the man who so influenced my game and life.

Alex was a wonderful and sometimes wild man, a much discussed but little understood figure. His potent combination of snookering genius and personal notoriety fascinated the media and the public but he could also be a guarded and baffling character, so nobody until now has managed to get to the core of who he was.

There is nobody better equipped to write about Alex's life than John Virgo, and no one more qualified to explain just how influential he was in snooker. John was there as Alex made history at the table and made headlines away from the game. Like me, he loved Alex and has witnessed first-hand the highs and lows of this sporting genius.

Alex inspired a generation of people to play snooker. I know – I was one of them. He made the game popular and exciting and single-handedly fired it into the mainstream. The history books might show that he won just two world titles, but the hearts and minds of the public show that he won so much more than that.

For all the controversy that surrounded his life, Alex will never be forgotten. He was a great friend to me and he had the heart of a lion. In these pages, John gets to that heart and shows you what it was really like to work and play alongside Alex Higgins as he revolutionised the game of snooker.

There was never a dull moment when he was around. So sit back and let John tell you about Alex. It's a fascinating story...

Jimmy White

PROLOGUE

I think a lot of us who knew Alex Higgins well suspected he would not live on to a ripe old age. He just always had an aura around him of one who might meet an untimely end. Sadly, our suspicions were proved right. There was an additional tragedy in that our final memories of him were most uncomfortable ones. Yet even near the end there were moments of magic from the Hurricane.

I got him involved in a tour of exhibition matches near the end of his life. It proved a testing experience at times. We knew that he had been very ill, but as far as we were concerned he had been given the all-clear from cancer. Well, you wouldn't have thought it to look at him – he had lost a lot of weight. He was only on the tour because Jimmy White had been forced to pull out at the last moment due to some ill health of his own. To think that the promoters had been worried about telling the public that Jimmy wouldn't be there! They needn't have worried, because they had replaced him with a man who was pure box-office to the end. From the first match we did on that tour, the punters were queuing round the block to see him.

Sadly, Alex did not appear to be the Hurricane any more. He was moving so slowly round the table and was clearly a mere shadow of the man he had previously been. The only 'Higgins speciality' he seemed to have remembered was his grouchiness. If someone in the front row of the audience moved while he was lining up a shot he would glare at them. He created this atmosphere, which was actually scary to a point – audience members were terrified to move and everyone felt a bit uncomfortable. But then, in the last frame of an exhibition game in Newport in South Wales, the magic suddenly came back. He suddenly changed – and made a 143 break. The effort he had put into it was just stunning. There was sweat literally pouring off him as he moved around the table. When he reached the 70 mark the audience were suddenly completely behind him to make the 100 break. That is the landmark, after all: any professional wants to make a 100 break. Then he got past the 100 and cleared up; there was a standing ovation for him. The roof nearly came off the place. I was so happy. Could this be the spark of a major comeback for Alex? I dared to wonder. He came over to me and gave me a hug and the emotions were running high for everyone. He was still pouring with sweat, he was drenched. I thought, *That's why he's still playing. He is a man with so much willpower and effort inside him.*

Jimmy played a few exhibitions with Alex after that. Although Alex wasn't up to his usual standards of play, there were still some explosive moments. On one occasion Alex was reaching over to make a difficult pot and Jimmy asked the referee whether Alex had accidentally fouled by touching the blue. The referee agreed and called 'Foul!' Alex walked past the referee and punched him in the stomach. Outrageous behaviour and though there were many times in his life when he could get away with such things, those times had long since passed by now. The referee was not about to stand for being punched. He turned round and grabbed Alex. As the referee held him in a headlock, Jimmy was laughing in the background. Only Alex could get into these scrapes, and only he could have people laughing as he did so.

Then, he, Jimmy and I went to Jersey to do a charity night. The young son of one of the sponsors was sitting in the front row of the audience, fidgeting a bit as he watched. He must have been around seven years of age. Alex missed an important black and decided it was the boy's fault. He walked up to the lad and said, 'If you move again, I'm going to have you shot.' That is just Alex.

Subsequently, we signed up to perform a Legends tour at Sheffield's Crucible, the home of snooker. It was a week before the World Snooker Championship in April 2010. Alex caused trouble with the promoter straightaway, by wanting an extra £250 to wear the waistcoat they suggested. When I introduced him to the crowd he kissed me on the cheek as he passed me. It was quite odd that he did that, considering all the run-ins we had down the years. Naturally, there was rapturous applause for him – but he just couldn't play properly. I was commentating on the proceedings but I didn't say much while Alex was playing. I just found it all a bit macabre – you don't want to watch your heroes like that. This was a man who could once play every shot in the book, but now, put him on a simple black and he would be struggling to screw the ball back two inches. He'd just got no energy or power left. He had been living on baby food for some time, after losing all his teeth during his cancer treatment. It was terrible to watch him at the Crucible and I wasn't surprised when the promoter quickly decided that Alex wouldn't be asked to take any more part in the tour.

His appearance won't stick in anyone's mind as a classic because of the way he looked and the way he played. We always said he was a fighter, but I think in the end he simply gave up. He didn't want to be out in public looking so ill and frail. He really looked shocking by the end. Then there was the fact that he couldn't play the game any more. He was like a boxer coming back to fight long past his prime – and he was doing it only for the money. I thought back to all the wonderful moments Alex had brought to the sport, all those wonderful performances that took the breath away of everyone who watched them. In 1982 he had ruled at the very same venue, but now here he was looking so terribly frail and struggling to produce anything, let alone a moment of magic.

It was all just sad – and that turned out to be the last time I ever saw him play.

But I don't want to remember Alex Higgins that way. I want to remember him in his prime, as the Hurricane, who swept through the game I love and took our breath away. I owe him a lot and so do you, the game of snooker. Both on and off the table, for better or for worse, he kept us entertained in style until the end.

I want to remember him as the man who changed snooker – and the man who changed my life.

THE RAT PEN

My love affair with snooker started in the house I grew up in, in Salford. We had an airing rack on the ceiling. I noticed that, rather than unfastening it with a normal stick, my parents used a broken snooker cue. I had seen the cue and knew that my father had played the game it was used for. So it sparked a bit of interest in me. What was this snooker game, and might it be a fun thing to try on myself? When I was 10, my father bought me a small table to play on. I would never look back. Snooker has been a large part of my life ever since.

I was born in Salford, Greater Manchester, on 4 March 1946. My father, William Joseph Virgo, was a crane driver at the docks, which were just a 10-minute walk from our house on Robertson Street. My mother, Florence, was the sweetest and most loving woman I have ever met. I had a brother, Bill, and three sisters, Marjorie, Barbara and Dorothy. Before I came along my mother also had a daughter, Joan, who tragically died when she was three years old. We were not a rich family by any means – my father's wage in the 1950s was £9. 50 per week. Nevertheless, I look back on those days with great affection.

There always seemed to be food on the table, and we had a lovely roast dinner every Saturday and Sunday. You can imagine how, every Thursday night, which was payday for my father, he came home and gave my mother the wage packet. How else could she feed and clothe us as she did? That said, my father must have kept something back for himself, because from the moment they started televising horseracing on a Saturday he would always have a bet. I was just five years old but horseracing became part of my life too – from cheering on my dad's fancies on a Saturday afternoon to occasionally putting a bet on for him in the backstreet bookie's, on the way to school. I never stayed at school at lunchtime. Well, my mother would always cook a hot meal for my father, so I had a choice between school dinners and mother's cooking. No contest.

After lunch my mother would hand me a piece of folded paper, which I knew contained money for me to place a bet for my father as I returned to school. Having placed the bet, I would speed through the rest of the journey back to school, often pretending I was riding Mandarin, or one of the other great horses of the time. I remember vividly the day I forgot to place the bet and then spent an agonising, terrifying afternoon waiting to see if the horse my dad had asked me to bet on had won. Fortunately, it hadn't, but even that didn't stop him giving me a proper rollicking when he found out I'd forgotten. However, he never bet beyond his means, and his life was all about his wife and children. If they handed out medals for supporting your family, he would have had a chest full of them.

I was moving closer to snooker all the time. Although Salford was basically a dock area, it was also a very sporting part of the world. Salford Rugby League Club played a mere 10 minutes down the Eccles New Road. If you walked for 10 minutes the other way, up Trafford Road and across the Swinford Bridge, you would reach Old Trafford, which was sporting heaven. At the top end of Warwick Road was Lancashire Cricket Club, and at the bottom end of the same road was where Manchester United

the greatest team in the world, played football. Warwick Road has since been renamed Sir Matt Busby Way, in honour of his achievements for the club. It can only be a matter of time before a similar gesture is made for Sir Alex Ferguson, after all *he* has done for the club.

Like most lads in the area, I absolutely loved sport as a kid. At school I played football, cricket and rugby league. I also enjoyed running and competed in the inter-school sports days. I have always believed that sport is a vitally important force for working-class people, primarily because it gives us the chance to better ourselves. For instance, in my class at school there were 46 pupils. So the chances of our realising our full potential academically were slim. We needed sport as another option – plus it was lots of fun. I was good at sport as a schoolboy, but not exceptional. I don't think anyone back then would have predicted that I would go on to enjoy a life so dominated by sport. Certainly, nobody could have known that my life would become so entangled with a man who dominated and revolutionised the game of snooker.

All my friends were sports-daft as well. Every night after school it would be one game or another for us. During those long, wonderful summers we played cricket. The games could go on into the evening on a bright day. For the rest of the year it would be mostly football that we played, and on occasion occasionally rugby. The games were contested on an area of waste ground that had been bombed by German aeroplanes during the Second World War. The playing surface was not so much a grassy pitch as a debris-strewn area. Put it this way, you wouldn't want to be diving around where we played, so we played touch rugby, rather than the usual game with its dives and lunges. Still, we always had lots of fun.

Then, one night in September 1958, everything changed. It was a pleasant autumnal evening and I was taken by surprise when none of my pals were on the street corner where we usually congregated. I wondered what had happened, so I went and knocked on the door of my good pal Alan Heywood, whom we all knew as 'Chinner'. His mother answered the door and said that Chinner and the gang had gone to the billiard hall on Small Street, just off Trafford Road. So I went home and asked my mother if I could go and join them. She said no. Why not? I wondered out loud. She explained that my father believed that billiard halls were 'dens of iniquity'.

That must have been serious, I thought – iniquity was a big word for my dad.

For the next few nights, I continued returning to the Croft and finding nobody there. So I kept asking my mother if I could join my pals at the billiard hall. I wanted to see what it was all about, but most of all I wanted to be with my pals again. Eventually, my mother relented. 'Oh, all right,' she said, 'but don't let your father find out.' I was so excited as I set out to visit this infamous den of iniquity. From the moment I walked in, I fell in love with the place. It was 10p (it was called 10 shillings back then) to join. I took lots of bottles to the off-licence to earn the joining fee. I was 12 years old as I walked through its doors for the first time.

The very first thing I noticed were the dim lights over the tables, which gently illuminated the fine green baizes and the differently coloured balls that sat upon them. There were 16 tables in the hall. When I looked at the way the balls were arranged on each one, it looked like a painting to me. It was a beautiful painting of a sky perhaps, the sort of sky that, when you gaze at it, you think 'Cor! I'd love to paint that.' That probably sounds like quite a romantic sentiment for a 12-year-old boy to have, but I think that when you find something that really fills up your senses, as snooker did mine, then all kinds of thoughts are possible. Snooker had captured my imagination, and even now, so many decades on, it has yet to release its grip.

So it was love at first sight for me and the game – but there was trouble on the cards for me when my father found out about my new love. To say he was not happy would be an understatement. He was

so angry that he stopped referring to the place as a den of iniquity, but began calling it a 'rat pen'. bit over the top, I thought, but 'rat pen' was easier to pronounce than 'iniquity', at least. So, even cloud and all that. Anyway, I told him I definitely wanted to keep going. He needed a lot of convincing, but eventually succumbed. So I returned triumphantly to the billiard hall – and quickly found myself in such a mess that my father felt all his fears had been confirmed.

I had got to a reasonable standard of play in a short space of time during my visits to the rat pen. Sadly, my youthful exuberance bubbled into overconfidence. One of the characters who hung out in the billiard hall was a man called Jack Scholes. He was a good player, much better than me and my pals were. One night he offered us a challenge: he would play me and my seven other friends and, if any one of us beat him, he would pay for the cost of the lights. Needless to say, he beat all eight of us – though I came closest to beating him. I had to wait until the end of the challenge, and I did not get home until 10.30pm. My father was waiting. He was furious and he gave me a good hiding. I was banned from ever setting foot in the place again. My father very rarely hit me, so when he was so angry with me about the billiard hall I took notice of the punishment. It was many years before I returned to the 'rat pen'.

Indeed, by the time I was next there I was 15 years old and trying to make up for some wasted time at school. I was returning home after an unsuccessful attempt at enrolling at night school. I was not allowed to enrol on the course I wanted to join because I didn't have the required GCE qualification. Like most of my mates, I thought a GCE was an electrical appliance, so I was not able to enrol on the course. On my way home I walked back into the billiard hall, the place that had so captured my imagination a few years earlier. How happy I was to return to this wonderful place, with its atmospheric lighting. The clicking of the balls was like music to my ears. 'It's good to be home,' I couldn't help but feel. I was back.

For the next few months I secretly returned to the billiard hall many times. As far as my father was concerned I was going to night classes, rather than returning to the rat pen of iniquity. Even once he found out, though, he didn't seem to mind too much. Which was helpful, because my game was improving rapidly – and my skill was beginning to be remarked on. The hall had a new manager, a leading amateur player from Bolton called Stan Holden. He was the first person to tell me I had a real ability at the game. Stan began to teach me the finer points of the game and I quickly improved. Within five months of starting to learn from him I was the Under-16s Boys Champion of Greater Britain. So began a journey that would take me around the world, make me a leading light in the game.

Stan had driven me to the Under-16s tournament in Soho Square in London. He gave me some tips about parts of the game, like how to get the best out of a screw shot. It was a memorable journey, not least because the back of the car where I was sitting was full of transistor radios, which Stan planned to try to sell in the capital. I won that tournament and when I came back there were reports of the games in the *Salford Reporter*, but the details of who won were not included, because the paper's deadline came ahead of the final match. Therefore, when I got home my dad had no idea who had won. I proudly told him I had. It felt good.

What happened next was quite surreal, actually. I put the trophy on the sideboard and then there was this strange procession of neighbours who wanted to see it. They would walk through the front door, admire the trophy, shake my hand and then turn and leave through the back door. Then the next edition of the *Salford Reporter* had my photograph in it. Fame! It was a strange feeling. It got even better: a reporter from the *Daily Mirror* wanted a chat with me. I gave a quick interview, and there it was in the next day's newspaper. The article referred to me as 'a debonair young invoice clerk from Salford'.

Debonair! I didn't even know what the word meant! Apparently it can mean 'suave or urbane'. I'll settle for that.

Debonair or not, I never thought of turning professional at that stage, but I did begin to work my way up the amateur ladder. I won the boys' championship in 1961, then the youth championship in 1964, and then I was playing in amateur league matches. I was still working at the office, where thankfully I could take the odd day off work to play snooker without anyone screaming the place down. I even represented England at amateur level. But in truth I was a bit bored with the game and saw no future in it. I remember even saying to a pal once, 'I'm going to pack snooker in.' But then Alex Higgins came along and he just fired up something that was inside me that I didn't even realise had been there. Suddenly I found this passion inside me. Funnily enough, that reporter may have described me as 'debonair', but pretty soon other people were saying that I had a chip on my shoulder. I was an angry young man.

Alex Higgins had a measure of anger in him, too. To understand how important Alex was to snooker you have to look at how sport works. For the public, it is nearly always the characters who make sport what it is. One of the earliest characters in the game of snooker, was John Pulman. He turned professional in 1946, the year I was born. Pulman was a snooker sensation – there is no other way of describing him. He became world champion in 1959, breaking the stranglehold on that tournament that Joe and Fred Davis had enjoyed for so long. He then gained a stranglehold on the game himself, which he did not lose till ten years later, when John Spencer beat him in the quarter-final of the World Championship. The following year he put up a tremendous fight and narrowly lost out 37–33 to Ray Reardon in the final.

Pulman's most memorable characteristic was the running commentary he kept up during his own games. He did this to psyche himself up; he was a determined fellow. 'I'm a right bastard when I'm playing,' he said. Although he was joking, he could indeed sometimes be a right bastard. Humour was never far away, though. Once he was playing on a table with cushions that were so dead it was as good as impossible to get good positional shots. 'Well,' he said, 'at least these cushions are stopping the balls falling onto the floor.' He was a real joker and character – no wonder the public took to him. As one of his fans once pertinently put it, 'I'd rather watch Pulman play badly than watch another player play well.' I totally agreed – that was the sort of magnetism he had. As we'll see, I myself found that bringing moments of humour and brevity to the game could prove popular and profitable.

In 1971 there was a tournament in which the best amateur players in Great Britain competed. It was broadcast on Granada Television. I won that. Then I was asked to present a television series on how to play the game of snooker. I have to be honest: I didn't have a clue how to go about this. So I bought Joe Davis's book, *Snooker for the Complete Amateur*. I studied it and used it as the basis for my television show. Funnily enough, years later I met Joe and he said, 'I've been watching your programme. It was very good and you have some good ideas.' I replied, 'Well I hope so, because it's your book I'm using.' He smiled and said, 'Ah, good thinking.' It was around this time that I first took notice of an amazing young man from Belfast. He would change my life and the game of snooker for good.

There was no professional game worth speaking about this time. It was purely and simply a very small closed shop at this time. Then it started to change when John Spencer and Ray Reardon came on the scene. Reardon was an ex-miner, then a policeman who earned his reputation as a player when he won the police snooker championship. Spencer and he started to play matches and soon people in the game

realised that games between these players were more exciting than anything else going on in the game at the time. Before he turned professional, Spencer would take on seven players. He would give them each a 200-point lead. If he overturned that lead and beat them he would get paid, but if he didn't beat them he wouldn't get a penny. It was as simple as that. He invariably did beat them and was soon being taken note of. He was persuaded to turn professional, and so was Reardon.

Not that they didn't face obstacles. Fred Davis, a key player at the time, was quite open about how he felt. 'Why do we need these people?' he asked. I can actually understand where he was coming from on this. There wasn't that much money in the game to go round at the time, so why would the existing professionals want someone else coming into the game? In the end Spencer and Reardon were accepted as professionals. In 1968-69 Spencer at his first attempt won the world snooker championship, beating Gary Owen in the final. The lasting memory from that match was a screw shot played by Spencer from blue to pink, bringing the cue ball back some seven feet. It was that good that Fred Davis had to admit that he and his brother Joe would not have been capable of it. However, Spencer and Reardon were happy to mostly conform to the game as it was at the time. Snooker was then a gentlemanly game played by men in tuxedos and so on.

Then word got round about some exciting developments in an amateur tournament in Bolton. There were teams competing from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. In the Irish team – which won the match – there was this young kid called Alex Higgins. Word started spreading round the game about how amazing this Irish boy was. I lived just ten miles down the road in Salford and I heard people saying, 'You wanna see this Higgins, he's a different class.' I was a few years older than Alex at the time and, although I had won some youth tournaments, I couldn't see any point in turning professional. In fact, to be honest I was getting a bit fed up of the game. I felt I was just plodding along and that there was nowhere to go. I couldn't see any future. Not only that, I felt the game was becoming an interference in my life. If I had a day off work I loved going to the snooker hall for a few games. I vividly remember my boss at work calling me to his desk one day and telling me, 'I have to say, John, if you carry on like this you'll end up selling shoelaces in the park. You're not going to go anywhere.' There wasn't much I could say back. I couldn't very well reply, 'Well, actually, I'm going to become a professional snooker player,' because there wasn't a professional game worth talking about at this point. But Alex was about to change all that.

It was really that Bolton tournament which brought Alex to my notice, when he played for the Belfast YMCA team. Stan Holden, who had been at the match, told me that everyone watching had been stunned by the speed that Alex played at. When he had gone into the match, which was two frames on aggregate, his team had been 154 points behind. By the time he came off the table they were in front. There was an even greater signpost to come. After the match, John Pulman, now world champion, presented the prizes and played Alex in a one-frame exhibition game. One man who watched that game said, 'Alex potted Pulman off the table and basically took the mickey out of him.' This was no mean feat, not least because Alex himself admitted he was 'in awe' of Pulman. This was the first time that anyone began to time how quickly a player made a break. Someone would be saying 'He's just made a century break in three and a half minutes' and people would reply, 'How do you know that? Who's clocking this?' And his game was also no flash in the pan. In 1970 Alex played six money matches and he won every one of them, including the one against the new world champion John Spencer.

From the very start, Alex polarised opinion. In 1970, some said he would be world champion in two years' time; others said he would simply flash briefly across the sky like a meteor and then blow up. The former school of thought would be vindicated initially, but Alex's life was to become

unpredictable after 1972, so perhaps those with the latter theory eventually felt they'd been proved right. Whatever the case, he was certainly an enigma, but the public quickly warmed to him. He sped around the table and made the most outrageous shot selections; his game was a joy to watch. Not only did he make the game itself more exciting, but he also brought added publicity to the sport. This was something it badly needed.

In 1971, Alex started in the qualifying rounds. In his first match he was drawn against Ronnie Gross, who was a former amateur champion. Alex won comfortably, by 16 frames to 5. It had been an amazing performance, not least because, with the 10 am start for the games, the timing hardly suited Alex's lifestyle. As Gross himself said after the match, 'When I heard I was playing Hurricane Higgins I thought I might turn into a bit of a tornado. But I finished up as a slight breeze.' Alex then faced Maurice Parkin, whom he also beat easily, 11 frames to 3. After that match Gross said, 'Alex is a very good player but I can't see him beating Spencer or Reardon – although Rex Williams is coming back and is young enough.' Parkin and Gross were both former amateur champions. What would happen when the stakes rose for Alex?

In the first round proper, he faced Irishman Jack Rea. Alex was again triumphant, but not as convincingly as some of his admirers had expected. His victory was a relatively narrow 19–11. Part of this can be explained by the fact that he had caught Rea on a good day. Indeed, Rea said afterwards that he felt he had played better than he had done since the 1950s. In the other first round, John Pulman, as a former world champion, had beaten Yorkshireman John Dunning 19–7.

Now, Pulman did not just have a reputation as a fantastic snooker player – he was also known as a legendary drinker. I remember playing at the opening of a snooker club some years after he had retired. At the bar afterwards, Pulman signed a bottle of whisky that he had drunk that evening. By the time I left, he was well into a second bottle. When Dunning had arrived at the hotel for his first-round match, Pulman had offered to buy him a drink. Dunning gratefully accepted the offer. I'm not sure exactly how long that session continued, but one indication is that, after the match the following day, I asked Dunning how highly he rated Pulman's ability at the table. 'I don't know about snooker, but he's a bloody champion drinker,' he told me. In any case, Pulman's victory over Dunning had set up a tantalising quarter-final between him and Alex. Two larger-than-life characters in so many ways were to come face to face.

This would be the biggest task to date in Alex's career. In many ways it would be the first real challenge he would face. He later recalled it, saying that he felt 'wet behind the ears' in comparison with his opponent. Before the match Alex told how he had grown up watching Pulman play. 'He was my first TV idol,' he said. Indeed, so in awe was he that he had always called him not 'John' but 'Mr Pulman' – and now he was to play against him. The match was described by one journalist in particularly memorable terms. '[Higgins] was dashing around the table like a greyhound and going for the quarter-and-half-chances while Pulman with his more tactical percentage game was trying to reduce the exchanges to more logical sequences.' But Alex was the one who came out on top – he won 31–23. He knew his opponent did not approve of his 'wild style of play' and he said he could see Pulman 'out of the corner of my eye and he just kept shaking his head in disbelief'.

He had vowed before the game that he would not be overawed by playing his hero, but would instead attack 'with brute force and scare him to death'. He was pretty much as good as his word. He described himself as 'elated' to have won the game, but he was quick to pay tribute to his esteemed opponent. Pulman returned the compliment and Alex later admitted that he was so pleased he 'partied for two nights' on the strength of the adrenalin rush the win had given him. Having won that game he then marched on to the semi-final, where he faced Rex Williams, the world professional billiard

champion, who had surprisingly beaten Ray Reardon 25–23. Would there be more surprises in store when he faced the Hurricane?

You may be wondering why the matches we played were over different numbers of frames. This was due to the fact that the match between Williams and Reardon was played at seven different venues in Scotland. Basically, they would play anywhere if they could get a crowd. A lot of people at the time gave this as the reason for Reardon's shock defeat. But as Williams showed in his next match against the Hurricane, this was no fluke.

I had got to know Alex by this stage and had quickly developed an affection for him. You see, it was very hard not to like him. He was living not far from me, in Oswaldtwistle, near Accrington. I hadn't started practising yet, but the reports I got from a friend – David Briggs – had truly impressed me. Many snooker players play what is known as 'the line-up' when they are practising. You put all the colours on their spots, then add the reds in a straight line down the middle of the table: six reds between the pink and the black, nine reds between the pink and the blue. You then put the white anywhere you like and, as the phrase goes on *Big Break*, pot as many balls as you can. Ordinary mortals do just that, but Alex always had to go one better. Every time he played the routine, he would try to pot a black off every red. David told me that one day Alex made four maximums. Not real ones you could argue, but it still took some doing. It also spoke volumes about his cue-ball control and how he could use it in real match play.

I remember one of the first times I met him. I was playing in the final of an amateur competition and Alex was there. He had just turned professional at the time. I thought I knew everything there was to know about snooker – then I saw Alex playing and I was absolutely mesmerised. I thought, God whiz! There's more to this game than I ever realised. The shots he was playing were amazing, as was the whole way he approached the game. People had always been very methodical in the past. The style never really heightened my senses or captured my imagination. Then I saw Alex play and I thought, Bloody hell! It was really, really exciting. It was an experience that changed everything.

Watching Alex gave me a real spur and reawakened my faith in and love for the game of snooker. I realised that there could be a freedom of expression in the game that I had never felt possible before. I started to realise that I could maybe experiment a bit more. Up until then, I suddenly realised, I had felt a little stifled. This was not that surprising. Anyone starting in a sport looks at his or her peers and follows their example. I would watch how they played a shot and how they approached the whole game of snooker.

All of a sudden here was Alex – and he was putting down a completely different canvas from the one that I had been brought up with. Even watching Joe Davis on *Grandstand*, which I did a lot as I grew up, had not prepared me for what I saw in Alex. All of a sudden I was watching someone who was exciting the audience in a way that I had never witnessed before. The atmosphere was simply extraordinary. Alex had single-handedly rekindled my enthusiasm for the game of snooker. I sometimes wonder what course my life would have taken had he not done so, that is how important Alex was to me. I suppose I will never know what would have happened without Alex, but I'm grateful to him for setting me firmly into the world of snooker.

So, I watched every frame of Alex's semi-final match with Rex Williams, which was held at the Co-op Hall in Bolton. The match had been rescheduled three times – much to the annoyance of Alex, who lost some exhibition work as a result – but from a spectator's point of view it was a match well worth waiting for. For my money, this was the best match I had ever seen at this point. Alex was in good form, but I think Williams was better. Alex lost nine frames in the first two days and came close

to losing the match. 'I was cocky as hell – which was almost my downfall,' Alex wrote later, adding that, as he fought back, he felt 'sore of ego'. This was a match that had everything: drama, great skills, two wonderful characters. It went to the last day and the very last frame, which Alex won to come off as the 31–30 winner.

I shudder to think how many snooker games I had already watched at this point, but none had been as exciting as that semi-final. The contrast was almost frightening, with Alex's gung-ho style up against the more old-school tactics of Williams. One minute you would have Alex running round the table, then Williams, a former world billiards champion, would be up there and would take what seemed like an age to play his shot. In the final frame Williams looked set to win but then missed an easy blue, effectively handing the game to Alex. As he rued afterwards, that blue might have changed the course of his career – and that of Alex. 'Rex was stuffed and I cleaned up' was how Alex remembered it. Equally significant was that Alex was willing to rethink his game plan during the match. Indeed, as Alex admitted, if he had not done that, Williams would have destroyed him.

The players of today have to cope with more instant pressure that was perhaps not there in times gone by. However, there were no practice facilities at the venue, so each day was like starting afresh. Also then, unlike now, the players were not provided with wet and dry cloths to wipe their hands and cues on. This is something that players now take for granted. Halfway through one session, Alex's cue obviously wasn't to his liking and he was in need of something to wipe it down with. He didn't have himself a cloth, but Williams did. So, while his opponent was busy at the table, Alex reached over and wiped his cue with Williams's cloth. In itself there was nothing overly cheeky about this. He was just using a dry cloth to wipe down his cue, when all was said and done. But what he did next was characteristic of Alex. As he began losing the next frame, he got a bit hot under the collar as he watched Williams clearing up at the table. He leaned across to grab Williams's cloth again but this time he didn't use it to wipe his cue. Instead, he used it to wipe the sweat off his face and his hands. This was how Alex was: give him an inch and he would take a mile.

However, Williams was to have the last laugh – and in some style.

In those days, the players did not have their own dressing rooms. Instead, there was a single room that was shared by the players, officials and any friends they had along on the day. During the first session's interval, in the wake of Alex's use of the cloth to wipe his face and hands, there was a slightly strange atmosphere in the room, as you can imagine. An awkward silence reigned for a while, then Williams turned to Alex to speak to him. 'I don't mind you using my towel,' he said, 'but I should mention that I have a spot of dermatitis on my hands. I do hope it's not catching.' Needless to say, Alex never used the towel again. I thought Williams had been superb in that match. He was unlucky to lose. Some reports claimed that the easy blue he missed in the final frame was the deciding factor. Believe me, though, it was by no means an easy shot. All the same, Alex returned to the table and cleared up to win the game. He then waited to see who he would be facing in the final.

Well, the other semi-final had seen reigning world champion John Spencer faced by the Australian Eddie Charlton. Spencer won the match 37–32, setting up what was in many ways the dream final: John Spencer, the world champion, facing Alex Higgins, the young pretender – great stuff. Since winning his semi-final, Alex had also beaten Jack Rea to become the Irish professional champion. He had performed amazingly in the Irish tournament, which is played in six venues around Ireland. In one of the sessions, Alex hit a purple patch and won all nine frames.

As Rea said afterwards, 'The way he played, nobody could have lived with him. His cue action was very good, but on the long shots with power he throws everything into it. He moves his head, his elbow juts out, he does everything wrong – and yet he knocks nearly everything in.' That was Alex for

you: flamboyant, unpredictable and, most of all, brilliant to watch. The ball was rolling, he had the public on his side and was set to go all the way.

The final of the World Championship was to be played at the Selly Park British Legion in Birmingham and would be contested over the best of 75 frames. Most people were sure that Alex couldn't win. After all, Spencer was a great player with a better all-round game than Alex. I didn't have a car, so I didn't go. It was a dramatic final, though, with the tension set up by the fact that Alex had played a money match with Spencer a few days before the final. Although Spencer had won, Alex had inflicted enough psychological pressure on his opponent to set things up nicely for the final.

There was a packed house at the venue, but backstage the organisers were in something of a panic. The country was gripped by a miners' strike at the time and a power cut was expected. They had arranged to get their own generator as a backup for the lights. Luckily, it was not needed.

Spencer was the first to be introduced and he naturally received a great reception from the audience. However, when Alex was called the noise was even greater. Indeed, this was the first time the world heard what came to be known as the 'Higgins roar'. If you were not lucky enough to witness Alex being introduced to an audience, let me tell you that it truly sends a tingle down your back. It is up there with the feeling when the starter lets the horses go at the Grand National. The only equivalent in snooker since has been when Jimmy White comes out to play at the Crucible. Alex, as always, believed that everybody in the venue was there only to see him play and see him win. 'The place was buzzing and so was I,' he remembered.

I cannot say whether Alex's reception unnerved Spencer or not, but I am sure he had never before felt that so many people wanted to see his opponent rather than him. For the first four days of the match the play was very much nip-and-tuck. To be honest, the snooker was a little average at times, but, boy, was the atmosphere exciting! The fifth day started badly for Spencer because a power cut had left him stuck in the lift at his hotel for 25 minutes. This meant that the afternoon session started 15 minutes late. That allowed just enough time for the waiting Alex to pop into the venue's billiard room to make a 111 break timed at just under four minutes, and then return to the main theatre. I sometimes wondered how people calculated these timings for his breaks, but it didn't really matter. The important thing was that they were keeping people interested.

You can bet your life that when Spencer arrived at the venue he would have heard about this late break from Alex. Spencer certainly had a bad time of it on day five, when he struggled to keep a hold of 'the Hurricane'. Day six was to be the beginning of the end. In the evening session Alex won all six frames. Everything Alex looked at seemed to get potted. That was the sort of rhythm he got into. As Jack Rea had said after facing a similar onslaught from Alex, once he gets into that sort of mood he is simply unbeatable. So it was that he went on to win the game. Alex Higgins, at the age of 22, became the youngest ever world champion, beating Spencer 37–32. That was amazing, but, then, so were the first words of the new champion after the match: 'I shall be world champion for the next five or six years, and when I'm 30 I will retire.' But would it be that simple? One thing was obvious immediately: whatever happened next, it was going to be exciting.

Higgins had changed the game of snooker for ever, you see. As he himself wrote in his book *My Story – From the Eye of the Hurricane*, '[The] fans were dragging chairs, dropping glasses and even walking past us on the other side of the table to go to the toilets. This was not traditional snooker etiquette at all – and I loved it. The venue and the snooker-mad crowd were more than good enough for me. Looking back, this was the moment when everything began to change, not that we realised it at the time. No one could possibly have known that this match wasn't only going to save me, it was going to bring about the rejuvenation of snooker.'

Wise words – and at the end of each day’s play he would return to a humble bed-and-breakfast he was staying in near the venue. It was called the Pebbles, but to make it sound more grand Alex would refer to it as ‘the Peebles’.

As for the new world champion himself, he quickly learned that once you reach the top you will get more attention, but some of that attention will not be the sort you were hoping for. Questions were asked of him in the wake of his victory. One journalist wondered about his lifestyle and why he so often appeared with a black eye, a cut or a bruise. Sometimes he looked more like a boxer than a snooker player. How many doors can one man bump into? people asked. There was no doubting his class, though. Plus, he had relative youth on his side at 22, a time of life when the body is more resilient. Could he, people wondered, sustain his wild lifestyle under the pressure of being world champion? Every other professional in the game was now determined to snap at his heels and knock him off his throne.

He had promised all along that if he beat Spencer in the final he would throw his hands up in the air and shout, ‘I am the greatest.’ He was too scared to do so on the day, but he hoped it would not be long until he won his next title. But *would* he ever repeat his World Championship triumph, and, if so, when? Who knew at that stage that it would take him 10 years to manage it? But there would never be a dull moment during those years. Alex, by winning the title at that tender age of 22, had ended for ever the image snooker had as only an old man’s sport.

The way Alex played the game gave it a new, more edgy image. The way he behaved away from snooker was pretty sensational too.

BIG BREAKS, BOW TIES AND TEDDY BEAR WARS

So, how did becoming the world champion change Alex? I was to spend a lot of time with him in the wake of his victory, so I could see at first hand the effect it had. Nowadays, when we think of a world champion, we think of big money and large houses. This was not the case with snooker in 1977. Alex was living in a rented house in Oswaldtwistle. He was alone except for his trophies, of which he already had a few. I was soon to visit this rented house and that was an eye-opening experience I can tell you. As we've seen, it had been an amazing victory that had taken him to the world title.

Everyone who witnessed that performance was transfixed. One friend of mine who watched it even wrote a poem about what he had seen. Admittedly, it wasn't really the greatest of poems, but there has certainly never been a snooker player before in history who would inspire people to write verse. Alex was the youngest ever player to win the world championship. The way he did so was like poetry in motion. It was just unbelievable. People who were there were amazed. I was, too, and my love of snooker continued to be reinvigorated by this remarkable man. Little did I know how close I would become with him in the years and decades to come.

Soon after this the snooker club I was playing in at Salford was closed down. So I started going to one in Chorlton-cum-Hardy. Then Alex walked in one day. I couldn't bloody believe it. He waltzed up to me and said, 'Do you fancy a game?' I thought, Bloody hell, this is the world champion! How many times do you get to play against the newly crowned world champion? So I said, 'Yeah, OK.' I think we must have played more than 60 frames, at £2 per frame. I ended up winning £6 off him. Much more valuable than the money was how Alex influenced my game. He got me playing in a rhythm completely different from how I had played before. Instead of all that ponderous, studious looking things, I was suddenly playing to a rhythm in which everything seemed to be happening at once. It was just unbelievable. I never actually got the £6 from him. He borrowed a jumper off me that night, took it and I never got back. That's the sort of man he was, but in truth neither of these facts really mattered when compared with what the world champion taught me that day.

I wouldn't say he really changed at all. I do remember his asking me if I could get him some exhibition work. In the wake of my television appearance I had begun to take on quite a lot of exhibition work at around £15 a time. So I asked him how much money he was expecting to get from such appearances. He said, 'Well, if you can get me £25, I'll give you a fiver of it as commission.' This was the world champion speaking, which shows you how little money there was available in the game, even for its top professional. I saw more and more of him after this. He came to the club and played against people. In all honesty, it was hard not to have a soft spot for him. He had a very gentle nature. The only problem was that his mood could turn on a sixpence, as we shall see throughout the pages.

Around this time I opened the Potters Snooker Club in Salford with Geoff Lomas, who ended up

managing Alex. He was even best man at Alex's wedding. There was a snooker player from London called Patsy Fagan. The club wanted to put on a challenge match between Alex and Fagan, who, like me, was at this point an amateur player. But Don Slack, the guy who ran the club in Acton, said he wouldn't allow the game to go ahead because Alex had failed to turn up for a previous booking. So I rang Don and said, 'Come on, Don, you know what he's like. He's got a new manager now, his diary is in order. Give him a chance.' He said he'd let the event go ahead but he wouldn't pay Alex a fee. I said this wouldn't be a problem, because we were all looking to make our money on a side bet, anyway. So Geoff and I went to Alex's flat. He was living in the Blackburn area at this point.

I walked into his flat and I couldn't believe what I saw. Strewn all over the floor were hundreds of telegrams that people had sent him to congratulate him on his World Championship success. Then I looked to the sideboard, where the World Championship trophy was sitting. Then my eyes moved underneath the sideboard and there I saw a small saucer, with a little bit of cheese on it. I asked him what that was there for. He shrugged and said, 'Oh, I've got a mouse, you know. I like to keep it well fed.' The place was just so basic and chaotic. I couldn't believe that the champion of the world was living in these sorts of conditions and leaving food around for a mouse. It was ridiculous, if a little bit hilarious too. Alex himself seemed perfectly happy living this way. I mean, he was on the road most of the time so to him I suppose it did not really matter. Presumably, he found a way to keep the mouse fed while he was away from home.

So we carried on arranging the match, which was to take place just a few days before Christmas. We were at the Potters Snooker Club in Salford and we had to get to Acton for the match. So we hired a minibus. Bill Myers was driving it. There was a group of us in there and we had all pooled our money to bet on Alex in the match. It was going to be a two-night affair, the best of 21 frames. There would be 10 frames on the first night and 11 on the second. Having driven down the motorway, we arrived at the small venue to find it packed with spectators, all eager to watch the match. Alex was always a bit of a draw, after all. He found the first night tough going and by the end of the evening he was trailing Fagan by six frames to four. Alex just hadn't played that well. As everyone was leaving Alex made a loud, defiant outburst. 'I'll be back tomorrow,' he vowed. He then pointed at Fagan and added, 'And *he* is going down!' It was like something Muhammad Ali might have said. As we will see in due course, I actually saw a lot of similarities between Alex and the champion boxer.

After this I went back to the hotel with Alex. All of a sudden, as if out of the blue, he had suddenly got a girl on his arm. He was also very much on the vodka. At 3am Alex suddenly appeared at Geoff's hotel room, banging loudly on the door. He then made the most bizarre gesture. 'This is my form, isn't it?' he asked, waving a tampon in Geoff's face. A tad bizarre, I think you will agree. Geoff was disturbed and not a little furious. 'You should be in bed,' he told Alex. 'You've got the second part of the game tomorrow and we've all got a lot of money riding on you.' Alex said, 'Oh don't worry about that, babe. He's got no chance – I'll fucking murder him.' He was confident, but he was probably the only one who was.

In truth, the rest of us were all a little nervous at the venue on the second evening. Well, all of us apart from Alex. He appeared with the same girl on his arm. She stayed at his side throughout the evening. When Fagan was at the table and Alex was sitting down, she was sitting on his knee. He was sitting there casually talking with her and we were all thinking, What's going on here? We've got all our Christmas money on his winning and he's sitting there with some girl! He looked like any other guy in a bar on a pre-Christmas evening. It was as if he had just popped out for a drink and a smoke with his girlfriend.

Meanwhile, Fagan continued to perform well. Needless to say, Alex lost. Consequently, a whole

gang of us who had put our Christmas money on him to win had lost our cash. This left us in a terrible situation with just a few days before Christmas. We were sitting trying to work out how we could scrape enough money together to buy Christmas presents for people. Personally, I'd bet around £200 or £300 on the victory, which back in the early 1970s was a lot of money.

He came over to us and said, 'Sorry, babes. But he was a lucky cunt.' So there we all were in the minibus afterwards, ready to drive back up North. The atmosphere in the bus was quiet and dejected as you can imagine. Alex wasn't with us: he had decided to make his own way back home, and that decision raised no protests from us. For the time being we had disowned him. He's lost us all our money, we thought. Let him go wherever he wants and, 'do whatever he wishes.

As we drove along, one of the passengers turned to Bill, who was driving, and said, 'Bill, you've gone the wrong way. It said M1 that way and you turned the other way.' Bill turned round and said, 'No, I'm going the right way. I just want to pop into London because there's this shop that does the best socks in the world. I just want to get some socks.' So we're all sitting in the back seething, thinking how Alex has just cost us all our money and Bill is driving us all through the middle of London so he can buy some socks!

Overall this had just been another example of the truth about Alex: the only thing you could predict of him was that he was unpredictable. As far as the public were concerned, though, he had truly arrived as a force in the game. These were good times for Alex and for the snooker, too. The best times were under way, thanks to him. Alex had made the public sit up and take notice of the sport like never before. Not that the sport's newfound popularity was *all* down to him. The two other factors were to be colour television and the series *Pot Black*. Snooker on television had till then mostly consisted of a few frames on *Grandstand*, the BBC's flagship Saturday afternoon sports show. In the days of black-and-white television the medium was not perfect for snooker. Though at least during the crossover into the colour television era, we had Ted Lowe's infamous comment: 'For those of you watching in black and white, the yellow is behind the pink.'

It had actually been Ted who first suggested to the BBC that, as colour television was coming into widespread use, a snooker tournament for the top professionals might be a good idea. So, on 23 June 1969, *Pot Black* first hit our screens. It was at first a half-hour programme with just one frame being contested per show in what built into a round-robin format, filmed at the Corporation's studios in Birmingham. However, just as the game of snooker had been for some time, *Pot Black* was a close shop. Willie Thorne was asked to appear on it because he was considered good-looking. When Willie had hair he looked a bit like the American swimming pin-up Mark Spitz. So that's how Willie got to turn professional. Whether he had the ability or not at the time I am not sure. But he wasn't going to turn down the chance to appear on television, was he? It's where we all wanted to be. The chance of it happening for me seemed slim at the time. I was working hard at the office all day, playing in the snooker hall at night. I travelled to amateur competitions when I could, but I didn't even have a car at the time. It was just a pain, and I began to wonder whether I needed the hassle.

Ray Reardon was the first winner of *Pot Black*. It was an instant success with viewers and the BBC was now aware that snooker on television really could attract a big audience. Alex was not to play much of a part in the show, not least because Ted Lowe was not a fan of the Hurricane. The fact that on his one appearance at the studios Alex had taken a pee in a sink didn't help matters much more. At the same time, the show had increased interest in snooker among television viewers. So, in 1973, the cameras were to show the highlights of the World Championship semi-final and final. With 24 competitors taking part in the 12-day tournament, some changes needed to be made. The old system

playing each match in a different venue on one table was not going to be an option any more. So the answer was to play the tournament using a similar system to that used for the tennis during Wimbledon fortnight. There were eight tables in total at the City Exhibition Hall, Manchester, where the tournament was to be held. Two of the tables would be the 'main ones' as far as spectators were concerned, akin to having to 'centre courts'. There were some complaints about the noise that spectators caused as they moved from table to table, but the tournament was a great success overall heralding the start of the commercialisation of snooker.

For Alex, though, it was to be a mixed experience. In his first match in defence of his title, he had to play the former English Amateur champion Patsy Houlihan at the Exhibition Hall. It was expected that Alex would easily dispense with his opponent and the final score records it that way – Alex won 16–0. However, the statistic showed neither Alex already demonstrating his unpredictable side during the match, nor the controversy that his behaviour sparked. Having won the first session 6–1, he turned up 22 minutes late for the evening session. In later years, as I was to find out to my cost, the rules were changed so that if you were late for such a match you would be docked frames. So under those rules he would have forfeited four frames. But in 1973 there was no such rule, though it may well have been in later episodes such as this one that prompted the rule change.

When he was introduced to the audience he was greeted by a chorus of boos. No sooner had the booing calmed down than it restarted with a vengeance as he attempted to make an apology. He had, he explained, been trying to clean his white Oxford bags, which had been soiled when he leaned over the table in the previous session. He added that he had also needed to re-tip his cue because it had split. The crowd were having none of it. They were not impressed and neither were the authorities. Alex, who, Alex felt, wanted his blood from the off. Even Houlihan was fuming, giving Alex a look 'like a hangman', according to the man himself. 'I try to give pleasure to everyone,' protested Alex, with a hint of desperation in his tone. 'Then let's have some,' retorted one spectator.

To Alex's credit, he did indeed give them some. Within five minutes of play resuming he had the crowd roaring its approval as he pulled off a dazzling break. He won every frame during that evening session. Even when the game was not so exciting, Alex managed to provide pleasure and entertainment for all. Whenever Houlihan needed the rest, Alex would rush and get it for him. He also kept up a regular chat with some of the girls in the tableside seats. When Alex was involved, what was going on in the game did not always matter. He would always provide entertainment one way or another. However, he was not to be successful in his defence of his championship, losing in the semi-finals.

He was drawn against the Australian Eddie Charlton, who was nicknamed 'Steady Eddie'. Alex did not seem himself in the tie, perhaps as a hangover from his previous clash. In that match he had only scraped past Fred Davis 16–14. He did not perform well against Charlton and lost the semi-final 23–17. What I remember most is that every time Alex turned up he would have two women on his arm. Not only that, he came out to play in a bright green suit, whereas it was assumed you had to wear black. He got fined £2,000 – a lot of money in those days – for wearing the wrong suit. He knew he was breaking the rules, he was just trying to make a statement. He wanted to show that he was different from everyone else. He didn't like wearing a bow tie. I remember at a board meeting of the WPBSA (World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association) Eddie Charlton said, 'Us letting him not wear a bow tie is like giving him a 14-point start.'

That may sound over the top, but you should remember that nobody wore a bow tie when practising – with good reason. They were uncomfortable. Furthermore, during matches a lot of players prefer to wear a shirt one size too big, so there is room for movement once the bow tie is added. The exception

was Tony Knowles, who used to buy a shirt half a size too small, because he thought it would stop his head from moving. Only Tony could have come out with a line like that! The point is that not wearing a bow tie was a physical advantage. As a board we had many run-ins with Alex about the bow-tie issue. At first, if you played an afternoon session you wore a normal suit with a normal tie. But, as manager and promoter Barry Hearn acquired more and more top players, he became more influential. That is the equation in snooker. The top player may have bragging rights, but his personal manager can utilise that power and influence. Hearn came up with the idea that players should start wearing evening suits in all sessions: morning, afternoon and evening. There was a bit of a fuss about it, but I suppose it did make players more smart and impressive-looking.

Alex, though, was having none of this. He didn't want to wear a bow tie and, if Alex didn't want to do something, he didn't do it easily. To be excused from wearing one you needed to have a doctor's certificate. Sometimes he was somehow able to produce such a certificate, but not always. Which is why in those days you sometimes saw him with a bow tie, sometimes not. The confusing thing, though, was that, when he played exhibitions, he quite often wore a bow tie quite voluntarily. Maybe the pressure of competition made him less keen; perhaps he sweated more in competitive matches. Or, just as likely, he was cocking a snook at authority – again. How things have changed since his day. Now you see players who never wear bow ties. Also, and this is perhaps due to the influence of *Break*, you see players wearing garish waistcoats. Barry Pinches wears a waistcoat in the colours of Norwich City Football Club, yet Alex was once fined for wearing a green waistcoat. Alex was ahead of his time in many ways.

Actually, the tournament's other semi-final was the more memorable one. The man Alex had beaten in the previous year's final, John Spencer, played Ray Reardon. The match was contested over the best of 45 frames, so, when Spencer led Reardon 19–12, he looked certain to progress to the final. However, Reardon had other ideas. He mounted a great comeback and, for the first time ever in the tournament's history, a player won having been seven frames behind. So the public had been robbed of what many considered the dream final: Higgins versus Spencer. In comparison, Reardon versus Charlton seemed something of an anticlimax. However, a rumour that was circulating did give the proceedings an edge. It was being said that, if Charlton won, the next year's World Championship would be held in Australia. This was unimaginable. The game was just starting to take off in Britain and losing the tournament to the other side of the world would have been a terrible blow. Whether these rumours were true, or just scaremongering, I still do not know. At the time, they got us a little squarely behind Reardon, though. As far as we were concerned, he was not just contesting the World Championship, but single-handedly fighting for the future of British snooker.

So, when Charlton won the opening seven frames of the 75-frame final, we were on edge to say the least. Reardon quickly turned around the game, proving that he was a great battler. In the years that came he showed those battling qualities over and over, but few instances were as impressive and dramatic as this one. He gained the lead and then never looked back, winning the match 38–3. Charlton had showed that you cannot win the World Championship by simply waiting for your opponent to make a mistake. No, you had to show some flair and adventure, too. You needed a bit of Alex Higgins, you could say. However, with the international flavour that Charlton had introduced to the mix, he had inadvertently sparked a great feeling of patriotism among British snooker fans. Some 25,000 spectators had flocked to the venue to watch the tournament. For 12 brilliant days, snooker had held centre stage. The game was on the rise.

But what of Alex Higgins? He had failed to defend his title, or even reach the final. Were the predictions that he would simply be a short-term success, a snookering flash in the pan, prove true? I

was certainly always good value entertainment-wise, including in his match against Fred Davis. During that match the roof leaked and the rain came pouring in over the table. ‘It was hilarious to say the least,’ said Alex accurately. ‘I guess they should have anticipated the problem – after all, neither Manchester nor Alex Higgins are exactly famous for being dry.’ Everything out of the ordinary that could happen seemed to happen to him. I remember him and Davis standing by the table and Alex was holding an umbrella. Everything suddenly seemed to be happening in the game of snooker and Alex was more often than not at the centre of it. It was as if shoots were springing out of the ground wherever you looked. It was newsworthy, for want of a better word.

Alex had told the media that he had not defended his title because of his new lifestyle of winning women and horses. He later admitted that the real problem was simply that he was not practising enough. This was in contrast to his earlier days, when he would frequently practise for long periods of time – up to 14 hours on regular occasions. His next chance to prove himself came during a tournament in Canada. The emergence of overseas players such as Charlton from Australia, South African Perrie Mans and Canadian Cliff Thorburn was key to the acceptance of the game of snooker as a world sport. Although snooker was very popular in South Africa, the idea of playing a tournament there was out of the question, because the country was in the stranglehold of the apartheid era. However, Canada was somewhere with no such problem attached to it. I went on a trip there in 1974 to compete in the Canadian Masters. Among those who also travelled there from Britain were young Midlander (and recent runner-up to Reardon in the 1974 World Championship) Graham Miles, Willie Thorne and Alex Higgins.

The furthest flight I had ever taken before this was to Dublin, to represent England in an amateur international. Technically, Graham Miles was the number two at this stage, having finished runner-up in the recent World Championship. We played in the Canadian National Exhibition tournament. If I had thought it was noisy at the City Hall in Manchester, then I was up for an even louder awakening in Toronto. There were two tables set in the middle of the main exhibition building, with thousands of people moving around all the time. Some would stop by the tables, to inquisitively watch what was going on. You could tell that many of them were wondering just what the game was all about. Even Cliff Thorburn, who was the new Canadian champion, didn’t really have so much of a following at this stage. Slowly but surely, as the week went on, more and more people came to sit and watch. It was fascinating to see interest in the sport steadily rising in the country. The fact that local man Thorburn won the tournament was even better. That there were two younger Canadians breaking through, in the shape of Kirk Stevens and Bill Werbeniuk, only added fuel to the growing appeal.

After that tournament, we then moved on to Ottawa. Maurice Hayes, a prominent snooker promoter, had booked another exhibition, but in the main the audiences wanted to see Graham Miles. In Canadian eyes he was the second-best player in the world and the real ‘pull’. Alex, naturally, was not very happy about this. He was not being given official number-one billing and people seemed to not know who he was. Trust me, he really was not happy at all, because he was not getting that level of recognition and adulation. For instance, when we went out at night people were not recognising him. So, to feed his need to be adored, he hatched a quick plan. It was a bizarre plan to be honest, but, Alex being Alex, he pulled it off and made it work. When he had been in Australia, he used to date a girl called Cara, whose father was a racehorse trainer. So there he was, feeling a bit unloved in Canada when he phoned her up. ‘I miss you, babe,’ he said. ‘I’m in Canada. I hate the place. Come over to Canada, then come back with me to Manchester – and we’ll get married.’ Only he would say that and only he would pull it off!

She flew over to Canada, where we had been playing games with French Canadians in snooker

clubs. One night, we'd had a game of cards and Willie had won about \$80 from Alex, who had a bad night. Willie knew that he would be very unlikely ever to see the money, so he came up with an alternative way for Alex to 'pay' him. We had also visited some funfairs in Canada, where they had a game that captured our imagination in a funny way. You had to throw a quarter-dollar coin and, if it landed on a plate, you won a big cuddly toy. I mean big – they were as big as a fully grown man. Willie and I became fascinated by the challenge of this game. Every day we would show up at the game and throw some coins, but we never had any joy. We just couldn't get them to land on any of the plates. Alex, though, had managed to pull the trick off and was therefore the proud owner of a giant teddy bear. Willie, perhaps suspecting that he would never see the \$80 that Alex owed him from the card game, suggested another way that Alex could pay him. 'I'll tell you what, Alex,' he said, 'forget the \$80, just give me the teddy bear.' So Willie ended up with a giant teddy bear and I had a huge buffalo cuddly toy, which I had managed to acquire not by landing a coin on a plate but by purchasing one from a lucky winner.

We hadn't heard the last of that bloody toy, though.

Soon after this, Cara turned up from Australia and we all had a real laugh together. We went horse riding and played at exhibition clubs. These were good times and Alex was on great form. One night the proceedings took on a bawdy edge. The announcer was reading out the scoreline as we went along in English and in French. When I reached 69 points, the announcer said, '*Soixanteneuf*.' I gave him a knowing look and everyone started laughing. Then, halfway through a game, I noticed that my cue was getting a bit sticky. I didn't have a cloth handy to wipe it with, so I decided to wipe it with my tie which was tucked into my shirt. The audience went wild with laughter; even when Alex was trying to play his shot, they couldn't stop laughing.

It was then that I realised that you didn't always have to play well to entertain an audience, but when I went back to my place you would have thought I had just made consecutive centuries, such was the ovation I received. Maurice Hayes approached me after the match and pointed out that, with my deadpan expression, anything I did that was silly became all the more funny. He said, 'You should try to do that whenever you can.' I am not going to pretend that thinking of something funny to do when you are in the heat of battle is easy, but, thinking back, I recall that many other snooker players do just that to relieve a bit of tension. It works.

Anyway, soon enough the trip was over and it was time for us to go home. When we got to the airport, little could I ever have known what was in store for me over the coming hours. As we were checking in for the flight, Cara noticed the huge cuddly toys that Willie and I were carrying. It must have seemed as if everybody had a large cuddly toy – apart from Alex. She asked him what they were. 'Oh, I had one of them, but I gave it to Willie,' he told her. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

'What did you give it away for?' she asked. 'I would have loved one of them!' Alex was nonchalant in his reply.

'Well, he said he wanted it for his girlfriend, so I gave it to him,' he said, conveniently omitting the fact that he had given it to Willie in lieu of the money he owed him. She was not happy at all.

'Well thanks very much,' she snapped sarcastically. Then she was off, because she was on a different flight from ours. So Alex, Willie and I got on to our plane, and that was when all hell broke loose between them. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place! That is exactly how I felt sitting between Willie and Alex as they embarked on the mother of all mid-air feuds.

The announcement went out for us to fasten our seat belts, which was actually very apt advice, as it turned out. Alex turned round with a very serious expression on his face and said, 'Er, Willie, I want the teddy bear back.' Willie asked him what he was talking about. 'I want it back,' Alex repeated.

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