

Action Billiards

- It was Balls to the Wall 9-Ball *

By

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It doesn't get any better than this. Star attraction: Hall of Fame member Buddy Hall. Line jumpers in from two and three states away. Champions like Tony Fargo [Clinton, Kentucky] and Linda Meyer [Pryor, Oklahoma]. In addition to Missouri reps, they thumbed, hiked or hoboed their way in from Tennessee, Illinois, and some from parts unknown. Arizona Jay was here as was Memphis Donnie Streeter. Iron Mike Borgmeyer and Joshua Jeans. No, that's not a brand name, it's a real person.

Missouri 8-ball and 9-ball champion Andy Quinn conquered this traveling show two weeks ago when it made a pit stop at The Break in Cahokia, Illinois. He was shooting for a repeat performance.

Champion Linda Meyer did the same from the ladies side. Former local champions scuffed their cue tips and cleaned their sticks like Kevin Gabriel, Jerry Terbrock and Richie Cunningham. Martin Warren came over from Rolla. Johnny 'the Big Ragu' Ragusa put in an appearance as did many other top of the line shootists. It was a Who's Who from the world of '9' ball.

Friday night March 29, 2002 opened the festivities. There were **SEVEN** mini tournaments. Most places have three or four. Maybe on a good weekend they might have five. But this is **Action Billiards**. This is where it's at. The place of places. Warm-ups for the big enchilada. The place in question once again: **Action Café and Billiards**. The old Starlite Billiards had been remodeled, repainted, renewed, renovated, refurbished, rejuvenated, renamed and reopened. Now owned and operated by California Bob Strachan and Hazelwood Kathy Arens.

Whoa, boy! Hold on just a cotton-pickin' second. Back this train up a little. Did I read this right (?) you are asking yourself. Sho' 'nough did. I said California Bob. The same California Bob, whom over the last thirty years has hustled his way in and out of countless poolrooms, bars and dives... big towns, little towns and burgs throughout the contiguous 48.

I know, I know, it's hard for skeptics to accept that Bob has transformed what was previously a dubious lifestyle (at best) replacing same as a respected entrepreneur and business owner. And the cynics say the jury is still out on the respectable part. How judgmental! Man. Nevertheless, it's true. Action Café and Billiards hadn't been opened a full year yet. Bob and Kathy's aim is to put the place back on the map where it had been several years ago when the other guy owned it.

One sure way was to sponsor a tournament. But not just any run of the mill tournament. That wouldn't do. This had to be different. A happening. An occurrence. A venture that would bring players and spectators through the doors despite the fact that it was Easter weekend. Something big. Something recognized. A specialty that would be remembered and talked about.

Enter Evelyn and Danny Dysart.

The Midwest 9-Ball Tour pitched its tent in Hazelwood, Mo. And who better to entice players to fill out a reasonable field on this Easter weekend but a sure-fire champion. A celebrated Hall of Fame sharpshooter the likes of the Rifleman, Buddy Hall. Who wouldn't want to witness one of the top 50 players of all time voted ever to play the game? At least forty locals with more testosterone than talent would anxiously enter hoping they would be lucky enough to get a chance to beat a bona fide legend.

Some got their wish. Some didn't. The ones who did can now mosey back to the ranch and unfold a tale that will sound somewhat within the bounds of reasonability. Josh Carmen would have to admit that he was out-gunned to the tune of 9-2. Chris Westerhold didn't do that well. The Rifleman waylaid Chris, 9-zip. (Before the weekend was over there would be three more 9-0 matches and almost a 5th, which I will get to later.) Others no doubt will tell their grand kids about how they had the Rifleman in their sights

and their gun jammed. The table rolled off, or, I scratched just as I was about to run out. Or, I'd have nailed him if my cue tip hadn't of fallen off and I was forced to use a house stick; a warped house stick. They're endless. They're priceless.

Speaking of Buddy Hall taking control of a match: I had the pleasure and/or misfortune to go up against him a few years ago. Toward the end of the match Buddy was clearly ahead 7-2. You know those little beads above the table where the score is kept? Those beads that are in plain sight so everyone within a four-block radius can tell how badly I am getting creamed? Yeah, those.

Somehow I got to the table and won my third game. When I reached above to move the bead, I hesitated. I looked over at him and said hey Buddy, which side is mine? He looked up at the beads and grinned. I got the impression it didn't matter which side I took he was going to beat me anyway. The final was 9-3.

But let's back up a few hours to Friday night. Seven mini-tournaments were organized. Most players like to enter these to warm up, to get the feel of foreign tables. Others just like to play against the best players. Buddy Hall entered the first one and won it. Practice session over. He's ready. Next.

The second and sixth were won by Kevin Gabriel. Those were the only two he entered. Dennis Gallagher won the only one he entered. Dennis Brown won one of the two he played in. Conversely, talk about determination, on the negative side Mike Harper was 0-4. A couple of others were 0-3. They kept coming back. Nobody was going to run these die-hards out. They played deep into the night and some saw the break of day. Hey, this is **Action Billiards** folks.

Saturday a little past noon the auction begins. There are 74 players in the open division and 12 ladies signed up for the ladies event. Excitement hasn't been this high since Hale/Bopp flew over a few years ago and the Mother ship picked up passengers and flew them off to Never-Never Land.

Evelyn announces that there will be three open bids. The guys with big bucks begin. The first open bid lasts a few minutes and when concluded \$620 was paid for [?] go to the bottom of the class if you hadn't figured this out--Buddy Hall. Gee, who didn't know that?

The second bid begins. Back and forth it goes. After it's all said and done \$480 was paid for Andy Quinn-the Eskimo. The third open bid saw Tony Fargo go for \$320. After that several went for over \$100, \$190 being the highest.

The ladies auction had a few surprises. Current champion Linda Meyer went for only \$30 while Julia Gabriel went for \$60. Rachel Slusser topped the list at \$70. That concluded, Evelyn shuffles the cards and the tournament boards were filled in.

Highlights

Memphis Donnie Streeter jumped out to somewhat of a rocky start but managed to overcome a little nervousness. He pulled out his first three matches 9-7, 9-8, and 9-4 before running into Buddy Hall. He went down 9-3. Buddy, as we have mentioned, opened up 9-2 and 9-0. The third match was tough going against Arizona Jay but Buddy pulled it out, 9-7. Then Memphis Donnie went down, 9-3.

Chuck Raulston took off 9-2, 9-7, and 9-6 before being stopped by Jerry Terbrock. Jerry fought his way through four matches, 9-3, 9-4, and 9-8 over the always tough Martin Warren, then 9-6 over Chuck Raulston. This set up the Buddy Hall-Jerry Terbrock match.

From the other end of the board Kevin Gabriel opened his first match, 9-8. Two relatively easier matches followed, 9-4 and 9-3 before running into Tough Tony Fargo. Always rough competition, Tony forced Kevin to the hill for the second 9-8 nail-biter for Kevin.

While this was taking place 14-year-old Justine Hall from Edwardsville, Illinois (not related) was enhancing his young reputation. He won 9-6, 9-6 and 9-7 over Dino Congiardo (who just whitewashed Jim the Painter 9-0). The kid was hitting them good. His match against Kevin could have gone down as a classic. Justine was crusin' 7-3 and things couldn't have been any better when ghosts of tournaments past

intervened. Kevin turned it up a notch, changed gears and pulled it out 9-8. This was the third 9-8 match of the tournament for Kevin. This was getting to be old stuff.

O'Fallon, Missouri's Iron Mike Borgmeyer got on a roll. He needed to. Everyone faced stiff competition but I don't believe anyone faced as much as Mike Borgmeyer in the opening matches. Where some players got somewhat of a break along the way, Iron Mike was in the flight that just kept getting tougher. It was 9-7 over Chad Bickel; then edged out Ryan Huelsman, 9-8; downed Mighty Pat McMillan, 9-4; then jumped right into the frying pan with Andy Quinn-the Eskimo, the man with iceberg water in his veins. Andy just came off a 9-1 laughter and as usual was in top form.

The score seesawed throughout the match. Neither Mike nor Andy missed a makable shot. Nice thought-out performances from both competitors; but as they say in books, it has to end sometime. Iron Mike thawed out the Eskimo, hung on to squeak out the 9-8 victory and picked up a very deserved round of applause from an appreciative crowd acknowledging another match well played.

This victory moved Mike out of the frying pan and right into the proverbial fire. Mike's concentration level in the Quinn match was so high that before it was over he suffered an acute weight loss of ten pounds; and now he was in for another sweat-out. For waiting in the wings with a Busch in one hand and a cigarette in the other was Kevin Gabriel. It was another outstanding battle. Both competitors showed once again what a great game '9' ball is all about: Excitement. To make a long story short, it was the fourth 9-8 win for Kevin (and third 9-8 match played by Mike).

As Buddy Hall just defeated Jerry Terbrock (9-6) that left a Kevin Gabriel-Buddy Hall showdown for the last survivor on the winner's side.

The ladies stirred up a pitch of excitement of their own. Whichever table these girls were called to play their matches you can believe they had a complement of well wishers following.

Paige Hester and Chantel Davis, from Teachers, always had a flock of male groupies tagging along. Christina Medley and Rachel Slusser had the same encouragement from the Action Billiards gang, and Julia Gabriel has always been a local favorite. The Oklahoma fans were strong for Linda Meyer. It was nice to see such a strong show of support for these girls.

From the top half of the board Julia Gabriel shot her way to the finals 7-3, 7-3, and 7-4. Her match against Paige Hester could have gone either way. Paige was doing a fine job of keeping up with the more experienced and tournament-tough Ms Gabriel until Julia put a couple of good safeties on her. The less experienced girl from St. Peters' game has improved a lot since we last saw her.

From the bottom half of the tournament board Linda Meyer steamrolled her way to the top. A 7-0 beginning plus the 7-1 follow-up convinced spectators that this Oklahoma lass was not to be taken lightly. Linda must have lost her concentration in the third match; she lost three games.

You do the math; 7-0, 7-1 and 7-3. That's 21 wins out of 25 games. This gal was hotter than Britney Spears in a sauna. I'm getting hot just thinking about it.

The top two ladies squared off for top of the hill honors. If the crowd was expecting a catfight with plenty of kicking, scratching and clawing they got it; but not in the literal sense. They scratched and clawed all right but it was for every game. The onlookers weren't disappointed. There was caution and safety play. There were runouts and hideouts. On occasion both took a flyer making things happen. One thing can be said of these competitors, they always put on a good show when they meet and today was no exception. They have the highest respect for each other's game and play accordingly. It went to double hill. Linda won out the tightly played contest 7-6 and breathed a well-earned sigh of relief. Julia went to the one-loss side and waited for the field to catch up.

Christina Medley was making her move. After dropping a 7-3 decision to Julia in her first set, this young lady settled down. Anita Foley took her to the hill but Christina pulled it out, 7-6. She knocked out Kelley Liebig, 7-4, followed up Jill Schriever, 7-3, then eliminated Paige Hester, also 7-3.

This brought on a rematch with Julia. But Ms Gabriel wasn't done yet and KO'ed Christina once again, 7-3. The part-time Action Billiards employee finished third taking away a hundred bucks. Julia's

win set up a rematch with Linda Meyer for the crown. Just a short two weeks ago at The Break Julia was on the hill when Linda came back through the losers side and double dipped her to take the event. But that was another place, another time. This is today.

There were many great matches taking place from the open division on the one-loss side. After Tony Fargo was deported he ran into a lot of stiff competition. First was Randy Enlow (9-6), followed by Johnny Neels, from Hillsboro, Mo. (9-8), then Chuck Raulston (9-2), Mike Schutzius (9-7), and Iron Mike Borgmeyer (9-8, the fourth double hill match for Mike). This set up a meeting with Martin Warren.

Suddenly the field was getting skinnier than Ally McBeal. The domino effect began. DaWayne Pearson lost to Arizona Jay (9-3); Jay was knocked out by Andy Quinn (9-7); Andy was run out by Martin Warren (9-6). After vanquishing Jerry Terbrock (9-7), Martin and Tony Fargo flipped the coin. At this juncture of the proceedings there were only four players remaining in the open division.

Kevin Gabriel made believers out of many skeptics. As nice a person Buddy Hall is he still is human made out of sinew, blood and bone. Kevin got him, 9-6. While this was going on Martin Warren clipped Tony Fargo, 9-5 just in time to face the Hall of Famer. Either Martin ran out of steam or Buddy hit another gear; probably a little of both. The score was 9-1 for Mr. Hall and a third place finish for Martin Warren. And here's another kicker; Martin didn't have a cent on himself in the cal. He announced before the auction began that he wasn't sure if he would be around to play Sunday if he made it that far so he nixed himself from the calcutta.

When Evelyn announced that table '8' will be the sight of the finals there was a sudden migration west. Jesse Owens didn't move this fast. A wall of people gathered around to see if Buddy could double dip Kevin and take the first place prize of one thousand dollars or if Kevin could pull off another miracle.

It didn't take long to see who would take charge. Buddy ran and ran and ran some more. He kept on running until the score was 8-0. Remember his previous match was 9-1. That's a total of 17 wins out of the last 18 games played. I'd say the man was in dead stroke. What a pace. What an animal! Maybe this guy wasn't human after all. But then Kevin settled down. A bit late but at least it wasn't the fifth shutout I alluded to earlier. Kevin made a modest effort coming back with five wins but the lead Buddy had was too overwhelming even for the straight shooting lefty. The Rifleman closed it out, 9-5.

Meanwhile Julia and Linda were in the middle of their first set. As Julia was about to make a shot she was interrupted by a passerby. He apologized for the interruption and asked if she was Julia Gabriel? Julia, being the polite and courteous young lady that she is said that she was. The gentleman, feeling a little tipsy, and obviously not meaning any harm, said that he just wanted to wish her and her husband all the best and hoped that they both were successful in the tournaments.

Julia gave him a quizzical look. "What husband?"

He repeated, "I want to wish you... hiccup... and your husband Kevin the best of luck."

"That is NOT my husband", she emphatically intoned, pointing to Kevin.

"Kevin Gabriel is not your husband? You both have the same last name. Are you sure?" Like she wouldn't know if she were married. Julia's pupils somewhat dilated by now, emphasized a resounding NO. Whether it was the tone of her voice or the stern look he received we aren't sure, but he pulled a retreat faster than the Iraqi Army.

Now Kevin, never one to throw high-octane fuel on any fire, walked over and stood next to Julia. He calmly asked, "Hey honey, who's picking up the kids tonight?" Then he grinned and walked away.

Now the guy didn't know what to do. He hiccuped and staggered off.

It was plain to see that someone was going to pay for this insult. It may as well be Linda. Sure enough, Julia finished the first set, 7-4, then came back stronger in the second set, 7-3. She turned it around. She returned the compliment of two weeks earlier.

The Final Showdown

The railbirds congregated closer to the action. More drinks were ordered and final wagering took place. The coin was tossed. This would be for all the potatoes. The championship was on the line. Closure was an hour away. It has been nine years and two weeks since Kevin won a big one in this house. Nine years and two weeks ago this was known as Starlite Café and Billiards. Me and 120 others were in that tournament. After my two matches I sat in the stands the rest of the weekend.

Nine years and two weeks ago Kevin Gabriel walked into Starlite and asked what was going on. When informed that the Texas Express Road Show hit town and was about to start he signed up. He paid 20-bucks for himself in the cal, plucked a reasonably straight stick off the wall and proceeded to run out the field. He went undefeated. Fourth place went to Reed Pearce. He was defeated by Ricky VanUum who placed third. Kevin ended the 3-day event by hammering Mike Gulyassy, 9-3. It was great. But it has been nine years and two weeks. Can he do it again? Will history repeat itself? Or, will the Rifleman outshoot the local Action Billiards employee? It was about to go down.

The match was on. As usual it was a good one. They literally went back and forth one game at a time. Kevin pulled ahead 7-5. For the first time in the match someone was two games ahead. Buddy won pulling within one but Kevin won the next game taking an 8-6 lead. Buddy came back. Running the rack for an 8-7 score. The next game Kevin tried a carom and scratched. Buddy promptly ran out the remaining balls for yet another double hill match. It would be the fifth for Kevin.

Buddy broke for the final time. A couple of balls dropped. But making the '1' ball and pulling shape for the '2' required coming all the way around the table hopefully getting past the '7' ball. He made the '1'. The cue ball traveled around and was headed for the spot needed when it clipped the '7'. It touched by the thinnest of margins. A whisker even. The cue ball found a pocket.

The phone rang; it was the Governor with a reprieve. Kevin got a pardon in one hand and the cue ball in the other.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I'd like to write that the balls were placed in such a way that God himself couldn't get out. HE would have looked for a place to hide. That every shot that had to be made required a breakout for the next shot.

I'd like to con the reader into believing that it was the hardest, most difficult, most complex layout of the weekend. That it would take great mental strain and painstaking effort to conquer. The most unbelievable 'out' witnessed by man or beast. The player would have been no less than a perfectionist to shoot his way out of this most arduous predicament. But I can't. I'd like to express how Kevin systematically perused the perimeter, analyzed the situation and methodically examined the field before him. I can't do that either. I don't like to lie to my readers.

There was no need to call for an Architect. No blueprints were needed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to research the data. It was laid out perfectly. Fact is, sad to say, it was a "Tom Cruise Run". I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but there were just too many witnesses to commit perjury.

It was a Tom Cruise run pure and simple. Five... straight... in... pop... and... stop... shots. It couldn't have been choreographed any better. St. Louie Louie Roberts couldn't have been more perfect. When Kevin dropped the '9', the place, with all due respect and admiration to Hall of Famer Buddy Hall, was a partisan crowd. All locals were pulling for Kevin. Nine years and two weeks, who's counting?

I think it's safe to say that Kevin's and Julia's stock went up a couple of points.

Sidebar number one: After the tournament most of the players that cashed posed for pictures. As you can see Kevin and Julia are enjoying the moment. As their pictures were being taken the gentleman who earlier approached Julia wishing her and her husband (Kevin) the best of luck, came by again. Kevin held out his hand and thanked him for pulling for him and his lovely wife- as he wrapped his arm around Julia. (Julia held back whatever she was thinking.)

Kevin grabbed the guy's arm and said, "Come on pal, we'll get a Busch on me." As they walked toward the bar Kevin looked at Julia and said, "Honey, I'll pick up the kids; you are having so much fun you stay and enjoy yourself. Love ya," and walked off.

The gentleman turned to Julia and said, "This is a very nice man you are married to. You are a very lucky woman... hiccup.... I'll bet you plan on keeping him, right!"

Whatever Julia muttered wasn't loud enough to hear. But someone thought he overheard her to say, "Read my lips. I did not have sexual relations with that man."

Sidebar number two: Mark Patrick, who no one has seen in five years, walks through the door Saturday noon in time for the calcutta, lays a C-note down on Kevin and leaves. He shows up Sunday night just in time to collect his money. As one observer mentioned, it will probably be another five years before we see him again.

Well, that's the way it happened March 30-31st, 2002 at Action Billiards in Hazelwood, Mo. Kevin Gabriel took out the open division; and from the ladies division, Julia (don't even think we are related) Gabriel.

	Open Division	Winnings	Cal Bid		Ladies	Winnings	Cal Bid
1.	Kevin Gabriel	\$1,000	100	1.	Julia Gabriel	\$300	60
	Bridgeton, Mo.				Granite City, Ill.		
2.	Buddy Hall	700	620	2.	Linda Meyer	200	30
3.	Martin Warren	500	no bid	3.	Christina Medley	100	10
4.	Tony Fargo	300	320	4.	Paige Hester	40	20
5/6.	Mike Borgmeyer	175	20				
5/6.	Jerry Terbrock	175	180				
7/8.	Andy Quinn	115	480				
7/8.	Mike Schutzius	115	80				
9/12.	Justine Hall	75	20				
9/12.	Donnie Streeter	75	10				
9/12.	Arizona Jay	75	130				
9/12.	Chuck Raulston	75	60				
13/16.	DaWayne Pearson	50	50				
13/16.	Lars Vardaman	50	190				
13/16.	Mike Werner	50	30				
13/16.	Johnny Neels	50	80				