

# True American Artform

by  
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"Double or Nothing on the nine?"

"Sure, you call it."

"Bottom right."

He had already potted the nine in his head, but now, since Jimmy made the call for the pocket, he had to rewind. He always knew what his next shot was gonna be. It came from a lifetime of playing. A lifetime of seedy backroom bars. He had given up smoking two years prior, but probably still did the damage with all the smoke round the table. Even though he now had a slight wheeze when he spoke, he wouldn't change the place. He loved the atmosphere. The smell of stale beer, the lights filling the smoke clouds as they left some drunkard's mouth. It all added to the moment and Rey lived for the moment.

"No pressure."

"10 G's for one shot, I'll take all the pressure you got."

He had a habit of doing that. Ignoring his accomplishments. "10 G's for one shot" didn't paint a true picture. It failed to mention potting the two off the break, or jumping the four and six to pot the three after a double kiss on the one. It also left out the other six pots with perfect positional play. 10 G's for nine shots? A thousand dollars each with two for the jump. He didn't look at it that way. He saw one shot standing between him and 10 grand. Him and a new start.

"Marcy, I need a Bud over here."

"Take mine, it's not cold, but maybe you get the next round."

Budweiser was his drink. Never anything harder. Jack Daniels or most varieties of Smirnoff went straight to his head. Budweiser he could drink for days. He stood by the table, behind the cue ball, staring at the nine. The one object that stood between him and glory. Two gulps and the bottle placed in the middle pocket. This was almost his signature move. Die-hard fans had seen him do this in every match he ever played. Like the wrestler who takes time from beating his opponent to show off to the crowd, it was a sign of confidence. And Rey had confidence.

"Tough shot."

"It is what it is."

"Play it slow."

"Not my style."

He placed his hand on the cushion, with the cue resting between his knuckles. A quick nod of the head to show he was ready and he took his position, staring straight down the cue to the white. Now stained by a variety of colored marks, the white sat six inches from the cushion. Rey had switched to green chalk a few years ago, just to be different. It had become another trademark.

"Any chance of getting you to play safe, honey?"

"None whatsoever."

His cueing action was smooth, but you never expected anything less from Rey. He could always, under any circumstance, stay cool. No matter what the stakes were, 10 grand, 50 grand, he would make it seem like it didn't bother him. Like it had no influence on the outcome. Usually he would only cue once or twice, but on special occasions he took longer. This was one of those occasions. Every time he drew the cue back, he would release it slowly forward, never making that decisive push.

"Anybody got a quarter for the jukebox?"

"One in my back pocket ... Don't knock the cue, it would be a crap way to lose."

Lydia never had a quarter for the jukebox. Over the two years they'd been together, Rey

must have given enough quarters out to cover the 10 G's on the table. He didn't mind, though, the music she played always went down well with him. He liked playing the shot to the beat. Connecting with the cue ball as the volume jumped. This was the perfect song for it, and one of Rey's personal favorites: 'Song 2' by Blur. He had first heard it in a bar in London on a trip to see old friends. It was the song that was playing during his best shot, his Sistine Chapel. A jump over the nine connecting with the black sending it around the table and back to pot the nine. This shot was easier.

"No guts, no glory."

One deep breath with his eyes closed was all he needed. 'Visualize the pot' his Grandfather used to tell him. He imagined the shot, saw the nine disappear into the pocket. With eyes open, he drew back the cue. Without any movement of his upper body, he thrust the cue forward, sending the ball down the table.

Rey had always believed that in all big moments, as in death, your life flashes before your eyes. Sometimes, it's not your life you see, but the build up to the big moment. Sure enough, as he struck the ball, the room lit up and the last 10 minutes flashed through his mind.

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"One more game, but this time, let's make it more interesting."

"Name the game," said Rey, in his usual, confident manner.

"Nine ball, 10 G pot."

"Jimmy, I don't carry that amount of cash around, but, if you sub me, you got yourself a game."

"You break. Tony, rack 'em up."

Rey was aware of the hustle. He had won the last seven racks without Jimmy making a pot. He knew he couldn't afford to lose, but then, he couldn't afford not to play. Rey knew that the ten grand was placed on one shot.... The break. If Rey was to pot off the break then he could go on and clear up. With the way he had been playing, it was a real opportunity. Although, with 10 grand sitting on every shot, a simple pot would become a tricky angle or an in off. But, if Rey failed to pot, Jimmy would certainly clear up. The hustle would have worked. It would all be over for Ray.

Tony finished racking the balls, but Rey always liked to double check. See if there were any gaps. Tony always left gaps, but somehow he kept being asked to rack 'em up. Especially when Jimmy was playing. Tony was his lucky charm. Even though he lost as many games as he won when Tony racked up, he won the big ones, and that was all that mattered. His biggest win was the first time Tony had ever racked for Jimmy. He won 15 grand after potting the nine on the break. Ever since then, Tony always racked. Nobody else had a choice.

Rey took the chalk out of his jacket pocket and dusted his house cue. One thing that Rey never believed in was having his own cue. He always played with whatever cue was near the table. He always inspected the cue and chose the best one, but he never took his own cue to a game. He practiced with it in his uncles' bar, but that's as far onto the street as it got.

"You gonna break, or shall I go for some food?"

"Gee Jimmy, you think that one up by yourself."

"Just break."

"Hey ... No one rushed Van Gogh."

Rey took to the table, placing the cue ball 6 inches diagonally from the back pocket. He found that changing his fingering on the break gave him more power, and the crowd loved a big hitter. No one worships the center fielder with 100 RBI, but hit 100 home runs and you'll go down in history.

He placed his hand on the edge of the table and slid his cue underneath his hand, between his index and forefinger. He spent a minute lining up the shot to hit the center of the diamond. A few strokes before one final draw. He unleashed the cue and sent the white racketeering down the table. It collided with the front ball sending the pack all over the table. The nine ball bounced off the jaw of the middle pocket. A bit less power on it and it would have dropped in, winning him the game. The other balls bounced off various cushions, but none seem to drop. The two, traveling towards the corner pocket, seemed his best hope. As it reached the pocket, it bounced between the jaws and sat on the edge. The thought of a bad break never crossed Rey's mind. He shook his head and stared down at the floor, contemplating his next move. All of a sudden, the crowd erupted. As he looked up, he saw the eight ball bouncing away from the pocket, after nudging the two in. Everybody needed a little help now and again.

"Lucky shot."

"I'll take luck if I avoid the hustle."

"Hustle?"

"I've seen the Color of Money, Jimmy."

With the two down, he went after the one. His hands were still shaking after his earlier shot. He took a deep breath, trying to recover. He looked over at Lydia and winked. Whenever she watched him play, he did this. His way of letting her know he's in control. She gave him a wry smile and blew him a kiss.

During an average game, Rey walked round the table over twenty times. A lot considering most of his games only lasted nine shots. He always studied the table a lot. If he were on the two, he would check the position on the three and four. This helped him a lot when he first started playing, improving his positioning and reading of the game. As he walked, he studied the three, noticing both the four and six between it ... and the one. This meant a perfect positional shot would need to be played, taking the cue ball past the two obstacles.

"You think too much."

"Pool is won in the mind, not on the table."

"Your Grandad teach you that?"

"You got it, first thing he ever did."

He knew the shot. In his head he was already on the five. He crouched down and took to the table, changing his fingering so that the cue rested between his thumb and first finger. He stared down the cue and lined up the shot. One draw back and he released the cue and sent the white into the one. To his surprise the white stopped dead as the one-ball drops into the pocket.

"A double kiss - your luck's out!"

Rey couldn't help but smile. He believed that a lucky pot will come back to haunt you. Every bit of good luck will be balanced out by bad luck. Potting the white, or a double kiss, just like this.

Looking at the table, his bad luck became more apparent. Not only had the white stopped dead but it had left the two balls blocking the three. The other balls scattered around the table seemed to have every cushion blocked, so playing it off one of the sides would be almost impossible. The curve was an option, but once again, the positioning of the other balls made it difficult.

"Play it safe, sweetheart."

"No ... I think I'll pot it now."

You had to love him. Confidence bordering on arrogance. But now he had to back it up. As the song says, 'It aint cocky, if you do it, and you back it up'. The shot in front of him could beat his 'Sistine Chapel'. He had to chip two balls, pot the three and leave the white in a good position to pot the four. The jump shot was one of his specialties. The first shot he ever learnt was the jump. When he started he was told he would make mistakes, and learning how to escape bad shots was important. He practiced jumps for hours on end. He could easily jump the length of the table. The real skill was managing to control the white after the bounce. Not only keeping it on the table, but keeping it on track to make the pot without the spin changing its direction.

"Take your time honey!"

"The more time I take, the more I'll talk myself out of it."

"What is it you say Rey? No guts no glory?"

Rey couldn't help but smile at that comment. He loved being wound up, made the impending victory all the more glorious. He never made comments to other players during games. You didn't want to give them another reason to make the pot. Jimmy always talked through matches, almost like a nervous reaction. Nobody ever complained, though.

With that in mind, Rey took to the table. He was aware that if he made this shot, the rest would be child's play. He was unlucky to be in this position, but his lucky break balanced it out. Rey aimed the shot as if the balls weren't in the way. Arching his body, he moved the cue to aim under the white. A few delicate strokes and a quick strike sent the ball in the air. Staying about six inches above the table, the white spun in perfect motion. Within a second it had past the four and the six. The shot all depended on the landing, and the effect of the spin. As it landed, it took another bounce, hitting the top of the three. The momentum of the bounce was enough to send the three towards the pocket. Hitting it on the top wasn't ideal, but it still connected. The three dropped with the cue ball in perfect position on the four. The crowd, now quite a following, erupted in applause.

"Yes! It's your game honey!"

"You made it look easy!"

"It is what it is."

Rey looked down at the table. The remaining six balls were spread perfectly. He stared at the table for several seconds, trying to see where a mistake could be made. It should be a simple clear up, but, if fate intervened and he missed, Tony would take it.

"What's taking so long? Looks nice and easy."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"Then what's the delay?"

"Just savoring the moment."

Rey had memorized the position of the balls. He knew where he had to put the cue ball after each shot. This was where Rey excelled. Sometimes he played half a dozen shots in under a minute. But that was only in less important games.

He crouched at the table and, without any strokes to get his cueing right, struck the ball, potting the four. Taking only a moment to chalk his cue, he got down on the table and potted the five. Rey could have played like that all day. He often spent hours on the practice tables clearing up. Putting eighteen balls on the table really helped his positional play. He was at the point where he could leave the cue ball anywhere on the table after a pot.

"Four shots left, not going to bitch out are you?"

"Not planning to."

Rey had already lined up the shot during that last exchange. As soon as he finished talking, he took the shot, potting an easy six. He put a lot of left hand side on the cue ball, sending it round the table. Just as he had planned, the cue ball sat behind the seven, leaving another easy pot.

"That's it, game over."

"Don't try that reverse psychology with me Tony."

Another quick chalk of his cue, and he was down on the table. Taking his time, he lined up the shot. He looked over at the position of the eight and adjusted his cueing action, putting backspin on the cue ball. A few strokes and then a brief pause. Finally, with one pull of the cue, he was ready. He released the cue and potted the ball. The backspin he put on the shot brings the cue ball up behind the eight.

Without even getting up off the table, he went over to the white. Within a second of getting into position, he took the shot. He put lots of the power behind the shot, and sent the white round the table, hitting four cushions. The eight ball slammed into the pocket.

Now he had an easy shot on the nine. A cut into the bottom left pocket. The only way he could slip up now would be by taking the shot too quickly. Possibly potting the white, or clipping the rims with the nine. This was the shot he hoped he'd have. He could have potted this with his eyes closed. He crouched at the table and took aim for the shot. As he drew the cue back, he stopped and slowly stood up. He turned to Tony.

"Enjoyed the show?"

"Double or Nothing on the nine?"

"Sure, you call it."

"Bottom right."

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He had seen every shot of the game flash before his eyes. As he struck the cue ball, there was a burst of light that returned him to the table. As he became conscious of his surroundings, the white connected with the nine and sent it towards the pocket. The shot would only take a few seconds, but in those seconds, almost anything could happen. Even in the busiest bars, these seconds would have run in silence. Everyone, whether they were watching the shot or not, knew when to be quiet. And on the flip side, they knew when to cheer.

The nine rolled towards the pocket. Rey started to wish he'd put more pace on the shot. That way the shot would be over already. He knew it was a cliché, but he always saw these shots in slow motion.

The nine rolled towards the pocket, slowing down as it went. It dawned on Rey that maybe he hadn't hit it hard enough. It could just sit on the edge, leaving a simple pot for Jimmy. As

it reached the pocket Rey glanced down at the floor. He couldn't look anyone in the face, especially if the nine stopped before the pocket. He realized he couldn't help but watch. As he raised his head, the nine hit the jaw of the pocket. He knew he had made the pot. If he had played it with more pace, the bounce off the jaw would have sent it across the table. A wry smirk appeared on Rey's face as the nine dropped. He couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief.

"Good shot, had me worried for a minute."

"All for the show, babe."

Jimmy had always been Rey's biggest threat, but also his biggest fan. When Rey played possibly his best shot ever, Jimmy had bought the cue off the pool hall. He kept it in a glass frame above his own table. But that was Jimmy. If he had dropped 10 grand to anyone else, it would have been an issue. But he would happily pay to watch Rey play. An education of sorts.

"Good Shot."

"Didn't think the nine would drop."

"Wasn't talking about that one."

"Don't tell me, you're gonna try buy this cue now."

"You heard about that? Makes me lose my edge a little."

"Are we good? Everything clean?"

"Your money's on the table. Tell you what; I'll double it if you can do that shot again."

"Michelangelo only painted the chapel once."

"Take your money and get the hell out."

Rey never needed to be told twice when it came to money. With Lydia in one hand and \$10,000 in the other, he felt on top of the world. As he walked towards the door, realization dawned on him. If he wanted a fresh start, he needed an end.

"Hey, Jimmy."

As Jimmy turned, Rey threw the roll of notes onto the table.

"What's this? My money not good enough for you?"

"I'm not returning it Jimmy. It's an offer. When I was down you bought my life, you remember?"

"Yeah I remember, I gave you 5 grand."

"Well, I'm buying it back. Now we're clean."

Jimmy looked on with pride. Although rivals on the pool table, Jimmy saw himself as a father figure to Rey. The money was a gift, and Jimmy had long forgotten about it. For the first time, he began to understand the boy standing in front of him.

"I guess I'll see you round, kid."

"Maybe ... or maybe we'll never see each other again."

"Maybe... maybe."

With all that needed to be said, already said, Rey took Lydia onto the snow-ridden streets of Manhattan.