

# SHARKED!

Jock of All Trades swims in dangerous waters as he tries his hand at billiards (by Nick Mystrom)



Pool is an interesting game. Almost everyone has played it recreationally at some point, but it's rare to bump into someone who plays competitively. I've played a fair amount of pool in my day, but I've never played against anyone who does it for a living – until now.

In my earlier bowling article, I theorized that there are certain sports which our society doesn't necessarily equate with coolness. That is, bowling a 300 game is nice, but it means you've spent a lot of time in a bowling alley in your lifetime. Similarly with pool, you've spent a lot of time in pool halls if you are a ringer. I'm not talking about the local tavern where it's 90 percent social and 10 percent pool; I'm talking a real down

and dirty pool hall with cigarettes and bad jukeboxes and Schlitz. There does, however, seem to be an elite upper echelon of any sport, which automatically earns my respect. Melissa "the Viper" Little is in that upper echelon.

The Viper earns a nice living playing pool. "About \$100,000 a year between tourneys [eight to 10 per year on the WPBA], sponsorships [Denver Athletic Club, Wynkoop and Jacoby Custom Cues], and teaching clinics." She is a full-time player and currently ranked 12th in the United States and in the top 20 worldwide. She has 18 top-10 finishes and has beaten the best player in the world, Allison Fisher, but has yet to win a tourney.

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## TALE OF THE TAPE

	THE JOCK	THE VIPER
HEIGHT	6'4"	5'4"
WEIGHT	230 LBS.	WOMEN DON'T TELL
AGE	36	37
STRENGTH OF GAME	TRASH TALK	POCKETING, FUNDAMENTALS
REASON FOR PLAYING	SHOW OFF IN BARS	PASSION, DEDICATION, COMPETITION
FAVORITE POOL PLAYER	FAST EDDIE FELSON	ALLISON FISHER

Anyone who is the 12th best player in the country at anything gets love from me. That's not to say that I am as big a fan of the Viper as I am, say, of the 12th best football player in the country (Terrell Owens), or the 12th best basketball player in the country (Tracy McGrady) or the 12th best baseball player in the country (Vladimir Guerrero). I am, nevertheless, a fan.

She got her nickname from a sportswriter who noticed her fierce and unrelenting nature during competition. "I can sense vulnerability in my opponents and when I do, it's all over but the cryin'," she explains, when asked about the relevance of her moniker. Sounds intimidating, but somehow I am not intimidated. She is all of 5-foot-4 with a very pleasant demeanor and claims that she almost never drinks or gambles, which I thought were synonymous with being a professional pool player. She's a far cry from my rough and tumble image of a true pool shark.

I think that there are very few sports where men and women can compete on an even level – pool may be one of those sports. With the exception of the brute strength required for a sledgehammer break, there may be no advantage to having greater strength or speed. In fact, after watching me break a couple times, the Viper thought she hit the ball as hard as I did. "We probably both hit it around 16 miles per hour," she claimed. After looking at her diminutive stature, I would have never believed that she could hit any ball as hard as I could. But my career as the Jock has been humbling, and I am learning to respect my competition more and more. After all, I'd been previously beaten by a wrestler who was 100 pounds lighter than I am, by Oprah in a marathon, by a golfer who was only allowed to use one club and by a 14-year-old bowler.

## I ALWAYS ENJOY BEATING A GUY WHO BRINGS HIS OWN STICK TO THE BAR.

As for my game, she was moderately impressed in watching me shoot before the match. "You've got a good eye and a good stroke; you know what you're doing." She corrected a few things about my posture – "Get lower, so your eyes are right on the cue" – and my vision – "Look through both of your eyes, not just your strong one; you're not shooting a gun." She gave me some tips on the break – "Draw it slightly and do your best to leave the cue ball in the middle of the table; place the ball near the second diamond and near the rail so that you can use the rail for guidance."

After watching me shoot a few racks and giving me some pointers, it was time to figure out our format. Her game is nine-ball. The basics of the game are that you must always shoot at the balls in numerical order and you forfeit your turn on a missed shot or scratch. The player who sinks

the nine-ball wins. You can either run the table by shooting the one through nine-ball in succession without missing, or you can combo in the nine-ball if you strike the proper ball first. She was absolutely sure that she could mop the floor with me if we played heads up, so we had to figure out a way to handicap our contest. She thought that giving me the seven, eight and nine ball was fair. Basically, I only need to pocket six balls to her nine in order to win. Also, if I made the seven, eight or nine on the break, I would win.

Unless you are really, really good, you shouldn't bring your own cue in that weird case to the bar. You will never catch me wearing a basketball jersey to an NBA game, painting my face at a Broncos game or putting on eye black for a flag football game, and I will never, ever bring my own cue to play pool in public. Somehow, I always enjoy beating a guy who brings his own stick to the bar. The Viper, on the other hand, has earned the right to bring her own stick. In fact, she brings three. One is for breaking, one is for jumping and one is for all other shots. The one she plays with is worth \$5,000 and has hundreds of metallic inlays.

I always know right away when I start these absurd competitions whether or not I have bitten off more than I could chew. The first time I faced a lacrosse shot as a goalie for





the Mammoth, I knew. When I got cramps and blisters after three miles of the Colfax Marathon, I knew. When I saw my junior bowling opponent crashing his ball perfectly into the one-three pocket, I knew. And when the Viper started effortlessly pocketing balls and leaving herself perfectly for every successive shot, I knew.

She gives me the break on every game, so it's my turn first. I am actually in the middle of a nice little run to the five ball when my house of cards comes crashing down. I miss an easy shot on the five in the side, and she cleans up the table like she's sweeping up confetti after a party. It's 1-0 for the Viper.

The next game, I bank in the six and, it seems, leave the cue ball perfectly for the seven, but the damn thing trickles into the pocket for a scratch. In the first set of games to five, it's just ugly – one mistake after another by me and none by her. She wins the first set 5-1.

Truth be told, we were supposed to stop there. But I couldn't let that happen. I mean, "Rocky" didn't end when Apollo Creed knocked him out, "Rudy" didn't end when he got cut from the squad, "Hoosiers" didn't end when Hickory lost a game, and I'll be damned if this article is gonna end with me losing 5-1.

As she's unscrewing her \$5,000 cue, I tell her that the fat lady has not yet sung and that this thing is not over. I decide it's time to get serious and revert back to my old habits. I start chirping a little bit and talking to her, and I'm feeling loose. I want to order a Bud Light, but it's 11:00 a.m. at the Denver Athletic Club, and the bar isn't open yet. She reminds me that trash talking is not a part of professional pool, and I remind her that I am not a professional pool player. Sure enough, the balls start rolling in for me. Most of my wins are on combos, but I run out the table a couple times and win 5-0 in the second.

Now, it's time for the third and final set. Almost all my opponents are better than me at their respective sports, so usually my only chance to get a win is to catch them sleeping and not taking me seriously. I think that this is what happened to the Viper in the second set. She let her guard down at the same time I just happened to be feelin' it.

The third set is ugly. She is focused and robotic in her shots – nothing spectacular, just solid pocketing with perfect leaves. As Fast Eddie Felson said, "Pool greatness is not about great pool." I scratch on the break, she runs the table. I hook myself and give her ball in hand, and she runs the table. Frankly, it's a little bit boring.

I play golf against a lot of different types of players and it's always the worst feeling knowing that if you make even one mistake, the match is over. Well, that's the way it was with the Viper. Even with her generous handicapping, I was no match. I guess I could spend the next five years in a pool hall perfecting my game and really trying to get this game figured out – but, I don't think that's gonna happen. I'll never beat Greg Louganis at diving; I will never beat Tiger Woods in Golf; I will never cook better than Emeril, and I will never, ever beat the Viper in pool.

After last month's surprising victory over the Rapids goaltender, I was riding high. Being bitten by the Viper is just a minor setback on the Jock's road to glory. I hope you all enjoy the Snow Angels in this issue; I know I did. Hmm, Snow Angels mud wrestling for next month? I think I like it.



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