



# *The Atlantic*

## **The Magician**

The world's best pool player sees shots no one else can

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At midnight on a bitterly cold January 15 the lobby of the Executive West Hotel near the Louisville, Kentucky, airport was crowded with men and a few women, all waiting anxiously for the guest of honor.

A man in a yellow windbreaker came through the front door and walked toward the registration desk. A murmur rose from the crowd. Everyone stared at him, a small brown man with slitlike eyes, a wispy Fu Manchu moustache, and no front teeth. He wore a soiled T-shirt and wrinkled, baggy jeans. He moved hunched over, his eyes lowered.

People clustered around him. Men flipped open their cell phones and called their friends to say "He's here!" They introduced him to their girlfriends. The man looked embarrassed. Another man thrust his cell phone at him and said, "Please say hello to my son; he's been waiting up

all night." The small man mumbled a few words in broken English. Then the hotel clerk asked him his name. He said, "Reyes." Someone called out, "Just put down 'the Magician.'"

Efren Reyes, fifty, was born in poverty, the fifth of nine children, in a dusty little town in the Philippines without electricity or running water. When he was five, his parents sent him to live with his uncle, who owned a pool hall in Manila. Efren cleaned up the pool hall and watched. He was fascinated by the way the players made the balls move around the table and fall into pockets—and by the way money changed hands after a game. At night he slept on a pool table and dreamed of combinations. He had mastered the game in his head before he finally picked up a pool cue, at the age of eight. He stood on a pile of Coke crates to shoot, two hours in the morning and two hours at night. At nine he played his first money game, and at twelve he won \$100; he sent \$90 home to his family. Soon he was the best pool shooter in Manila. His friends would wait for him in the pool hall after school, hand him his cue when he walked in the door, and back him in gambling games. He was the best pool shooter in the Philippines when he quit school, at fifteen. By the time he was in his twenties, no one in the Philippines would play him any longer, so he toured Asia. He wrote down in a notebook the names of the best pool shooters in the world, and proceeded to beat them one by one. He became a legend. People who had seen him play recounted the impossible shots he had made. They called him a genius, the greatest pool shooter who had ever lived. Even people who had never seen him play, including many in the United States, soon heard the legend of Efren Reyes, "the Magician."

In 1985 a small brown man, a stranger, entered Red's pool hall and nightclub, in Houston, Texas. He said he was Cezar Morales, and he offered to play all comers. Over the next twenty-one days he played the best pool shooters in the Southwest, and won \$81,000. The players he

beat argued among themselves about who was the better pool shooter, Cezar Morales or the legendary Efren Reyes. Shortly before he returned to the Philippines, they learned that Morales and Reyes were one and the same.

Over the next eighteen years Reyes won every major pool tournament and title in the world: the U.S. Open, the Challenge of Champions, the World Pool League Championship. He was named Player of the Year in 1995, and World Champion in 1999. He won the biggest prize in all of pool—\$160,000—in Japan, \$100,000 in Hong Kong, and around \$50,000 in a number of other tournaments. The Philippines Jaycees named him an "outstanding Filipino," and the government awarded him the Philippines Legion of Honor. He endorsed McDonald's, and Puyat sporting goods, and San Miguel beer. One of the first things visitors see when they enter the Manila airport is the image of Efren Reyes. His closest friend was Fernando Poe Jr., who campaigned for the presidency of the Philippines before his recent death.

Reyes and about 600 other pool shooters, mostly men, had come to the Executive West in Louisville to compete in the Derby City Classic pool tournament, three events over nine days, for prize money totaling more than \$180,000. They warmed up on seven practice tables off the Boozeseller Lounge, and played their games on twenty-eight tournament tables in a huge conference room down a long hallway. The first event consisted of nine-ball bank games, in which the object ball must hit at least one cushion before being pocketed; the second of one-pocket games, in which each player picks a corner pocket and must deposit all his balls in that pocket; and the third of nine-ball games, in which the balls must be shot in order, 1 to 9, with the last being the money ball. The winners and high finishers in each event were eligible for the overall best-in-tourney prize of \$20,000.

The Derby City Classic is not like most other tournaments—or even matches seen on ESPN, with the referees in black tuxedos, and a ring of polite, hushed fans. The DCC is a gambler's event; the players are less interested in the tournament matches that end at midnight than in the gambling games that run from midnight until 7:00 A.M., or the craps games and Texas Hold 'Em poker that run twenty-four hours a day in the hotel rooms.

The DCC is nine days of hustling pool, cards, and dice for men with such nicknames as Shannon the Cannon, the Scorpion, Scott the Shot, Kid Delicious, Spanish Mike, Goose, the Hurricane, Kid Confidence, the Killer Pixie, and Piggy Banks, and a few women—called, say, the Black Widow or Ming.

I found Spanish Mike, Reyes's trusted adviser, having breakfast in the hotel restaurant. He is a big-bellied man of seventy, from Philadelphia by way of Puerto Rico. "Efren is a poor loser," he told me. "When he plays for money, his eyes get like a snake's. That's his strength, the money. And his knowledge. Sometimes I don't see a shot, but I see his eyes going fast and I know he sees one. Efren is a genius."

Tournament action was in full sway on all twenty-eight tables in the conference room. Spectators drifted from table to table, watching the action, or sat on folding chairs against the walls. On a raised platform at one side of the room Scott the Shot, the tourney emcee, spoke into his microphone: "All starting times are approximate. If the schedules on the wall read ten A.M., the match could start at five P.M. 'Approximate' means within twenty-four hours." Scott the Shot—Scott Smith—is fifty-seven, with a spiky gray crew cut; he wore a shiny gray suit and a tie showing Bugs Bunny playing pool.

Ming, in black silk pants, flounced around coquettishly at Table 13. The Black Widow, Jeanette Lee, was practicing with her husband, George Breedlove, on Table 25. She wore a tight black sweater with a rhinestone black widow spider on it. Earl "the Pearl" Strickland played on Table 4. A long, lean North Carolinian who was considered the best nine-ball player of the 1990s, he had hit a dry spell that made him touchy and suspicious. He has a reputation for arguing with referees and fans, who, he claims, "laugh at me." At Table 10 was Johnny Archer, the Scorpion, a hunched, sinister-looking man with a black pirate's goatee who was voted Player of the Decade for the 1990s. Ralf Souquet, a trim, bald little man who resembles Tweety Bird, was playing on Table 9. A thirty-five-year-old from Germany, he was the 1996 World Pool Association world nine-ball champion. Reyes played a twenty-one-year-old from Ohio on Table 8. This was the young Ohioan's first tournament—"and I drew the number-one player in the world," he said, trying not to hyperventilate. It didn't help that Reyes had drawn a small crowd, which applauded his masterly shots and laughed at his self-deprecation. Reyes smiled when he missed a shot, scratched his scalp, slumped down in his chair between shots, and hung his head as if he were the most pitiful pool shooter in the world. But his disconsolation was not an act; his Filipino friends say he's a simple, humble guy who's astonished by his fame.

Scott Smith said into his mike, "What does a professional pool player have in common with a medium-size pizza? ... Neither can feed a family of four." His audience laughed, but it's true: the best players in the world earn about \$100,000 a year from tournaments. That's why they like to play gambling games.

Every great pool player has three talents to varying degrees: the ability to make shots; the ability to control the cue ball to set up the next shot, which

is called playing position; and the intelligence to read the balls spread out on a table so as to determine the order of successive shots.

Souquet plays a maddeningly slow and methodical game, which tends to disrupt the rhythm of his opponent. Archer plays a cautious and precise game, preferring to rely on position to avoid difficult shots. Strickland is an explosive shot maker who can be unbeatable when he is in "high gear," according to Scott the Shot. Reyes plays a fast, flamboyant game, marked by his ability to control the cue ball and make seemingly impossible shots, to read the layout of a table at a glance (he claims to be able to see as far as eight shots ahead), and—his genius—to see possibilities that lesser mortals can't imagine.

"Efren has more imagination and creativity than the rest of us," Archer says. "We're more basic. He takes one glance and sees it all. He knows things we don't. A few times he's taken a shot I couldn't even envision until after he made it, and I saw it was an easier shot than I'd thought."

"Three times a match he'll take shots I don't see," Souquet says. "He's in a different league than the rest of us. He's the greatest player who ever lived. But he's beatable. I'm probably his worst opponent, because I throw off his rhythm. I usually play by the book. He does wild stuff I wouldn't do, shots I would never take. I like to play Efren, because he is the greatest player. I consider him a friend. But I wouldn't play him in a gambling game. No one in the world will, unless he gives them a spot." In pool parlance a "spot" is the advantage a good player will give a lesser player to entice him into a game. In a game of one pocket Reyes might offer a spot of 9 to 6, meaning he would have to make nine balls in a rack to win, and his opponent would have to make only six.

"He's the best I've ever seen," Strickland says. "The luckiest, too. The fans love him and disrespect me." In 1996 in Hong Kong, Strickland and Reyes

played a match for \$100,000, winner take all. The first player to win 120 games of nine-ball would get the money. They played several hours a day for three days. By the end of the third day Strickland was ahead, 117 games to 116. Then Reyes ran out the last four games to win the match.

A year before that match, in Reno, Nevada, Reyes beat Strickland in a nine-ball game with what has become known as "the Shot."

"It was the greatest shot ever made in pool," Archer told me. "Efren's cue ball was behind the nine, so he couldn't hit the object ball, the five. It was a no-escape shot. But Efren hit the cue ball off two rails before it cut in the five *and* gave him perfect position for the six."

In Kentucky, Reyes won his match with the Ohioan easily and moved quickly down the hallway before anyone could intercept him. He is embarrassed by his fans' adulation. When he got to the indoor swimming pool, he sat down at a table and began to talk in the heavy Tagalog accent he calls Pampanga. He articulated each word carefully.

"I now like be famous," he said. "But not morning when fans call me sleeping." He smiled his elfin, mischievous smile, his eyes closing.

Reyes has two kinds of fans: pool aficionados who worship his genius, and Filipinos who worship him. When he plays in Asia and the Middle East, he stays in fancy hotels, many of them staffed by Filipino waitresses, maids, janitors. They see him as one of their own, a man who has pulled himself up from poverty to become world-famous. After his matches they bring him his favorite Filipino dishes of fried fish and chicken and rice. He takes staffers out with him to karaoke bars, where he sings and buys them drinks.

With his fame came money beyond his wildest dreams. "As kid I have no dreams," he told me. "Pool just sport. I never thought make money with pool. Now, I like my kids finish school and family be good." (When he's not on the road he lives with his wife, Susan, and three children in a country town in the Philippines called Angeles City.) "I support all my family, my wife's family. Forty-four, but more kids coming." He smiled his guileless smile. "I give just to family. I don't want anything to me."

Reyes's life today in Angeles City is not much different from the life he saw around him as a child. He putters around his house and front porch in flip-flops, shorts, and a T-shirt. Chickens peck in his front yard or waddle onto his porch and through the house. The house is a meeting place for all the neighborhood children, his relatives, and his cronies. They drink beer all day, play mahjong, have hot-soup-eating contests, and hold cockfights. Reyes rarely plays pool at home. But he does play chess, a recent passion. He learned chess the same way he learned pool—in his head first.

Reyes says the only player he fears today in nine-ball is Strickland. "But many young players are good now," he told me. "Archer. Ralf. Mika [Immonen], from Finland. It a young man's game. My game only fifty percent of when I younger." In pool, as in most sports, a player's best years are behind him by the time he reaches forty. After that the eyes begin to go—and then, with aches and pains, the stroke. Finally, Spanish Mike told me at breakfast, wiggling his fingers, "the nerves go."

Scott Smith worked his way along the crowded hallway outside the conference room. Before he entered, a man burst through the door and shouted, "Efren's got a game!" The crowd surged toward the door and poured into the conference room, where spectators were leaving the games they had been watching to hurry toward Table 25, in the far corner. The tournament players watched the crowd rush away from them as if in a



fire drill. People stood four and five rows deep around Reyes's table, with those in the back standing on chairs, boxes, anything they could find.

Reyes was shooting one-pocket for \$500 a game against Ricky Byrd, a pool-hall owner from Alabama. Reyes had given him a spot of 9 to 3. The crowd watched in rapt silence as Reyes won the first game. Byrd dug into his pocket, pulled out a wad of \$100 bills fastened with a rubber band, peeled off five, and handed them to Reyes.

A man was practicing by himself on Table 26. He looked over at Reyes and the crowd and said softly, "I feel like a fool, but I'm too scared to move."

When Reyes lost the second game, he gave Byrd \$500. Byrd handed the money to a big, light-skinned black man with a stubble of beard, who stood against one wall. The man was wearing a Phillies baseball cap turned backward, a T-shirt, and gray sweatpants. Sitting beside him was Spanish Mike, watching the action through tinted glasses. Some men in the crowd were talking on their cell phones, giving their friends a play-by-play of the action.

Reyes won the sixth and seventh games, to go ahead by one. Then Byrd won the next four games. Reyes was sitting on a chair against the wall. He didn't get up for the next game. One of the fans said into his cell phone, "Efren's in a trap." Finally Reyes shook his head no. He quit. A small man stepped out of the crowd and said to Byrd, "Play Efren nine-four."

Byrd shook his head. The crowd muttered, and some called out, "Play him nine-four!" But Byrd refused to reduce his advantage.

Finally Byrd turned and pointed at the burly man in the Phillies cap. "Let Efren play Cliff," he said. "I'll put up five dimes [\$5,000] on Cliff if Efren plays him eight-seven."

All eyes turned toward Reyes, sitting on his chair. He stood and said, "I play."

The crowd erupted, people yelling into their cell phones, "Efren's playing Cliff for five dimes!" Men started shouting: "I'll take five nickels [\$500] of that action." "I'll take a dime." Dozens of men waved fistfuls of bills at the small man from the crowd. He collected the bills—maybe \$20,000 in side bets—and wrote names on a piece of paper. Meanwhile, Spanish Mike produced a wad of bills. He counted out \$5,000 and handed it to the small man. Byrd did the same. The game was set: \$5,000, winner take all. Reyes would have to pocket eight balls a rack to win, and Cliff only seven. The first man to win eight games would win the \$5,000.

The first game began with an audience of more than 400 fans, all sitting on one side of the room. The series lasted six hours, full of unbelievable tension and skill. The spectators were witness to the game of a lifetime, between two men who, though rated the top two one-pocket players in the world, had rarely played each other.

Cliff Joyner, in his early forties, is from North Carolina. Despite his bulk, Joyner plays a game every bit as nuanced and delicate as Reyes's. He studied the balls and then tapped the cue ball so that it came to rest behind another ball, leaving Reyes without a shot. This is called a "safety." Joyner's strategy was to play a series of safeties against Reyes, hoping he'd become frustrated and take a wild shot that would leave an open table Joyner could easily run.

But Reyes didn't take the bait. He played Joyner safety after safety. He waited. He studied every one of Joyner's safeties to see if he could find a shot in it that neither Joyner nor any other pool player in the world could even conceive of. In this way the two men nibbled away at each other: safety after safety, then a shot, a pocketed ball, more safeties; each man

winning a game, losing a game; the games going on and on for agonizing minutes, the crowd silent, holding its collective breath, until finally the two men were tied at six games each.

Reyes won the thirteenth game to go ahead, 7-6. Joyner began the fourteenth game by pocketing four balls in a row. Then he played Reyes a weak safety by mistake, and Reyes pocketed seven balls in a row before finding himself without a shot. He played Joyner safe. Joyner returned the favor and played Reyes an impossible safety that was rewarded by applause from the fans.

Reyes studied the balls. His cue ball was against the rail, next to a corner pocket. The object ball was against the rail a few inches from the other side of the same pocket. To win Reyes would have to pocket the object ball in the far corner pocket on his side of the table. That seemed impossible. So he aimed his cue at the cue ball to play a safety. He hit the ball too hard, however, and both the object ball and the cue ball went spinning around the table, hitting one cushion after another in what was such a terrible mistake that groans rose in unison from the audience. The paths of the two balls crossed in the middle of the table; the cue ball headed for another rail, while the object ball moved on a 45-degree angle. The audience suddenly realized where it was heading. The 400 fans jumped screaming from their seats as the object ball rolled slowly toward Reyes's pocket and dropped in.

Pandemonium filled the room, people shouting, applauding, yelling into their cell phones. Reyes gave a little punch in the air with his fist and then sat and hung his head. He had just won \$5,000 on a shot that no one else could ever have seen, one rivaling the shot he once made against Strickland. That's why he is called "the Magician."