

PART II

Young Gun

JoAnn Mason, 23,
national 9-Ball
champion.

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BANK SHOTS

BANK

By Karen Kramer

Staff Photos by Bruce Gilbert

SHE HELD HER first pool cue at the age of 4, was "clearing racks" at 5, and by the time she was a teenager had won first place in a major New York City tournament.

Last year, at 22, JoAnn Mason — a native New Yorker — won the U.S. Open 9-Ball Championship and became the fourth-ranked female pocket billiards player in the world. Right now Mason is defending her U.S. Open title at the four-day tournament which began yesterday in Chesapeake, Va.

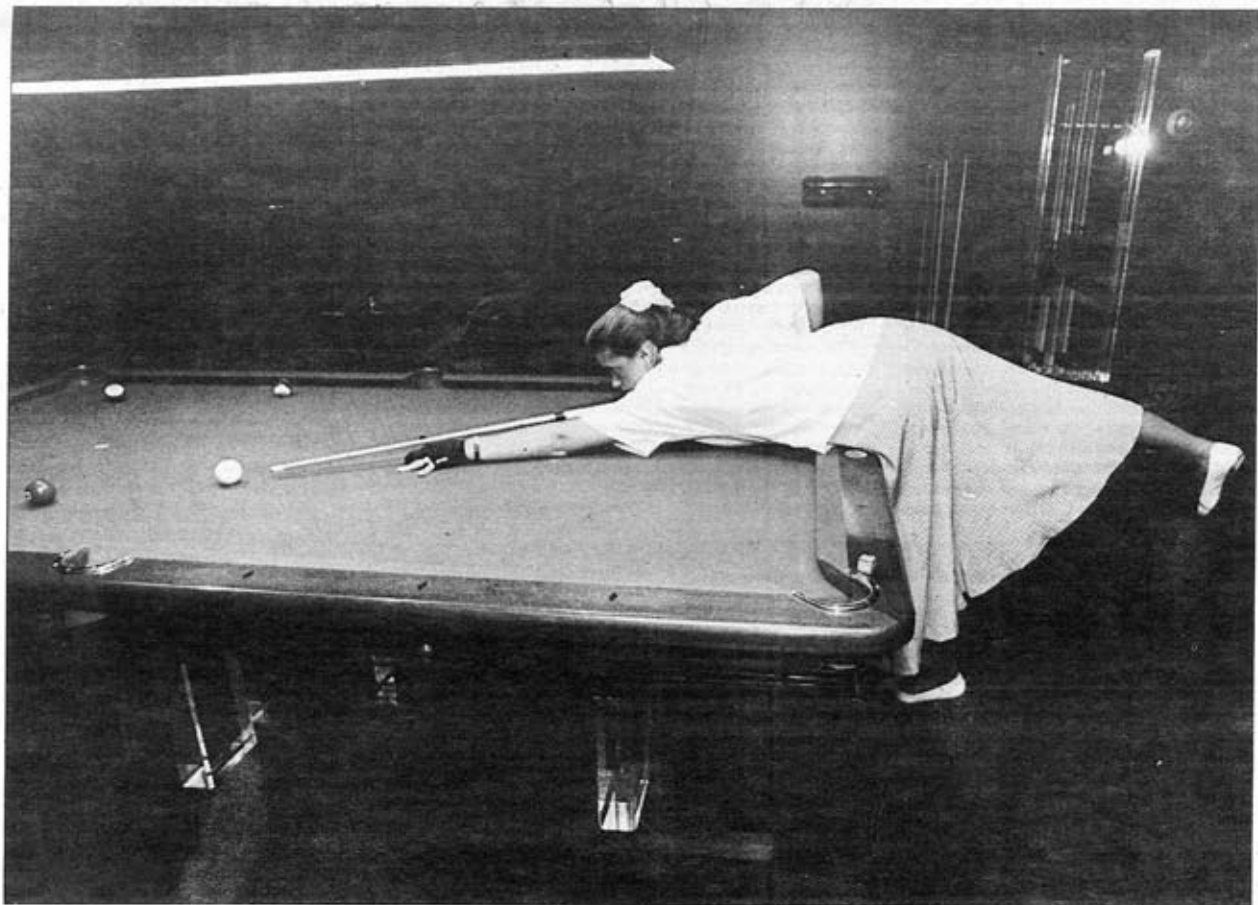
"I knew from an early age what I wanted to do," says the blond-haired, blue-eyed Mason. "It was never just a hobby for me. Even in high school, it's written in my yearbook that I wanted to be a professional player. Just like my father."

Harvey Mason was a professional touring player in the '70s, and when he went on tour, he would often take his family with him. The older daughter, Nancy, had little interest in the game, but JoAnn wanted to imitate anything her father did. One day, when the family was vacationing in upstate New York, JoAnn Mason picked up a pool cue, and she was hooked.

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JoAnn Mason practices constantly to retain her championship form, commuting to Amsterdam Billiards in Manhattan several times a week.

Since childhood, JoAnn Mason has wanted to be a professional player — just like her father. And her father became her first teacher. 'She was good from the outset,' Harvey Mason says. 'She just had this natural ability, and took to it immediately.'

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Because it was difficult for JoAnn to even reach the table, she developed a "sidearm" technique as compensation, a style where the stroking arm goes off to the side, rather than straight up toward the ceiling. This style, which was shared by pool legends such as Ralph Greenleaf and Willie Mosconi, still works for the 5-foot-4 Mason today.

While growing up in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, the Masons lived in the Winston Churchill apartments, which had a pool table in their on-location health club. After coming home from school and doing an hour of homework, young JoAnn would practice pool from 4 in the afternoon until 11 at night.

In those days, her father says, "the world of ladies pool was nonexistent. I didn't look at it too seriously for JoAnn because — what could she do with it?"

But things were changing. In 1967, the first U.S. Open tournament for women was held in St. Louis and was won by Dorothy Wise. She was 52 years old, and continued to win for the next four years.

Today, more than 13 million American women play pool, according to Peg Ledman of the Women's Professional Billiards Association. The association has 300 members, and about 25 of them are touring pros, Mason's level. There are three major women's tournaments a year: the Masters in Detroit, the World Championship (which changes location every year) and the U.S. Open, held in Virginia. A player's ranking is based on how well they do in these, and other sanctioned tournaments. Winning a major tournament can mean a prize of \$10,000, but players earn their real income from exhibitions and endorsements.

Overall, top male players are still superior to the best females, and the men's tour is more lucrative. But women, whose influx into the game is much more recent, have made considerable progress. "The women are good, they're competitive," says Harvey Mason, who teaches many female players. "They stand up well under pressure — sometimes better than the men do. Their character is strong."

Back in 1981, when JoAnn Mason was 13, she entered an 8-Ball contest in Manhattan, and then a national tournament in New Jersey, and won both. She and her father both began to realize what a strong talent she had. Of the national tournament, Harvey says, "She just made every ball she shot at. She was able to make shots that professionals make 50 percent of the time. It's almost as if ignorance is bliss. When your mind is in a pure state something like that can happen. She walked right through it undefeated."

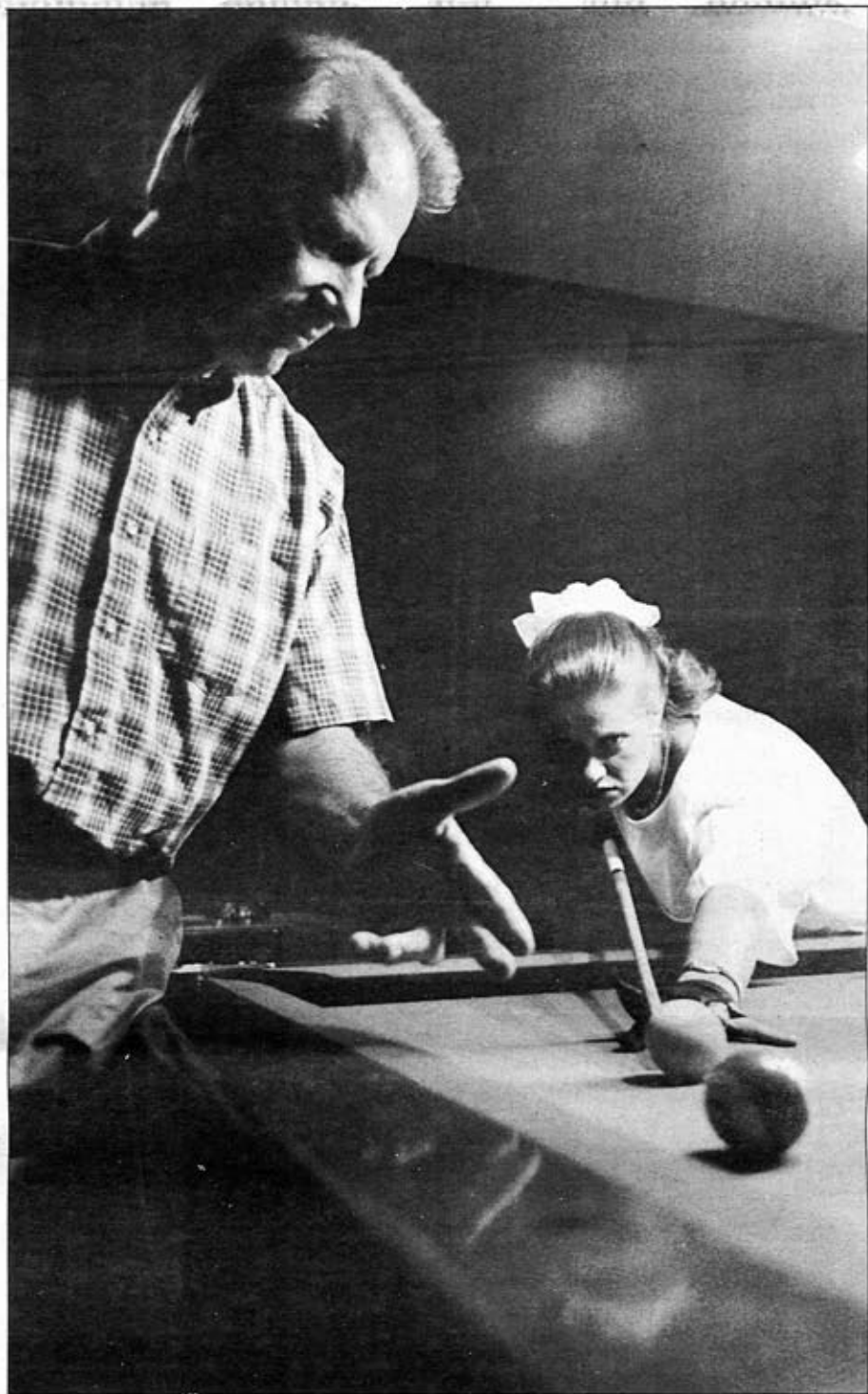
SHORTLY AFTERWARD the Masons moved upstate, to the town of Monticello. Following high school, JoAnn put aside everything else to work on pool. Her father, seeing how serious she was, began to give her lessons for the first time.

Since then Mason has taken first place in the Masters, and for four years was one of the five finalists at the U.S. Open. She has just signed with an international cue company, Cuetec, to endorse their product, and travel all over the world promoting it.

To maintain her ranking, Mason practices constantly. Several times a week she commutes into Manhattan to Amsterdam Billiards, where she'll often practice for 12 hours, stopping only to eat. "Upstate we don't have the nice billiard rooms like the city has to offer," she says. "Also, in New York there are always people to play with who are good."

Mason is on the road approximately a week and a half each month traveling to 12-15 tournaments a year. In October she will compete in two tournaments in Hawaii, followed by one in Sweden in February and another in Taipei in April.

Added to the tournaments are the trade shows and exhibitions she does, demonstrating trick shots and then inviting onlookers to challenge her in a match. At the shows, Mason promotes the flipping-coin she



patented (in a match, players flip a coin to see who breaks) and the cue stick and glove she endorses. Though she is reluctant to discuss her yearly income, she says she is paid around \$1,500 for a three-hour appearance.

If she chose to, Mason could be on the road all the time. "It could get out of control," she says, "but I have good influences around me. My boyfriend, Robert Parker, is very supportive of me, and we do a lot of traveling that doesn't involve pool."

Aside from her boyfriend and family, Mason's closest female friends are also professional pool players. Loree Jon Jones, whom Mason has known for 17 of her 23 years (their fathers competed professionally) is ranked No. 2 internationally. If Jones were not accepting her first child this month, she would be one of Mason's toughest competitors this year at the U.S. Open. Another good friend, Robin Bell, from California, is ranked No. 3. Though they are professional rivals, Mason says they are supportive of each other as well.

Mason is matter-of-fact about both her success and

the pressures she faces. "A few years ago," she says, "I was over-trying by putting a time frame on everything I did — saying I had to win a certain tournament by a certain age. But [now] I'm not into perfectionism."

"When I'm preparing a tournament, a lot of people will ask if I'm going to make this shot or that shot, but I don't think that way. It's one ball at a time. That's how I look at it. It helps me to keep calm, and that's why I handle pressures well."

Asked about defending her 1990 9-Ball title in this year's Open, Mason is characteristically unfazed — and determined. "I'm a much better player today," she says. "Last year, it felt unbelievable [to win], and it's going to feel even better this year."

"Through my whole life, I've been more afraid of being nothing than of trying to do something. So now I'm something. And I'm not going to give it up for anything." // ■

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