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by Carlton Stowers

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EVEN AS THE ambulance hurried away from the parking lot of the Full House Tavern in Wynnewood, Okla., on that Labor Day weekend in 2008, there were those convinced that the whole frightening thing was just another one of Billy Mays' elaborate tricks. What bystanders wouldn't learn until later was that as he was en route to the hospital, the legendary sportsman's heart stopped beating.

In fact, attending paramedics had good reason to believe that the country's greatest barroom shuffleboard player, in the throes of a full-blown heart attack, had played his last game. Even as they attempted to resuscitate him, the odds were that they would soon pronounce him dead.

Shows what they knew about Roadhouse Billy.

Four days later, with newly implanted stents opening up his blocked arteries, the 72-year-old Table Shuffleboard Association Hall of Famer checked himself out of the hospital against the advice of doctors and was back in business, taking bets, performing trick shots and pocketing the money of competitors half his age. "What I found out," he sagely notes as he puffs on a Pall Mall cigarette, "is that dying is easy; it's living that's hard."

Daymon Runyon couldn't have dreamed up this guy. He's shuffleboard's rock star — colorful, cagey and cocky. For most of his adult life he's traveled the American back roads, earning his living in beer joints and cocktail lounges throughout the United States and half a dozen Canadian provinces.

Understand, we're not talking the kind of fun-in-the-sun shuffleboard played in retirement communities and aboard cruise ships. Mays' game is the England-born pub sport played with circular weights that are lagged along a 22-foot, highly polished maplewood table. It's a game of delicate touch and warlike strategy. And Mays has been its master craftsman for half a century.

He's been crowned world champion more than 25 times. If barroom shuffleboard were an Olympic sport, he'd be up to his horn-rimmed glasses in gold medals. "I've always believed that every man born has something that he can do better than anyone in the world," he says. "I'm lucky. I found that thing I can do better than anybody."

And with that he's off on a trip down memory lane: beating movie idol Rock Hudson in a series of games in North Hollywood back in the early 1960s; being hired to teach legendary con man and hustler Titanic Thompson how to play; matching talent and wit with longtime rival Granville Humphrey for 60 straight hours in Oklahoma City; a 90-day visit in California during which he won \$120,000; and playing against guys with nicknames like Suicide Ray, Cable Car Denny, Blind John and Wacky Dan.

Hesitant to tally his career earnings, he admits only that he's probably won close to a dollar for every mile he's traveled. Suffice it to say, his endless search for the next game has spread over several million miles. You do the math.

And when he's not bent over the shuffleboard table, he's got a laundry list of bar tricks that'll clean your pockets. Want to bet he can't blow a dime from the edge of the table into a nearby beer glass? Trust me: Don't. He estimates that that one alone has supplemented his income by more than \$100,000 over the years.

None of which would have happened had he not injured his back while roughnecking on an offshore oil rig back in the late 1950s. Limping home to Dallas, broke and wearing a back brace, he was sitting in a local bar on an evening when Humphrey, at the time the premier shuffleboard player in the country, invited him to play. As Humphrey's partner, the 20-year-old Mays pocketed \$45. "The next morning, I was standing outside the bar, waiting for it to open. I played shuffleboard until it closed at midnight. Did that day after day," he recalls.

In three months, he was the best player in town, and he went on the road to expand his reputation. From

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION



Michael's Bar in Philly to the Barn in Costa Mesa, Calif. ("Appearing Nightly: The Costa Mesa Police Department," a wall sign once proclaimed), he sought out the best players and defeated them. [Johnny Carson](#) invited him to do his trick shots on *The Tonight Show*, and *Sports Illustrated* profiled him. He's just guessing, but he says he's probably won more than 1,000 tournaments during his lengthy career.

"While he's doubtless the greatest player ever," says shuffleboard-hooked Dallas [lawyer](#) Robert Hoffman, "he's an even better [teacher](#). You make a list of the top players today, and virtually all of them have taken lessons from Billy."

These days, Mays admits, his game isn't what it once was. A mild stroke in 2004 made it necessary for the natural right-hander to learn to play left-handed. And, oh yeah, he's been blind in one eye since age 9. Then, there's that heart attack thing. Now he plays only two days a week and doesn't travel as widely. "Truth is," he admits, "I'm probably not *the* best anymore. But I'm still one of them."

Volcano's Sports Bar & Grill in Hurst, [Texas](#), held a tournament recently, and [Billy Mays](#) played. Guess who won?

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