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The Hustle Of Texas Billy

He can't see out of one eye and he's not too good with the other. He looks skinny and puny, like a sucker. But Billy knows a dozen ways to beat you

Gilbert Rogin

I've always believed that every man born has something that he can do better than anyone in the whole wide world," says Billy Wayne Mays, a 31-year-old Dallas carpenter, his shoelaces untied, a pack of cigarettes rolled into a sleeve of his T shirt, eyes bigger than life back of his glasses. "But not many men ever discover what that something is. I'm lucky. I found the one thing I can do better than anyone. I can shoot hell out of that shuffleboard."

W. G. (Red) Oster, a contractor for whom Mays sometimes works, says, "Billy will climb a tree to tell a lie when he could sit on the ground and tell the truth," but it is generally conceded that he is the finest shuffleboard player going. Some hustlers maintain that the legendary Granville Humphrey, who in 1964 was sentenced to two years for unlawful sale of stimulants and possession of amphetamines, is the best man that ever walked up to a shuffleboard table.

"He went to the penitentiary to play," a hustler was saying the other day.

"He heard there was a table there," said another.

"And they locked the door."

"Granville Humphrey owes me \$1,800," says Billy Mays.

Billy doesn't confine himself to shuffleboard action. By his own admission, he's not half bad at the other games hustlers play in the beer bars and cocktail lounges where the customers drink tomato beer and Seven high. As he says: "Any man in the land. Any amount he can count. Any game he can name." This doesn't include pool—which he won't shoot unless he's spotted a ball or two—or cards or dice. "That's gambling," says Billy. "I don't like to gamble. Another man has a pretty good chance of winning. I don't like to play anyone that has a pretty good chance of winning."

Billy considers himself one, two or three in the country in Shuffle Alley, the coin-operated bowling machine played with pucks or weights. "I shot 68 perfect games in a row against this old boy in the Flamingo Club in Houston," he says, "and got beat out of \$400. They called him King, and he proved it. But then we went to another machine and I captured him for \$1,400."

Billy also says he's right up at the top on the Bowler, the coin-operated bowling machine played with balls. "Bob Miles—they called him Mr. Shuffleboard Himself—bet me \$10 I couldn't break 100 with a sack over my head," Billy says. "I had 106 on the fourth frame and a strike working in the fifth." Billy is fifth or sixth in the U.S. in bumper or peg pool and 10th or 12th in chugalugging. However, he admits that in the latter Suicide Ray of El Monte, Calif. is in a class by himself. "He don't drink it," says Billy, "he throws it down. He can't miss. He's got a mouth from ear to ear. He drinks a keg of beer between 8 a.m. and midnight. Draw him a large glass and he'll let you set a shot of whiskey on the bar with your hand four inches away and he'll bet you \$100 he'll beat you before you can throw it over your shoulder and set it back down. Then there's Tex. He takes a dime, sets it on a table and blows it in a beer glass. I'll take a little bit of action on that. Bubba, out of Winslow, Ariz., he picks up a four-by-eight-foot table with his teeth and walks around the room with it. He walks off with it. I lost \$10 on that, but it was worth it to see it. Tinkerbell sticks a knife in the ceiling and lines up a beer bottle so it'll drop in. He won't do it for less than five or 10, though. He's just a typical hustler. Everyone has some kind of gimmick to promote money on the side."

Billy's is his five trick shuffleboard shots. "Not a player in the world can do all five of them," he says. "Trick shooting is something you can make a little money on when players aren't around or when they won't play no more."

Billy will also arm-wrestle for \$100 or match up and fight for the same price. "The one that stays out there loses," he says. "It's kind of hard on the clothes, though —skin, too." He'll run you a foot race ("I can do the 100 in 10 flat—that'll beat most bar players") or bet he can outrun any car over 50 feet—manual or automatic shift. "I make them put it in neutral," he says. "I'm in neutral when I'm standing there."

Another one of the little games Billy plays is shooting lines—also known as pitching quarters. "I'm a pretty good line shot," he says. "I won a bar off an old boy in Memphis pitching lines. We were playing shuffleboard and they closed on us. We pitched at the line in the middle of the road. When the traffic got too heavy we had to move over to the ball park. But I pitch a lot better on ground than concrete, where if they hit just right they take off. On ground when it hits it comes back at you thisaway and then bounces back on the same identical spot. We pitched for \$100 a pitch for 15 hours at 30 feet, and the last six hours neither of us were over eight inches from the line. I won \$1,500 cash and the bar, but I gave it back."

Nonetheless, shuffleboard is Billy's road game. He's played in every state and says that California has the most action, Virginia the least. From 1960 through 1964 Billy averaged 100,000 miles and three or four used cars a year. On a number of these trips he was accompanied by his wife, Jean, who used to ride a Harley 74

and who once managed the Oasis, a beer bar in [San Bernardino](#). "We'd finish one town and then drive 500 miles and play the next," Jean says. "It wouldn't have been so bad if I didn't have to be chauffeur." Jean is regarded as the best woman player in the country and the superior of 98% of the men. Billy and Jean have often teamed up to play partners or doubles. They played head to head only once. Jean won.

Since Eldred Wayne, Billy's 9-year-old son, died of leukemia in 1964, the Mayses have done little traveling. Jean has a job nights printing color film for Econo-Color, and when Billy isn't working for Red Oster he is at his shop in [Mesquite, Texas](#), where he sells and services shuffleboards for the National Shuffleboard Company. Nowadays Billy generally plays once a week at the Silver Seven out by Love Field. "I got to keep in practice," he says, "so if a road boy come to town I can beat him."

On the road Billy prefers hitting the small towns. "Those of 500 population or maybe 1,000, they got that one hero there," he says. "In those little towns the people forces the people to play me. 'We know you can beat him,' they say. 'Play him some.' You hustle the big ones, you're just lucky to run into the right spot." According to legend, the hustler is supposed to let the fish win a few games before jacking up and busting him, but Billy doesn't see it that way. "I always figure," he says, "if you let them get your money you might never get it back. I go in and say I'm the best in the world. If you tell someone that you're the best in something they always know someone who can beat you. And if you can't beat the best in town you might as well not go on the road."

Says Jean, despairingly: "He'll play for \$100 a game and come out one ahead so he can have the pure glory of the game. And all those fishes there for 10 and 20 and he can't lose."

Says Billy: "I like to run across good players. When you run across good players you run across good money. If you want to run into a shark, you've got to wade in deep water. You can't be a bit scared of money. This is a game that takes a lot of guts, good steady nerves—they can start a fire behind me, I keep playing, unless I want to watch it—and you got to be brave as hell. Safe playing will beat you every time. People can't figure out why I win so many times. Because I go for it."

Says Jean: "Billy's ego won't let him play safe. It's lost him a few games. That's why many of the players won't play partners with him. He likes to be a showoff. It takes two to win and two to lose, but Billy wants to be the hero and win all the games."

Says Billy: "You go out to win but you always know there's a slight chance of losing. Over the hill there's always the next guy on his board."

The home board is a big advantage in shuffleboard. Each board has its distinctive speed, drifts and tricky spots. "There ain't a board in the world that's perfectly level," Billy says. "The straightest board I ever played on curved a half or three-quarters of an inch. Most curve five or six. [Philadelphia](#) boards are so slow it's like ice skating on concrete. A couple of years ago a player told me there was good action at Michael's Bar in [Philadelphia](#). I wanted to play for \$100. We played for \$20 and I lost five in a row. I never missed a weight, lagged a one or went off the board. They wouldn't shoot at threes; they'd outlag them. The old boy I was playing against lagged 25 straight threes. That board was so slow you could throw them overhand and they wouldn't go nowhere. We drove 1,000 miles to make all that money, but the player who told us to go there neglected to tell us they'd beat him. I finally captured them, though. I have a 72% chance of winning on a board I've played two days."

"The more crooked the board the better I play. There was one in Gallup, N. Mex. that was ungodly. Felix knew every little crook in that board and he was a boogerbear. He busted me twice. I came back the next day and captured him. C. B. Faulkner, who was once offered a fight with [Sugar Ray Robinson](#), has a damned crooked backside board he plays on in [Little Rock](#). You need a road map to play it."

Boards aren't all that's crooked in shuffleboard. Players have been known to put salt on the end of a board to stop a weight, or use a magnet or spit on the weight or put ear wax on the bottom. Or they'll jack up the legs of the table to change the drift or raise up an end and kick a cigarette butt or beer coaster under a leg.

Billy rarely finds it necessary to assume a false identity to get action on the road, and the few times he's tried it it has backfired. Once, in [Memphis](#), he introduced himself as Wayne Mays in the hope he wouldn't be recognized. "Oh," the fish said, "you're that Wayne Mays that passed through here a few years ago." Another time, in Pasco, Wash., he decided to go under the name of Wayne Nickels, but the next day when someone asked what was his name again, he couldn't remember. "I knew it wasn't Quarter or Penny," Billy recalls thinking, "so I told him, 'Wayne Dimes.'" Since Billy doesn't have to shave more than twice a week he's had no luck growing a beard, but he has been known to put his arm in a sling to go hustling. His ineffectual appearance usually works as well as anything. As a player said the other day: "Look at Billy Mays. He don't look like he can do nothing. He don't look like he can cross the street."

Billy Mays was born in Emory, [Texas](#), was smoking when he was 5, rolling his own when he was 6, was married four times before he was 21 and has gone to jail seven times in one day. When he was 9 one of his five brothers hit him in the right eye with a slingshot and he hasn't seen out of it since. When he was 17, Donnie Fleeman, who later kayoed [Ezzard Charles](#) and fought [Roy Harris](#), knocked him cross-eyed by hitting him on the back of the head. When a player recently suggested that Billy even things up by playing without his glasses, Billy said: "I'll tell you what, I'll shoot without them if you shoot with them." Indeed, to get games Billy often has to play with one hand or with a broomstick or backwards or blindfolded. These are what are known as spots. "A spot," says Billy, "is something that sounds like it give you a chance—but don't." As a matter of fact, there is a blind man that plays horse collar, one of the half a dozen shuffleboard games. "I don't know anyone can go up and beat him where he plays," says Billy. "Blind John. [Wichita Falls, Texas](#)." There's even a horse that plays in Truth or Consequences, N. Mex. He picks up the weight with his teeth and pushes it with his nose. "I'll play that horse for \$50," a hustler told its owner not too long ago. "I imagine I can beat him." "You probably could," the owner said, "but I'll bet you \$100 you couldn't find another horse that could."

Before he took up shuffleboarding Billy was a pretty fair boxer. When he was 16 he was middleweight champion of Fort Leonard Wood despite the fact that you have to be 17 and see out of two eyes to be in the Army. Billy still gets in the odd fight. "I walk away from a fight," he says, "but they better not follow me." He doesn't take his glasses off before a fight. "I never have to hit a man more than one time in what you call streetfighting," he explains. Indeed, it was his big punch and not his birthplace that got him his road name—Texas Billy. This came about in the Park Inn Diner in [Buena Park, Calif.](#) The way Billy says it happened, a rodeoer who stood 6'10", went 285 and wore a big cowboy hat came into the place, "wiped a big old X in the middle of the shuffleboard and said: 'The game is stopped!' It just so happen two real tough boys are playing. They really love to fight. I jumped up on the bar and put my feet on the stool. One of the boys grabs him a shuffleboard weight and hits Tex in the chest. 'If you don't want to eat that weight...,' Tex says." What with one thing and another the question was posed as to who was or wasn't going to pull Tex's hat down over his ears. It turned out to be Billy, who knocked him down with one punch. "He came in 10 feet tall and went out two," says a player named Eddie

Contreras, who was there. "The next day he showed up on TV in the calf-roping contest with a bandage around his head. Tied his calf in pretty good time, too."

"When I was 22 I was the best shuffleboard player in the world," Billy says. "When I was 21 I didn't know what a shuffleboard was." Billy got started playing after breaking his back falling out of a 125-foot oil derrick. Actually, the way Billy tells it, he fell about 25 feet, then grabbed hold of a pipe and, evidently, sort of slid the rest of the way. While he was hanging around **Dallas** with his back in a brace he got hustled into a game in Sam's Place, drew Granville Humphrey as a partner, won \$40, played the rest of the day and lost all of it back. For the next three months Billy opened Sam's at 8 a.m. and didn't leave until they shut the door at midnight. "At the end of three months I was the best player in **Dallas**," he says.

But Billy didn't make his name until 1962, when he beat Bob Miles out of \$22,000 in the Park Inn Diner. "We played for 30 hours," Billy says. "Let's play for \$100," Bob Miles said. "Let's play for \$200," I said. "Make it \$300," he said. "Make it \$400," I said. There were 120 people in there betting, and only three were betting on me. I won 18 in a row—19 out of 21. He went busted five times and had to go get money. While he was gone I played \$500 freeze-out with Mexican Tommy—he's an interior decorator who has the most beautiful shot in shuffleboard, it's poetry in motion—and K. C. Kid, who's also known as K. C. Chuck. K. C. started betting on me after I busted *him*. Won \$4,800. Another boy won \$4,000. Some nights you throw those weights up there, looks like someone stop them with a string."

The most Billy ever played for was \$1,000 a game in Pasco, Wash.; he won \$10,000. Billy also says he once won \$10,000 in **Stockton, Calif.** "Mostly hot checks," he says. "From a rich man—supposedly. The bar was guaranteeing his checks. But when they turned out to be hot they said they didn't know he was going so strong." Billy claims he has \$100,000 in bad checks in his bureau drawer.

"I don't play against paper," Jean says, "I don't like no paper and I don't give no paper. The last one I had was for \$400, and I sold it for \$50. I can show you a stack of checks that won't quit."

"They play that last game on nerve," Billy says. "A guts game. They give you a check to keep from fighting you."

Insolvent or busted shuffleboard players are often able to get bankrolled by people like Chuck the Backer for half their winnings, if any. There are also specialists such as Caroline, who are, in effect, backer brokers. "Caroline, he wears a little black derby," Jean says. "You won't shut him up no way. Ask him can he play any game, that's his road game. Never spends his money. But he'll sell you a backer."

"For a split, he'll get you a backer," says Billy. "Chuck the Backer, he can't play for nothing."

When Billy is playing, Jean banks the winnings in her purse or in her panty girdle. "They've taken Billy a couple of times," she says, "but they never took me. I had this .25 automatic. I could get five bull's eyes out of 10 at 30 yards. When he's playing I always make sure to find me a seat with my back to the wall and watch his back. He can't watch his back and front, too." On several occasions Jean had to show the gun to get them out the door. Jean does all right with her hands, too. She has two or three small scars about her mouth from fights. The Mayses lost the .25 after Billy used it on a man who robbed him at knife point in **Miami**. Billy says to only push him so far. He once accidentally scalped a man by punching him between the eyes. Another time he rammed a broomstick down a man's throat, which is the only thing he's ashamed of in this line.

Jean doesn't like to let Billy have more than \$100 in his pockets. "The shorter money he has, the better he plays. Every time he has \$200 he loses. Just keep him with \$100 and he wins. Billy shoots his best game when no one's watching or on real short money."

Billy is what is known as a marathon player. "I don't really get warmed up till I stay up 24 hours," he says. "In 1961 I played one man for 60 hours without stopping. I had already been up a day and a half. **Oklahoma City**. I won \$1,800. Anytime a player starts playing a marathon player for a few hours it's just like sticking a gun in his belly and saying give him your money, because he's going to get it." Unlike most players, if Billy is playing a session—10 or 15 straight games—he stays away from the booze. "When it's for serious money he drinks milk," says Jean. "I don't go in these places to drink," says Billy. "I can drink at home." And, unlike most players, Billy isn't on pills—what they call goodies. "I can stay up longer without them than with them," he says. 'Wacky Dan [which is not his real name], he misses a three, he runs outside, takes 10 bennies, runs inside, misses another three. Another player buys them 10,000 at a time."

"One guy I was playing asked me whether I had any goodies on me," says Jean. "I gave him two tranquilizers."

"But the longer you stay up," says Billy, "the softer that pool table gets to looking."

Billy considers shuffleboard a more difficult game than pool, and shuffleboard players more socially acceptable than pool players. "In pool you start making balls in a month," he says. "To be any good in shuffleboard takes you a year. I've never seen a pool player that's worth a damn—as being a good guy. Shuffleboard players are businessmen, have real nice jobs, with a few exceptions. Bill Milton makes false teeth. Garry Moore is a postman. Kenny Herdman is a superintendent for Bell. Clyde Jones—they call him Jonesy—he has a nursery."

Billy feels he's better than they are because he is more cunning. "There's 100 players that shoot or lag as good or better than I do," he says, "but they don't win the games I do. So there's got to be something else. I outthink them. It's like playing chess. You got to play way ahead of your opponent. A lot of them don't know how to play way ahead. In this game all you concentrate on is stealing points. Knowing how to get them is the main factor. The others concentrate on hitting weights and lagging and hope the other guy misses. I make them miss, make them do stuff they don't want to do. They finally get disgusted because they can't hit the weight where I put it. Whenever I find a place I can't shoot pretty good, I try to make sure a player don't get to put nothing on me there. In other words, I block that spot. Every player has a weakness that a player can beat him with. I have one. I'm the only one that knows it and I'm not sure of it. The majority of boards, it's hard for me to stick five inches off the rail in the deuce or troy."

"But overall I haven't lost to a single player in the last five years. Three times I've lost money. Jonesy. Bill Van Curan—they call him Bill Van. Mexican Tommy come out ahead of me one night. Bill Van outlagged a four on me for \$500. An impossible shot that was possible. That was the only time I've ever seen it. I've outlagged a lot of threes, but I never outlagged a four. But I get a big bang out of watching them beat me. It's the thrill of their lives. It tickles me."

"He loves to play so much he'll actually lose money just to play," says Jean. "He'll spot himself out."

"Whenever I get playing I have no interest in money," says Billy. "I just like to play to be playing. It'll relax you more than anything in the world. Whenever I play I don't have a worry in the world. Everything else is gone. Life's just a big lot of laughs."

"I never made a nickel playing shuffleboard," a player named Rod Cameron was saying not too long ago. "I like the atmosphere. You meet a lot of characters like Billy. If you wrote up every game he lost you wouldn't have enough paper. He's been busted more than any shuffleboard hustler."

"I made more money than any shuffleboard hustler," said Billy. "I usually spot Rod a point and a hammer and he won't play. I'll play anyone in the world on any board, give them 14 points if they give me all the hammers."

"Let's slow down something," another player said to Billy. "I'll buy your glasses for \$50."

"If he can't outshoot you, he'll outtalk you," said Jean.

This was in Moose Lodge 1818, a storefront in [Dallas](#) where Billy was promoting what he called the First Official World's Shuffleboard Tournament, \$1,000.00 Guaranteed. Billy was eliminated in the singles but he and Bill Milton of Davis, [Okla.](#) took second in the doubles. Then, the day following the tournament, Billy busted three players, making \$1,400. (Players are never wholly broke, however, for, as Billy says, "any hustler, you always give him road money.") "That's why I like tournaments," he says. "The gathering of the players. Everyone got to try me."

Two days later Billy and Jean flew to [Los Angeles](#), rented a car and drove to the Islander bar in [Garden Grove, Calif.](#), which has blowfish for light fixtures and "Kanes" and "Wahines" on the restroom doors and where they had heard there was action.

"We got to find out where they're playing," Billy said. "Let everyone know we're in town. In two hours half the players in southern [California](#) will know we're here."

As it turned out, there wasn't any action at the Islander, so Billy called the Dixie Tavern in Chino, where he had played on his last trip to [California](#) two years previous.

"They said they're playing at the Hi-Spot in Rubidoux," Billy said when he returned to the car. "The reasons players move around be a player at one particular spot loses a lot of money. But all you got to do is find one player and you find all the action."

Billy and Jean took a motel room in Riverside, which is near Rubidoux, and drove out to J.D.'s Hi-Spot, a gabled beer bar that sits on a desolate stretch of Mission Highway. Billy learned the players wouldn't be in until the weekend. But he did run into Tommy Galvin, out of Cucamonga, who was 24 and had been half of the third-place doubles team in Billy's tournament. Tommy mentioned that his real father was a big producer. "I don't know his name," he added vaguely. "I don't play to prove I'm a player. I play to make money. I used to hustle pool. I gave it up. Too much competition. I look like an easy fish. I make the payments on my car."

Billy, Jean and Tommy drove to the Jolly Jug in Montclair, a cocktail lounge with spangles on the ceiling approximating stars; a brown doll made out of what looked like a chlorine jug sat on the piano bar. Jonesy was there, and Billy played him five games. Jonesy won the first two for \$10. Billy jacked him up to \$20 and won the next game, lost the next, jacked him up to \$30 and won. Jonesy said he had to go home, and Billy, Jean and Tommy took off for The Barn in [Costa Mesa](#), which has a sign on the wall reading: APPEARING NIGHTLY THE COSTA MESA POLICE DEPARTMENT. At 2, Jean lay down on three bar stools and tried to sleep. All the lights were out except those illuminating the shuffleboard table, the Bowler and the cigarette machine. When they left The Barn, Billy was still trying to get A.Z. and Jack to play for \$100 an end. "If we'd have played three more games we'd have won all three, most likely," he said later.

The next night Billy was back at the Hi-Spot, shoelaces dragging.

"I want all that [Texas](#) money before it gets out of town," said Eddie Contreras, who was waiting for him.

"You going to have to steal it," said Billy.

"Now that he looks like a piece of spaghetti, I'll lick him in arm-wrestling," Contreras said.

Billy started riding Horace (not his real name), and his girl, a couple of card thieves.

"I'll tell you what," Billy said. "Any game. I'll play you pool for \$50 a game, shuffleboard for \$50 a game."

"That means you win one and get a chance in the other," said Horace. "I'll flip you a coin for \$100."

Billy was finally reduced to doing his trick shots for drinks all around. Horace bought.

"Man, that's some strong," said Horace's girl friend. "I'd like to borrow this guy. Double the bankroll in four or five days."

Billy drove over to the Headhunters, a beer bar in [Fontana](#), where the owner said he'd give him \$19 appearance money. In the car Billy said: "I chased a bunch of geese in my life. Boy, I chased a lot of geese all over. You get tired of being the best. I'm going to retire at 35—retire from playing and working. I got eight acres of land in East [Texas](#). Two years I'll buy another 100 acres, lounge around, live on the farm, raise cattle and horses, go fishing, water ski. I'm going to build me a round house, because it's something different. Build it around a tree. I got the idea when I was laying bricks, building bars in millionaires' homes."

At the Headhunters a woman asked him: "Do you want to play for money? I got \$2 here." "I generally don't like an overfriendly bar," Billy confided. The lady kept after him. Billy told her he didn't play for less than \$5. She finally got up the \$5 and he beat her and then beat someone else. Billy said that in Pasco, Wash., a man wanted to play him for \$50 just to say he played a hustler. "He talked it over with his wife," Billy said. "I know you play for a lot more," the man said, "but won't you please play me for \$50?"

Jean had to be back at Econo-Color the next night, so Billy drove her to the airport in [L.A.](#) Then he took off for the Jolly Jug, where there was going to be a shuffleboard tournament between teams representing the Jug and the Headhunters.

"I heard you got every 50♦ player around playing for \$5," a Headhunter in a black team shirt said to Billy.

"Want to play for \$20?" Billy said.

"No, but thanks for the compliment," the man said.

"Let's pitch," Billy said to Popeye, a kid playing eight-ball.

"I don't pitch cheap," Popeye said.

"Twenty a pop," Billy said.

"I'm playing eight-ball for \$20," Pop-eye said.

"But look how long it's taking you," said Billy.

"Twenty against the wall?" Popeye said.

"Let's go out in the street and pitch against a line," Billy said.

"I can't play both at the same time," Popeye said. "Shake dice?"

"I'll arm-wrestle you for \$20."

"Look at that arm," said Popeye, showing Billy a skinny arm.

The next day Billy left to go up north with a shuffleboard player named Cable Car Denny and a 19-year-old pool player Denny was backing.

"He would be all right," Billy said about the pool player, "but he feels he needs something to help him stay awake."

Billy wasn't too sure where Cable Car Denny was taking him.

"Whenever they want to take you somewhere and won't tell you the name of the town," Billy said, "the money's there." He eased off his shoes. "As long as I can get a little game, a little play," he said, "I don't care where I am."

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Sugar Ray Robinson

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