

Jimmy White and his Magic Finger

One possible definition of a sporting hero is that he is a man who does what you do, who lives your life – but better. Jimmy White embodies this definition more fully than any other sportsman I can think of. Only his phenomenal ability separates him from the people who love him. Nothing else.

My attitude to snooker is very simple – I can't be bothered to watch it when Jimmy White isn't playing and I can't bear to watch it when he is. I want him to win too badly and I have watched many a World Championship through the chinks in my fingers. Watching Jimmy White is unbearable, but people still relish it. They were certainly relishing it down in Newport, where I met up with him during the Welsh Open Tournament.

It should have been, could have been so easy. Coming back into the hall after the interval, I believed Jimmy would simply win the frame and have done with it: momentarily I had forgotten what he is like. To the ecstatic exasperation of the crowd, he managed, by working at it, to lose the next two frames and was on the verge of losing a third when O'Kane miscued on an easy black and Jim padded up to clear the table.

It was then I noticed the beauty with which the snooker balls that he pots tumble into the pockets, as if his long finger has guided them there.

Judging by the reaction to even this minor victory, it makes no difference where Jimmy White plays; always, following him around, will be the note of barely contained mob hysteria, heard in the wild whoops of triumph when he pots the final black.

I can remember the time when Jimmy White was the whirlwind, an unstoppable, unruly force scoring sky-high breaks and hardly ever winning tournaments. When he came on the scene, I'd never seen anything like him, the way he could pot balls. He had this cue action – it was like he had a long finger that he was putting on the table and pointing at the balls.

White admits to it. He says that all he used to do was pot balls. 'It took me about ten years to get that out of my system, because I just loved potting balls. To play a safety shot was like turning the game off. I was like a frustrated boy with his Tonka toy – I wanted to be playing all the time.'

Now, however, it seems that the days are gone when the young Jimmy White rammed balls as if he were firing bullets. 'It was very hard at first to tighten myself up. I still go for my shots, I haven't completely lost that instinct, to go for what I see, but I try not to give it to 'em on a plate any more – I make 'em work for it. I got sick of losing, really.'

Jimmy White was exactly what I expected him to be. Siting in his loosened black waistcoat like an off-duty Sam Weller, chatting amicably in his small, sweet, toothy, South London voice, he is just himself. A working-class English everyman with a long, magic finger. And he really does seem not to have been changed by the fame and the money. His heart is warmed by the prospect of returning to practise at the same club, in Tooting where he first played almost 20 years ago.

'I only went there because when it was raining we couldn't go on the common and things like that. I never played at all. And then one day I had a few shots. And that was it. I fell in love. But it took about two years before I could play at all – my highest break for two years was 25.'

However when he was 14 his headmaster saw him play in a charity match and was so impressed that he struck an agreement with him to curb his truancy: that he need attend school for only half of each day and could spend the other half in the snooker club.

'And I thank him now,' says White.

I asked him if snooker is more boring for him now. 'No, I could never get bored. But the

atmosphere in the clubs, in the old days, was incredible. They were like a base to.... I don't know, to get away.'

Jimmy has no fake modesty about him. He knows just how good he is. He has after all, over the last couple of years, trimmed the excesses of his talent to suit the demands of the game. He has, perhaps, shown it who is boss. 'Now I just feel it's in my own hands. Without being flash, you know.'