

# Joe Russo, bridge builder: he's right on cue

By BRUCE NIXON  
Staff Writer

The guys shooting pool on the other side of the room broke off their game and came over to watch. Their main man was setting up a table and they didn't want to miss a thing.

Standing at the front table in the Family Recreation Center on Arctic Parkway, Joe Russo handled the billiard balls with the casual self-assurance of a man who has been playing the game for more than 40 years. Russo was setting up several particularly tough shots to demonstrate the interlocking bridge cue that he invented about a year ago.

"Over the past 100 years, many bridges have been invented, but only one standard bridge was generally used," he was saying. "The idea for my bridge came after I watched Danny Delimberto (the 1972 world billiards champion) lose a \$10,000 game because of the bridge. It was simply too unstable."

Angling his cue on the double-bridge, Russo gracefully fired off a series of difficult shots from the midst of a close ball spread. He then demonstrated how easily the same shots could have fouled using a conventional bridge combination. The two guys shook their heads and smiled before they went back to their game.

To the inexperienced eye, Joe Russo's interlocking bridge looks about like any other bridge. But on each side of the bridge is a half-inch square groove that locks onto a small block behind another similar bridge. When the other ends of the bridge cues are held together, the result is a tall bridge with stability on the table

unmatched by conventional bridges, which tend to slip under the weight of a shooting cue.

And, as Russo is quick to point out, the hard nylon-like bridge material will not mark the \$300 shooting cues used by the pros.

Joe Russo knows what he's talking about. He has made his living from billiards for more than two decades. Last summer, he came out ninth in a field of 45 in the world billiards championships in Asbury Park. He was the straight pool champ in both the 1969 Hustler Open in Johnson City, Ill., and in the 1970 Stardust Open in Las Vegas.

Russo got into the game like any other kid might. "When I was 14, my father bought a pool table," he says. "From there, I was gone. When I was, oh, 17 or 18, we moved from Trenton to New York and I got to play with all the old-time champs. They were the beautiful days."

He remembers playing in some of New York City's finest rooms during the 1940's, when girls came out to rack up the balls after each game. They were 40-table clubs like the Strand at 48th and Broadway, Doyle's at 42d and 7th Ave., McGirr's in the Roseland Building at 52d and Broadway, and at Elkin's Billiards at 45th and 7th Ave., where the film, "The Hustler," was shot years later. "In those days," Russo recalls, "Things wouldn't get started until three in the morning. And standing room only."

His own room—Broad Billiards, across from Trenton's old Garden Theatre—came in 1952. Eleven years later, he opened the Gold Crown on Front Street. It was a lavish 10-table hall that lasted until 1971 when Russo went on the road, playing in a half-dozen or so big tournaments each year. Then in 1975 he opened Family Recreation in Ewing Township, a 10-table room that boasts 2,000 steady players.

"It's the only room in the country," Russo claims, "where people can come and learn everything they want to know about the game. I take a personal interest in the players. I'll show them anything they want to know." He wants to give the game a respectable image, he says, and doesn't like people to think of his place as a pool hall. Family Recreation is one of 28 rooms in the country sanctioned by the Professional Pool Players Association for championship tournament play.

Indeed, Russo is planning a city championship exhibition and tournament for January or February. The



Photo by Michael W. Pankoff

The bridge that could have saved a \$10,000 shot, demonstrated by inventor Joe Russo.

tournament would attract hundreds of good players, and would feature exhibition matches between Russo and other champion players like Steve Mizerak, Irving Crane and Wimpy Lassiter. "There's a big contest coming up at Diamond Billiards in Bristol," Russo said. "We're going to see what happens there. If it's a success, and the guys want to put up the money, we'll have one here. I wouldn't have any trouble getting the big names together."

But in the meantime, Russo will continue with Family Recreation, and sell-

ing his new bridge by mail-order from his home — "I spend every morning packing dozens of them to fill orders — and teaching the game he loves. "Right now, I've got about six girls I'm teaching and they're really coming along. It takes me about a year to teach them to play real championship pool," he says.

"The real secret of pool is in the stance and how to handle the cue," Russo claims. "And the more people learn about the game, the more they like it."

## Next weekend's listing of road runner races

Only two footraces are listed for next weekend by the Middle Atlantic Road Runners. These will be held Saturday in Newark, Del., and Sunday at Belmont Plateau.

The details are:  
Saturday, at 10:30 a.m. — Fourth Annual Turkey Trot; 10,000 meters (6.2 miles), Barksdale Park, Newark, Delaware. Sponsored by the Newark Recreation Department, Athletes Foot,

Nike, Newark Weekly Post and The Delaware Sports Club. Contact: Newark Recreation Department, P.O. Box 390, Newark, Delaware 19711.

Sunday, Nov. 20, at 1 p.m. — Middle Atlantic AAU Senior 10,000 meters Cross Country Championship, at Belmont Plateau. Sponsored by the Olney Kwanis Club. Contact: Joe McIlhinney, 7508 4th Avenue, Melrose Park, Pa.

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