

## Legends of the Road

# George Rood

by Thomas C. Shaw

**G**eorge Rood was a mystery. Rood (pronounced "rude") wasn't at any of the tournaments, none of the hustler's jamborees, didn't regularly travel the backroads with other players, and rarely allowed his picture to be taken. But one by one the top road players in the country got to know him, and the knowledge always cost them money. Sometimes the only identification they came away with was his first name and the fact that he played in Dayton, Ohio.

Among the top players the word circulated that there was always a game waiting for them in Dayton, if they thought they could handle it. The locksmiths would tell each other to avoid Dayton and a guy named George, just like they'd say avoid Canton and a guy named Don (Willis).

Rood himself did little traveling. If someone wanted him they'd have to play on his home turf. They did come, on a regular basis, on their trips through the midwest, and for twenty-five years matched up with the mild-mannered man from Dayton. Hardly one left with the cash.

Russ Maddox, who has known Rood for over sixty years and spent some time on the road himself, said "George Rood was one of the least recognized players on the road, and absolutely one of the finest that ever picked up a cue. I've known George since before the war (W.W.II) and I only saw two players that beat him — Mosconi in their second meeting (George won the first) and Wimpy (Luther Lassiter)."



Ready for an exhibition with Eddie Taylor at East High Billiards.

George Rood was born November 11, 1914 (Armistice Day) in Marietta, Ohio, just across the river from West Virginia. It was, and is, a small town, but in those days it boasted a number of good players.

Life at home was rough and Rood left when he was fifteen. "The only places I could go to keep warm in the winter were poolrooms and places

where they gambled. So I ran errands for the gamblers and loafed in the poolroom and got so I played well. The first thing you know I was playing with everybody, and playing for pretty good money. By nineteen I was playing real well and I made enough to pay my way through school. Marietta was just a little town but we had half a dozen players that could each run a hundred balls."

Rood played older guys rather than kids his own age. "Everybody who's an adult thinks he can beat some kid. So I had lots of games and I won quite a bit of money for those days. Those were Depression times."

You could buy a full four-course meal for a dollar in 1930, so games for a buck a rack were substantial to the teenager.

When players from the Brunswick tour came through the small town it was always George that was picked to play them. By his late teens he was beating them all.

Rood was a pretty good athlete, never drank or smoked, and made his way through high school and a year of college (West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon, a couple hours east of Marietta) by playing football. He earned extra money playing pool, and giving diving and swimming exhibitions. He married, and his wife, a court reporter, got a good offer in Dayton in 1939 so the couple moved across state.



"The war was coming, you could see that, so I thought I would get a good dog for security while I was gone. I got a good show dog by accident and a job at Wright Field (now Wright-Patterson AFB). When I enlisted in 1941 I just changed clothes; I was stationed right there on permanent assignment."

Rood spent seven years in the Air Force. "Some of the Brunswick players had come through Marietta," he said, "and I had played Mosconi, Caras, Ponzi, Cranfield, Crane—beat everybody but Crane. He played real well. Emmett Blankenship came through and I beat him. I was a teenager and he must have been in his forties. I played Tommy Hueston. He was an old man, but we had some great games in Marietta, and in Parkersburg, WV and Charleston, WV. We even had one session where we both played left-handed. A nice guy to play with. He had won the Continuous and the 14.1 and the billiards championships years before, but we played 9-Ball. A real gentleman." The same group paraded through Dayton, and so did a regular line of non-tournament players.

"I had quite a bit of time, being stationed at home which was pretty rare, and I played a lot of pool," Rood said.

"I remember all the big name tournament players coming through Dayton," says Maddox, "and George played them just as he had in Marietta. He beat (Andrew) Ponzi, Johnny Irish, Joe Balsis, Joe Canton, Joe Procita...just everybody. George's style was to spin the ball. He had complete control of the cue ball and the ability to play perfect position so he always had short, easy shots. He played 9-Ball like you never saw. He was a fairly fast player and very focused. We were in Greenville, SC one time and he was playing this guy that was a complete idiot. When George would get down to shoot, the guy would get right in his line and holler 'Miss it, miss it', and George would knock it right in the hole. Can you imagine anybody doing that? George just laughed at the guy. His ability to concentrate was superb."

The action room in Dayton was The Recreation and that's where Rood played most of the time, though the Red, White & Blue and The Varsity also saw some action.

Marcel Camp came through with Minnesota Fats one day and they played a ring game with Rood, each

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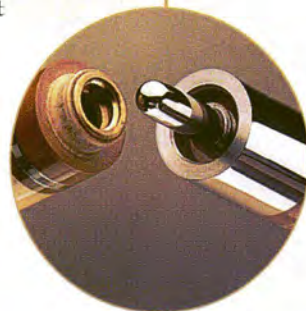
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getting spotted the seven and nine—and losing. Eddie Taylor also came through and was on the losing end of a 9-Ball match. “I wouldn’t play him banks, of course,” Rood said. “No one would. I went down to Knoxville later and played Eddie again and he beat me very bad. Eddie was a fine player.”

Another Ohio native, Don Willis from Canton, matched up at 9-Ball with Rood a number of times. “His best game was rotation,” Rood remembers. “George beat him every time they played,” Maddox said, “and it got to where Willis avoided George like the plague.”

The show dog Rood had purchased for security turned out to be a good lead and he was asked to show dogs on weekends. By the time he was out of the service it had turned into a full-time job and a career that occupied him for over thirty years. For the last twelve he’s been a judge at dog shows nationwide.

Though Rood did make a few trips during his seven years in the service and did play away from home when he took dogs to shows, the few pool-only trips of any distance were taken just after his discharge. He and Maddox traveled to Norfolk during the legendary big dollar days in the mid-40s.

“That was quite a trip,” Maddox remembers. “It didn’t last long but when we hit town we went right to where the action was. A fellow who owned the Zam Zam Club had lost \$123,000—and this was in 1947 dollars—and that drew every player in the country.”

“George got into a game right away with little Don DeCoy,” Maddox said, “and won \$2,000 before Don quit. Then ‘Rags’ Fitzpatrick stepped up and George won \$2,200. Then Chris Megehan made a game with George and we had another \$500. Johnny Irish was next and he lost \$500, too. They were waiting in line almost and

George beat them one after another. Sixteen hours straight. He played Lassiter, and Wimpy won the first five games, then George started winning and Morgan, Wimpy’s backer, pulled him up. We were ahead \$9,200 for sixteen hours of play.”

Rood and Maddox took a much needed break for food and relaxation, watching the other games.

“Wimpy and somebody were playing on the front table,” Maddox remembers, “for a hundred a game. In

day got a good portion of the money back. They’d heard about a local hero—a shortstop—and Maddox called and arranged a game. The room was packed when they arrived.

Simply beating a player would end the action too soon so they arranged to play a set of ten ahead (the first player to win ten games more than his opponent wins the match). George let the fellow get seven up, Maddox worked the crowd for side bets, then Rood pulled out the stops and went to ten games up. They left with over \$6,000.

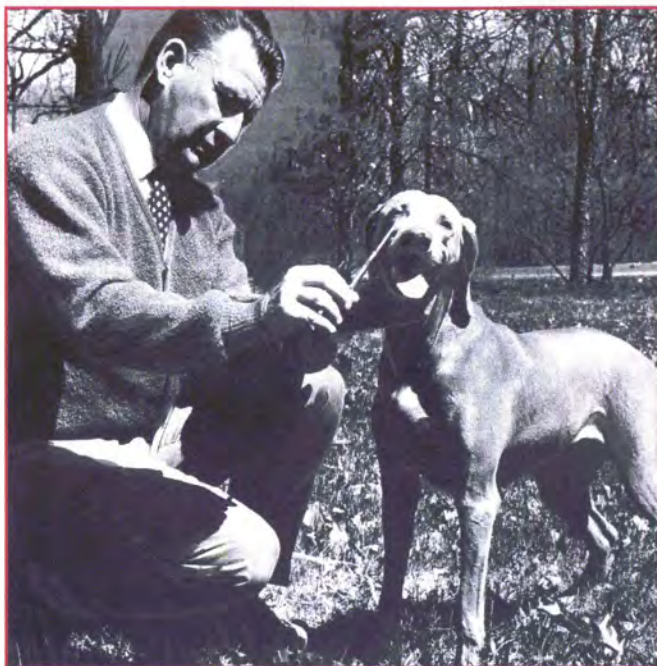
In a sense, Rood himself was a local hero, but he was far from a shortstop. Traveling players would meet up with him in Dayton, rather than running into him on the road. The few trips he did take were mostly in the late 40s.

“I wanted to play Hubert Cokes some 3-cushion over in Evansville,” Rood said, “and a player named Tom Tomoshekish, who was known as Tom Smith, wanted to go, too. There was another player around, a pretty good player, named Charlie Jones who wanted to play a bookie named Brown so we all went together. It did create a problem, though. It didn’t go over too good when I told my wife I was going over to

Evansville with Smith and Jones to play Brown.”

Rood and Maddox did make it to Gotham, heading toward the Brooklyn Billiard Academy. “It was an upstairs room and Onofrio Laurie was there,” Maddox recalls. “George and Laurie played and I think Laurie got up six or seven games. We were pretty tired from the trip and rested up that night and played again the next day and George just ran roughshod over him.”

Aside from beating Laurie and Joe Batchelor it was difficult getting games in the city. When they heard about Danny Gartner, called “Young Greenleaf” by the press, they went to



Rood with a prize show dog in the '60s.

the back, Morgan and another bookie they called ‘Cocky’ because he had one lazy eye, were playing for \$10,000 a set. \$10,000 in 1947 money, and everybody was gathered around the front table watching the hundred dollar game.”

Meantime, Fitzpatrick had come back with more cash and wanted to have another go at Rood. “We played for \$700 a game,” George recalls, “and we traded safeties a while in the first game and he got out of it and went on to beat me 13 games in a row, which was pretty close to all the money I’d won. That was quite a first day.”

A trip to Richmond, VA the next



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his room across the river in New Jersey. "It was interesting," Maddox recalls. "Gartner would only play for \$5 a game, but I got half a dozen side betters involved so at least it was up to \$35. George wins and I say 'Play for ten' and Gartner and the sweaters agree. George wins and I say 'Play for twenty', and it kept going like that. Some of the side dropped out, but George won ten games in a row before Gartner pulled up. In just over an hour we'd won well over \$1,000 — starting at \$5 a game."

Not many months later the pair, along with Tom Smith, made another trip. They swung through Indiana as a kind of warm-up before going to Mullens, WV and looking up Bud Hypes. The warm-up turned out to be not such a good idea. Rood got into a game with a very bad player who wouldn't bet high but wouldn't quit.

They played for two straight days, Rood carrying him every step of the way until he had all the cash and neither could stay awake at the table.

When they arrived in Mullens they found Bud Hypes ready to play. The two got to it, at a hundred a game, and at the end of the play Rood was down \$1,500. After a good night's sleep they met the following afternoon and again played until six in the morning. Rood got his money back but that was all. On the third day it was all Rood and they closed out the battle with Rood up \$6,600, plus a year-old Buick that had belonged to a man named Jigs who had been partially staking Hypes.

Rood and Maddox made another trip, trying to catch the famous James Evans in Detroit, but got there just after Evans left. They did find 'Rotation Slim' Graham and George beat

him at 9-Ball. He also beat 'Babyface' Whitlow and a few others but it wasn't a high dollar trip.

Both Rood and Maddox came to realize that there was little future in continuing to look at pool as a career. The post-war culture was centered around starting families and buying houses on the G.I. Bill. Pool, like many other recreational activities, took a nose-dive. Rood concentrated on his show dog business and Maddox went off to school at the University of Miami.

But there were still opportunities to be had and it wasn't long before Rood got a call suggesting he come down to the land of sunshine for a couple weeks and get into action with the players Maddox had been scouting.

Miami in the early 1950s was a much different town than it is today.

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Spin the Ball George was working his magic on tables all over town. Kokomo Joe was managing a room on the beach. Marcel Camp managed a downtown room. Dinty Moore's on Flagler, Malone's, the 52, the Latin American Club and a dozen other rooms were all seeing action.

"George came down and beat Okeechobee Slim, he beat Howard Barrett over in Ft. Myers, and we went up to Tampa and won some money from Johnny Vives," Maddox says.

By the fifties Rood was heavily into dog shows. In '57 he and Maddox bought East High Billiards from Bob Haas, the room in Springfield where Mosconi had set his world record of 526 balls. They kept it a few years, then opened another room in Dayton called the Cue & Bridge Lounge.

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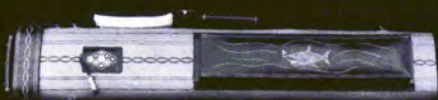
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Rood got glaucoma in one eye, had a lens implant, and quit playing. Glaucoma eventually showed up in the other eye and required a second implant.

He kept at the dog show business, turning from showing to judging in his later years.

Five years ago Airway Billiards, Bar & Grill moved to George's neighborhood with a beautiful twelve-table upscale room. Co-owner Todd Recher and George became fast friends and Rood picked up a cue again. In his 80s, with implants in both eyes, he found he still had some of the old skills and became a regular.

He and Recher play most afternoons, and George is in the Airway league (he won his division two years in a row). He gives lessons to students, still travels to

judge dog shows, and has the energy of a healthy 60 year old. He'll be 85 on November 11th and attributes his good health to a life with no alcohol, no cigarettes, natural foods and the fistful of vitamins that have been a part of his regimen for the last thirty years.

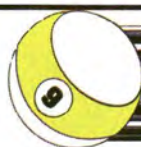
Most of the folks at Airway Billiards are aware they have a legendary player in their midst, though not all realize just how great he was. Certainly Todd Recher does, and he has become George's biggest booster over the last few years. There have been a couple stories about Rood in the Dayton paper, and he's probably better known now than when he was undercover and running over the best players in the world.

On the subject of "best", I asked him who he thought were the best in each discipline.

"Mosconi, of course," he said. "No one could come near him in Straight Pool. Best all around player would be 'Rags' Fitzpatrick. He played super 9-Ball, he was the best One-Pocket player, and he played strong banks. Banks, of course, is Eddie Taylor. That goes without saying. In 9-Ball the best was Wimpy, Luther Lassiter."

Rood isn't one to brag, but other players of the era who were in the know wouldn't hesitate to put this non-tournament, non-road player in the same exalted group.

Cornbread Red summed it up nicely, "Our paths never crossed. The boys told me not to go to Dayton, and that if I did go, not to play a guy named George." **P&B**



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