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A GAME FOR THE AGES

BY ERIC BUTTERMAN AND SHAUN TOLSON



THE CRAFTSMAN'S TOUCH

The roaring '20s may have made the game of billiards popular across all social classes, but it was Paul Newman's memorable character Fast Eddie Felson in the 1961 film *The Hustler* that solidified the game as a societal mainstay. "Paul Newman in *The Hustler* just changed everything," says Howard Hatch, the proprietor of **Hatch Billiards** (www.hatchbilliards.com) in Brunswick, Maine. "People finished watching that movie and just wanted to go and play pool. He was the coolest guy in the U.S. It made it the cool thing to do and filled up pool halls all over the place."

But what eventually lifted the resurgence beyond Fast Eddie was a need to fill up more square footage. "You take the cultural awareness and the advent of really big houses and it takes on a life of its own," Hatch says. "The homeowner started to envision entertainment—the game room, the pool table ... it just fit."

Ironically, Hatch's shop is based in a town that shares its name with the most recognizable and successful billiard table manufacturer in the history of the game. Aside from sharing four rails and six pockets, however, there's not much that links the Hatch and classic Brunswick styles. "The bases of my pool tables are sculpture to me," he says. "It's functional sculpture, so I'm interested in the form, as well as the surface decoration."

Hatch's tables all start at around \$20,000 and require about six weeks to build. Unlike other manufacturers making highly ornate pieces, Hatch subscribes to the philosophy that less is more. Rounded edges and gradual curves characterize many of his designs, and aside from his affinity for high-contrasting inlays, Hatch lets the natural grains and patterns of the wood accent each table. "I'm supplying the niche for the person who already is furnishing his



house with high-end furnishings with high-end materials—the finish, the actual woods, and the design,” he says. “You can go out and buy a nice pool table that plays well for \$4,000, but the person who’s going to spend \$20,000 or more, they’re thinking that this is going to make their house look better.”

Hatch was an avid pool player when he was younger, so he brings to his business a solid knowledge about the game and how a well-made table should play and feel. He has been designing and crafting furniture for the past 35 years,

and each of his tables is an ode to simplicity and versatility. “Whether it’s a pool table or any piece of furniture, I’d want it to be comfortable in a wide variety of house styles,” he says of his work, adding that most of his customers are attracted to his tables for their connection to classic furniture styles and their solid craftsmanship. “My clients aren’t necessarily pool players,” he explains. “They know how to play the game, but they’re primarily interested in the look of the table and the fact that it can last 100 years and it can be an heirloom.”



Hatch Billiards’ Arch table in cherry and rosewood, with mother of pearl inlays.