

# CUSTOM JOBS

Two table-makers discuss their approaches to building one-of-a-kind products and the difficulties faced by serving such a niche market.

By Nick Leider

**T**HE CUSTOM pool table market is in a curious position. It is not so much a niche within the billiards industry as it is a separate entity, one that sits outside the sport's major manufacturers and distributors. Unlike the cue market, which relies on people progressing from once-a-year hobbyists to once-a-week players, or the production table market, which relies on the housing industry to provide square footage in need of filling, the custom table exists as more of a niche furniture market, one that is a bit of a novelty for those who place orders that range from a few thousand bucks to six-digit investments.

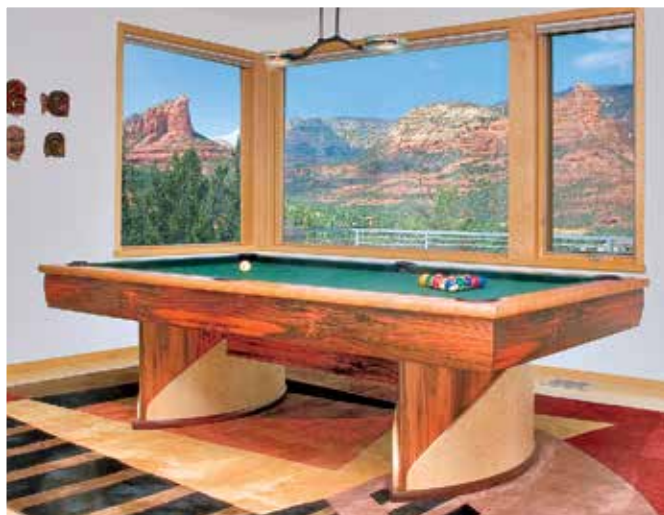
Two custom table-makers whose products couldn't be more different also took very different paths to building unique tables. But in a twist of irony, the two — and custom table-makers in general — continue to struggle to convince one market that shouldn't be a difficult audience: Pool players.

## Cue-Friendly Craftsman

Years ago, when he was studying furniture design at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Howard Hatch got the pool bug, straight pool to be exact. The teenager progressed in his studies and eventually opened his own studio, all while he continued to tool around other people's tables.



The cherry and Cocobolo Arch (above) is Hatch's most popular design. The Ovoid (left) makes a strong contemporary statement.



In 1996, he took an order for a custom billiards table. The proverbial light-bulb moment hit in his Brunswick, Maine, studio, and Hatch began to focus his business — now Hatch Billiards & Furniture — more and more on custom built tables. Usually priced

between \$15,000-\$20,000 per table, Hatch's work is influenced by Art Deco and the American studio furniture of the 1940s.

Although his tables aren't astronomically priced compared to top-of-the-line production tables, Hatch has yet to build a table for a pool fanatic. Rather, his market is the affluent homeowner who wants a beautifully crafted piece of furniture. Sure, most of his customers know how to play and enjoy the game, but he's not in a situation where he'll be setting up a booth at a local billiards show.

"I have not sold a single table to what I'd call a serious pool player," he said.

"I work with homeowners who want a pool table to be part of an entertainment package. These are large houses where there's room for a pool table to go along with other interests."

Since building his first table nearly 20 years ago, Hatch has been through various economic cycles that directly affected his business.

"It wasn't a coincidence that I started building pool tables in the 1990s," he said. "That's when demand started to grow. People were building these big houses, sometimes as big as 5,000-sq.-ft. That was a new thing — to have so many of these. But when the housing market crashed, nobody wanted to buy pool tables."

"My approach is to be a craftsman, so I can offer people a unique, one-of-a-kind product. If you search for custom furniture on the Internet, you'll find 10,000 people. But custom pool tables? There aren't so many of us."

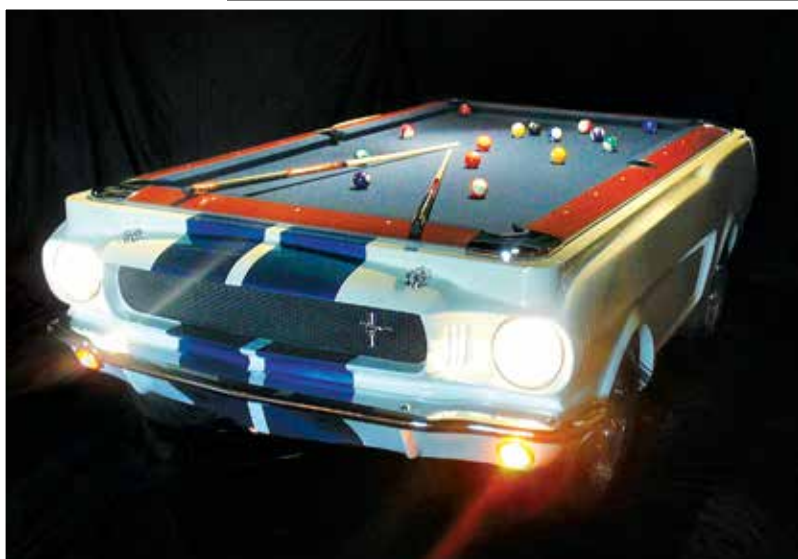
While still building custom ordered residential and commercial furniture, Hatch produces as many as six tables per year, each taking upwards of four weeks to construct. His most popular table is the Arch, with a body of rosewood and cherry rails, the table inlaid with mother-of-pearl for the diamonds.

"The first time I ever made a pool table, the challenge was figuring out the geometry, but that was only the first one," he said. "Those basics are all relatively simple. The challenge I'm interested in now is designing new tables. I want to force myself to improve."

His latest challenge came from San Francisco's Fringe Design. Incorporating more visible metal components than his traditional tables, Hatch had to design a table that minimized material below the table bed. The four legs he created attach directly to the top via steel plates that connected the legs to the aluminum frame inside the apron.



**Classics like the '66 Corvette (above) and '69 Shelby (left) are big hits.**



## **Flexing American Muscle**

Unlike Hatch, Tony Utegaard and Ben Mallah found themselves building custom pool tables without much history with the sport. Instead of producing finely crafted pieces

"At a certain point, when you're trying something new, you have to trust yourself and your sense of engineering," he said. "When I tested those legs to see how solid they were, it was great. Building a rock-solid table isn't easy."

Though his designs are limited only by his imagination, Hatch faces difficulties in attracting clients. The biggest impediment to his business is getting his name out there. He serves a niche market, which can limit his exposure to potential customers. But technology is helping to make it easier to be heard.

"It's all about the Internet," Hatch said. "I've got my website and an ability to let people know what I can do. It would have been impossible to build a business like this without an ability to easily market myself."

of furniture like Hatch, Mallah and Utegaard maximize novelty by building pool tables onto classic muscle cars in a Largo, Fla., workshop. Since the two founded Pool Table Cars Inc. in 2009, they have gone from selling a whopping three tables the first year to now producing hundreds of them annually.

"We weren't really pool table people," Utegaard said. "We were car and business people. People have been making furniture out of cars since they started. We thought there would be interest in pool tables. We wanted to approach this as dropping a standard, regulation pool table into a car."

Like Hatch, the guys at Pool Table Cars face difficulty in making people aware of their product, which can range in price from \$10,000-\$100,000.

Unlike traditional pool tables that can easily be matched to a homeowner's gameroom, a 1969 Shelby Mustang pool table requires a specific type of audience.

"The biggest challenge we face is introducing our product to the market when nobody knows the product," Utegaard said. "It's almost a case where nobody knows to even look for it."

To build awareness, Pool Table Cars took a "shotgun" approach to marketing. Utegaard got his tables on American Idol and the Price is Right. The business partners brought tables to trade shows, classic car auctions, home and garden events. Basically, if there was a way to get a table in front of a group of people, Utegaard and Mullah were there.

"Ironically, our least likely customer continues to be pool players," Utegaard said. "We sell to people who think it's a cool thing to show the neighbors. The tables are a few inches taller than a standard pool table, but

otherwise they play very well."

The table aspect of the construction is handled by Craftmaster Billiards and the Lunsford Slate Company, which is housed in the building next to Car Pool Tables. The car portion of the table is produced as an exact replica of the classic model, one that was cut, shortened and welded back together into the correct size. Molds were then taken of each model so that replicas could be made out of fiberglass. From there, the pieces are treated exactly like car parts, where they head to the body shop and are ornamented with chrome and grills. Even the lights are operational, and the hubcaps and wheels are real.

"We joke that classic car people will be stripping our pool tables for parts," Utegaard said. "But it's been an overwhelmingly positive response. The only worry I've heard is for the car, and we say only one car was harmed in the making of each table's model."

Mullah and Utegaard, who were previously in real estate development,

began selling primarily Ford Mustang tables, though they have recently reached licensing agreements with Chevy and General Motors.

"As we release more models, we reach greater audiences," he said "For the first four years, we were almost exclusively selling the Mustang Shelby. Everyone knows the loyalty of Ford people versus Chevy people. When we released the 1969 Camaros and Corvettes, it automatically doubled our market."

Whether it's the finely crafted woodwork of Hatch Billiards or the irresistible novelty of Car Pool Tables, the custom table market has plenty to offer its customers, even if pool players have yet to fully embrace the new market. Those who produce these unique products don't seem to be too concerned with who they're selling them to. As long as there's a demand for the product, these guys get to do what they love to do.

"I am Santa Claus," Utegaard joked. "I make toys." ●