

# The Unhappy King of Snooker

*Sam Knight is a journalist living in London. MORE »*



*O'Sullivan "sits over everyone," an ex-manager said. "He is not a normal bloke." Credit Photograph by Nadav Kander*

Early on a Tuesday morning last fall, Ronnie O'Sullivan was running through the woods near his home, in Chigwell, Essex, northeast of London. It was damp and muddy, England in November. O'Sullivan, who is thirty-nine, loves the anonymity of running. About ten years ago, he discovered that it was one thing that truly takes him out of himself—more than the drink and the drugs and the antidepressants—and suspends the otherwise unavoidable fact that he is the most talented snooker player of all

time. At the age of eleven, O'Sullivan was making good money in the sport, and in the past three decades he has won five World Championships and set a number of records while enduring a bewildering odyssey of breakdowns, addictions, and redemptions, largely precipitated by the imprisonment of his father, whom he loves, for murder. O'Sullivan is frequently described as a genius. But he does not see how this can be so. Most days, he feels like a fraud. His game comes only in fits and starts. He wins because the others lose. He has wondered for a long time whether he would be happier doing something else. He has moved nine times in the past ten years. "I'm fucking, you know, searching," he told me recently. "I kind of know who I am but I don't like who I am, do you know what I mean? I wish I was a bit more fucking stable."

O'Sullivan tries to run six or seven miles a day. That morning, he was with his best friend from school, George Palacaros. (O'Sullivan grew up a short distance from Chigwell, in the town of Ilford.) It was a final run before the U.K. Championship, snooker's second-biggest tournament, in York, two hundred miles to the north. O'Sullivan's first-round match, against an amateur named Daniel Wells, was two days away. About five miles into the run, Palacaros called out to O'Sullivan to check the heart-rate monitor that he wears on his wrist. As O'Sullivan turned to reply, he slipped and fell, breaking his left ankle.

He tried to carry on. "I thought, I ain't going to waddle back," he said. He jogged another mile, but whenever he looked down he saw his ankle swelling up. By the time O'Sullivan reached the changing room at his running club, he couldn't put any weight on his leg.

At the hospital, O'Sullivan was told that he had a simple fracture.

His ankle wouldn't need surgery, but it would take twelve weeks to heal and he would have to wear a protective brace. He called his psychiatrist. In the afternoon, O'Sullivan posted a picture of his ankle, bulging alarmingly, on Twitter, with the message "Might be one legged Snooker at the #UKChampionship on Thursday." He found a pair of soft blue boots in his closet that fit over the brace. The next day, a friend drove him to York so that he could keep his foot elevated on the way.

Snooker, like its poor relation pool, is a cue sport. Unlike pool, snooker has twenty-two balls: fifteen red, six of other colors, and one white. (Pool and its variants involve sixteen balls or fewer.) Players take turns attempting to clear the table and earn as many points as possible, using the white cue ball to "pot" a red, then a colored ball (which is returned to the table), then a red, and so on. When all the reds are gone, the players dispatch the colors in order of their value, from the yellow, which is worth two points, up to the black, which is worth seven. If a player fails to pot a ball at any point, he must yield the table to his opponent. Matches are divided into frames, each won by whichever player scores the most points. In the professional game, frames tend to unfold with vivid, unsettling ease—the balls slide into the pockets as if there were nowhere else for them to go—or with staggering, metaphysical difficulty, as the players foil one another by arranging the balls in illogical patterns, a type of play known as "safety," and everyone's nerves go to hell.

Snooker's civilized appearance belies its vicious and enervating nature. A snooker table is three times larger than a pool table and its pockets are an inch smaller. Even the most basic shot is a concatenation of foresight, friction, and various Newtonian laws. Players seek to control where at least two balls are going: the red

or colored “object” ball, preferably toward a pocket; and the white ball, its rate of braking and spin carefully calibrated, either to stop near another object ball, so the process can begin again, or to continue toward some hostile district of the table, from where the opponent will be unlikely to score. The best players string together thirty shots in a row, in a hushed environment of thick carpet and dinner suits. (Snooker’s dress code recalls, more or less, that of a nineteen-thirties music hall.) Players compete to pot the same balls, so every shot has a psychological echo: What is good for me is bad for you. The longer I am at the table, the longer you must watch and fret. Players avoid eye contact. No one speaks.

At the U.K. Championship, all matches except the final were the best of eleven frames. O’Sullivan was reluctant to put weight on his ankle. “I feel like a baby that’s trying to learn to walk,” he told reporters. He limped through his first match but won, 6–2. Three days later, in the second round, he faced Peter Lines, a forty-four-year-old journeyman pro. I travelled north to watch him play. I reached the Barbican theatre in York, just outside the city’s medieval walls, early in the evening.

O’Sullivan had been debating whether to pull out of the tournament. His balance wasn’t right. There was no sign of him by the practice table, where the other players, dressed in bow ties and waistcoats, waited, leaning on their cues. Referees pulled on white gloves. Nevertheless, at 7 P.M., O’Sullivan appeared, walking out under the lights in answer to the snookering nickname that he has had since he was a teen-ager, “Ronnie (the Rocket) O’Sullivan!” In a dinner suit and his blue boots, his sideburns shot with gray, he looked like a croupier on his way home from work.

“You don’t feel comfortable when Ronnie’s playing,” Barry Hearn

told me. Hearn has been snooker's dominant impresario since the nineteen-eighties. He controls the commercial rights to the sport and has managed O'Sullivan three times, on and off, throughout his turbulent career. (O'Sullivan fired two managers during the reporting of this article.) "You're almost watching an accident waiting to happen," Hearn said. Against Lines, O'Sullivan was obviously out of sorts. Most snooker players, obsessed with repetition, seek to become robotic versions of themselves. But O'Sullivan in full flow is always in motion, checking this, squinting at that, buzzing backward and forward around the table, grimacing at the balls, fussing at chalk marks on the baize. His ankle made that impossible. Every movement was an effort.

Still, it was too much for Lines. Ranked sixty-first in the world, he seemed unnerved by the television cameras and missed a number of easy shots. Many lower-ranked players find it hard to concentrate when they play O'Sullivan. The crowd is against them, and they wonder what he thinks of their game. The match was untidy. In the fifth frame, with the score at 3-1, O'Sullivan potted a fluky red and the balls suddenly opened. In the course of twenty-nine strokes, he scored a hundred and six points—a "century"—and it seemed as if he might race away. But Lines came back. O'Sullivan was distracted; he picked his teeth and watched the game under way at a nearby table. "Come on, Ronnie, our son," a Yorkshire voice called out from the crowd. By the time the game finished—6-3, to O'Sullivan—it was ten-thirty. O'Sullivan was exhausted. I caught up with him in the corridor as he hobbled back to his dressing room. In person, he can be disarming—trouble, but you want him to like you. I congratulated him on the match and said I enjoyed it. "Fucking hell," he said. "I didn't."

People who grew up in Britain in the nineteen-eighties, as I did,

found themselves steeped in snooker whether they liked it or not. The game was invented in 1875, by British military officers in colonial India, but for the next hundred years it was confined mostly to gentlemen's clubs and dubious billiards halls. (In the nineteen-fifties, Charlie, Ronnie, and Reggie Kray—London's best-known gangsters—got their start running a snooker hall in East London.) In 1978, however, the BBC broadcast the sport's thirteen-day World Championship, at the Crucible Theatre, in Sheffield, for the first time. Television transformed snooker: the game's slow, hypnotic quality; the trapped, pacing players; even the acidic colors of the balls seemed made for the small screen. Tobacco companies poured money into events. In 1985, almost twenty million people stayed up past midnight to watch the World Championship final, in which the top player of the era, Steve (the Nugget) Davis, was beaten by Dennis Taylor, an underdog with specially adapted eyeglasses to help him see down the table.

In the sport's heyday, two snookering archetypes seemed to be at war, and television dramatized the duality. There were the champions, clean-cut automatons who ruled the game for years at a time before abruptly burning out: Ray Reardon, a former policeman, in the nineteen-seventies; Davis, in the nineteen-eighties; Stephen Hendry, a baby-faced Scot who won a record seven world titles, in the nineteen-nineties. And there were the broken and the beautiful, who produced exquisite passages of play but couldn't keep their heads together: Kirk Stevens, a Canadian cocaine addict who played in a white suit; Alex (the Hurricane) Higgins, who died, furious and alcoholic, of throat cancer, in 2010; and Jimmy (the Whirlwind) White, who reached six world finals and lost them all.

Ronald Antonio O'Sullivan was born in 1975. His parents, Ron and

Maria, had met a couple of years earlier, as teen-agers, working at a vacation camp. They moved to London and cleaned cars to make ends meet. When their son hit the professional snooker scene, in the early nineteen-nineties, he was younger, more gifted, and ruder than anyone else. He won his first major title at seventeen. In 1996, O'Sullivan was accused by a Canadian opponent, Alain Robidoux, of disrespecting him by playing left-handed. O'Sullivan arranged to be certified as good enough to play professional snooker with either hand. That same year, he was suspended for head-butting an official. He drank too much and saw too many first-round exits. He talked openly about his loathing for the game, and for himself. In 2000, O'Sullivan went to rehab, to seek treatment for an addiction to marijuana. By the time he turned thirty, the age at which other great players, such as Davis and Hendry, were beginning their decline, O'Sullivan had won two world titles, the same number as Alex Higgins—respectable, but well short of his potential. Between late 2009 and early 2012, O'Sullivan failed to win a single ranking tournament.

“My arsehole had gone,” he told me. “My fight. I had nothing in me.” But the following year, at the age of thirty-six, and long after he had given up on the possibility, O'Sullivan began to win again, rediscovering a consistency and a freedom of play he had not experienced since he was sixteen. Since 2012, he has reached three successive World Championship finals, winning two of them. At this year's tournament, which starts on April 18th, in Sheffield, O'Sullivan will be expected to reach his fourth final in as many years. This late, unexpected flowering has altered his standing in the game. “Ronnie is the genius that sort of sits over everyone,” Hearn said. “He is not a normal bloke.” Earlier this year, O'Sullivan overtook Stephen Hendry's record of seven hundred and seventy-five century breaks. Many wonder whether O'Sullivan can

equal Hendry's record of seven world titles and officially become, in his forties, the greatest player the game has ever known.

He remains fragile, though, and amazed by the turn of events. Damien Hirst, the artist, is fascinated by snooker: the promise of its seemingly straight lines, "the grid over the landscape," as he calls it, and the struggle of the players caught up in its geometry. Hirst is close friends with O'Sullivan and often accompanies him to tournaments. When we met, I asked Hirst if he thought O'Sullivan was afraid of the future and of what would happen when his talent eventually faded. "I think he's scared of everything," Hirst said. "That's his beauty—that he is absolutely shitting himself. Do you know what I mean? He doesn't know what the fuck is going on."



*"Is the light bothering you?" [Buy the print »](#)*

The evening after O'Sullivan defeated Lines, he had dinner at Toto's, an Italian restaurant in York, with Gary Smith, his manager, and Chic Gourlay, a friend from Glasgow. O'Sullivan was in good spirits. He flirted with the waitress and ordered a steak. His ankle

was feeling stronger, and he had found a pair of black sneakers, which looked better with his suit. “I feel all right now,” he said. “I feel like a snooker player again.”

At the next table, Ken Doherty, a crafty Irish player who won the world title in 1997, was eating with friends. Doherty and O’Sullivan have known each other since Doherty, at the age of eighteen, became the club pro at the Ilford Snooker Centre. O’Sullivan, six years younger, would take the bus there to play after school. It was the late nineteen-eighties—peak snooker—and O’Sullivan was the game’s prodigy. He won his first tournament at the age of nine and made his first century break at age ten; his chubby face was all over the snooker magazines. He stuck out at the club in Ilford: prepubescent, foulmouthed, his afternoons at the table bankrolled by a seemingly limitless supply of five-pound notes from his father, Big Ron, who had become wealthy running a chain of sex shops in London’s West End.

“He would just smile at you sometimes when you were playing,” Fin Ruane, another young Irishman who hung around the club, told me. O’Sullivan’s father would drop by: good-looking, thickset, ready with jokes. “Ron’s the name, porn’s the game,” he used to say. “He would come in, and if there was twenty people in the room he would have to buy twenty teas,” Doherty recalled. “No one put their hand in their pocket. It would have been an insult.” People liked Big Ron, but they didn’t cross him. He told everyone that his boy was going to be world champion. His uncles had been boxers, and he taught his son to think like one: “Take his head off.” “Don’t get beat.” “Fuck ’em, son.” Ruane said, “I remember his dad, he would be playing cards and someone would say, ‘Ron, it’s your deal.’ But he would just be looking over at his kid playing. He just loved him, loved watching him.”

The young O’Sullivan worshipped Steve Davis, the champion at the time. He wore the same waistcoat, without a cinch. When he was nine, O’Sullivan heard Bill King, the father of a rival junior player, say that Davis was “never a foot away” in snooker, and it struck him as a profound truth. Unlike the other players, who relied on forms of backspin (“stun” and “screw”) to position the white ball for their next shot, Davis played with topspin and used the cushions to play longer and more inventive strokes that flowed around the table. It was riskier and more technically challenging, and often got the white only a few inches closer to the object ball, but it was worth it. When O’Sullivan finally beat Doherty at a local tournament, he decided to become a professional. “That was the day,” he told me. “I’d done everything. I used the cushions. I beat Ken. I played to a level where, fucking hell, I fancied it.”

At Toto’s that night, the two men swapped stories about Goffs, in County Kildare, a sporting resort where the Irish Masters tournament used to be held. In 1998, O’Sullivan beat Doherty in the final but was stripped of his title a few weeks later; he had eaten a hash cake, and failed a drug test. It was a beautiful place to play. “Everyone used to go, take their wives,” O’Sullivan said, shaking his head. “Lovely.”

The next day, in his third-round match, O’Sullivan found that he could move more easily. He won, 6–2, against Ben Woollaston, a player ranked twenty-seventh in the world. Woollaston took the lead in the third frame but lost his nerve. “It was embarrassing to be out there,” he said afterward. In O’Sullivan’s fourth-round match, a twenty-nine-year-old named Matthew Selt disintegrated completely. Once O’Sullivan was ahead 4–0, he started looking for a maximum. A maximum in snooker is the perfect break: fifteen reds, fifteen blacks, and the rest of the colors—a hundred and forty-seven

points in a single spell at the table. It is the sport's equivalent of a hole in one or a pitcher's perfect game. Joe Davis, snooker's undefeated world champion from 1927 to 1946, made the first official hundred and forty-seven, in 1955, at the age of fifty-three. O'Sullivan made his first maximum when he was fifteen. Against Selt, he recorded the thirteenth of his career—two more than Hendry, the nearest player. "Nothing special," O'Sullivan told me later. "If he had made it hard, I could never have got there."

O'Sullivan trains in a first-floor office in an industrial park in Romford, a few miles from his house. The surrounding blocks are occupied by accountants, insurance brokers, and gas-meter retailers. The office belongs to one of his former managers, Django Fung, who allows him to practice there as much as he wants. Fung, who is from Hong Kong, represents several Chinese players, but they are often out of the country. When I arrived to watch O'Sullivan train one day in January, there was no one else in the building. The blinds were down. Five snooker tables sat under fluorescent lights, on a spartan floor of blue carpet tiles. O'Sullivan was looking in the fridge for milk, to add to a cup of tea. Often, he craves company. Since 2011, he has worked without a coach, hitting balls in myriad patterns for three or four hours a day.

When discussing O'Sullivan's game, commentators and rivals often talk about his unusual sequencing—the way he links shots together around the table. Phil Yates, who was the snooker correspondent for the *Times* of London for twenty years, compares O'Sullivan to a savant, able to perceive mathematical solutions without knowing how or why. "I don't think he can break down why he is as good as he is," Yates said. "He just is." According to Hirst, O'Sullivan often comes off the table in a fugue state: "I go, 'What about that pink you potted?' And he'll go, 'What pink?' He's blank. He's totally startled.

It's like van Gogh. I go, 'You did brilliantly there.' And he goes, 'Did I?' ”

O'Sullivan spends a lot of time thinking about the white ball. He has come to believe that the quality of the initial contact between his chalked, pressed-leather cue tip and the phenolic-resin sphere—the momentary grip, the transfer of energy and intent—is what decides everything else. If the white responds, he will not lose. “You're using force,” he said, after making his tea. “You're using your hands. You're creating. You're making that white dance.”

When the connection isn't there, O'Sullivan feels it right away. “It's invisible, but it's night and day to me,” he said. During the good days and the good months, he senses it in every stroke. When he is cueing well, he leaves fat chalk streaks on the surface of the table, like a golfer's divots, and the white ball topspins extravagantly, slowing down across the nap and then accelerating again, as if late for an appointment. There is a particular echo as balls hit the middle of the pocket. He disregards the score. “I know I'm playing a different game from what they're playing,” he said. And, because of the duel-like intimacy of snooker, O'Sullivan is able to observe the mesmerizing effect that his skill has on his opponents: “You're thinking, 'You've got that on a string, mate. That cue ball. It's just . . .’ And you just sit there. And that is what beats you.”

In 1992, when he was sixteen and had just turned professional, O'Sullivan went to snooker's “qualifying school”—a three-month marathon of knockout matches, in Blackpool, during which fringe players competed to enter the tournaments of the season ahead. Matches were played on twenty-four snooker tables in the Norbreck Castle Hotel, a colossal sand-colored structure on the city's

seafront. O'Sullivan was one of the youngest competitors. "Up against the world," Hearn, his manager at the time, recalled. "Everything was new."

The previous summer, O'Sullivan's father had been arrested after a fight in a night club, during which a man had died. (O'Sullivan found out while playing in a junior tournament in Thailand.) The dead man, Bruce Bryan, had worked as a driver for Charlie Kray, the gangster. He was stabbed after what Big Ron later claimed was an argument over the bill. While O'Sullivan was in Blackpool, his father was out on bail, charged with murder. He came up to stay with his son. Each day, the seats around O'Sullivan's snooker table filled a little faster. "All the old soaks and all the old dyed-in-the-wool players would go and watch him play," Yates, who was covering the event, said. "Because they couldn't believe what they were seeing."

In Blackpool, O'Sullivan won his first thirty-eight matches as a professional snooker player—a record for consecutive victories that still stands. He won thirty-six of the next thirty-eight as well, losing just two games at the qualifying school. People who saw him there like to argue about whether he has ever played as well since. "It was a bit like Tiger Woods or Mike Tyson, when they came along," O'Sullivan told me. "That is how my life should have been, if my dad didn't go away." O'Sullivan played his last match in Blackpool on September 20, 1992. The next day, his father was found guilty of murder. In his summation, the judge referred to "racial overtones" in the case—Bryan was black—and sentenced Big Ron to eighteen years in prison. The story made all the newspapers. O'Sullivan said, "From that moment onward, everything was shit, to be fair."

Three years later, O'Sullivan's mother, Maria, was also sent to prison. She had taken over the management of the sex shops and

was found guilty of tax evasion. She served seven months. During her absence, O'Sullivan's younger sister, Danielle, who was twelve, went to live with family friends. O'Sullivan, who was nineteen, went off the rails. He partied in his parents' house, got stoned, and put on weight. When he turned up at tournaments, he would look at the other players and envy the small, stable groups they travelled with: parents, managers, drivers. "They had this wall built around them," he said. "I had no wall." For several years, O'Sullivan was accompanied on tour by a man known as the Yunzi, a friend of one of his father's friends in prison. He thought about his father constantly and sought to win on his behalf. "It was me and Dad, fighting the fucking world," he said. But he also held his father responsible for the chaos that had enveloped his life. The table became complicated, loaded with meaning. His game went haywire.

The white ball could dance, or not, at any time. In the first round of the World Championship in 1997, O'Sullivan made a maximum in five minutes and twenty seconds, surpassing the previous record by almost two minutes. He was knocked out in the next round. The British press called him "the Two Ronnies," after a comic duo who were big in the nineteen-seventies. During the 2001 World Championship, in Sheffield, where he won the title for the first time, at the age of twenty-five, O'Sullivan called the Samaritans, a suicide hot line, and started taking Prozac. The unpredictability was exhausting. He was desperate for a thought system that would make sense of his life. He saw shrinks and gurus. He tried Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. After recovering from his addiction to marijuana, O'Sullivan tried all of the Anonymouses, out of a sense of completism. He went to sex-addiction meetings even though he was not addicted to sex.

Nothing helped. During the 2008 season, by any measure one of his most successful, O'Sullivan would get drunk every weekend. His long-term relationship with Jo Langley, the mother of two of his three children, whom he met in rehab, was falling apart. (O'Sullivan has an eighteen-year-old daughter, Taylor, from an earlier relationship.) "I was cueing well, but I had no family, no home," he said. Between tournaments, he stayed on a friend's sofa, reading "How I Play Snooker," Joe Davis's classic manual from 1949.

O'Sullivan's father was allowed out of prison on day release for the first time in early 2009. In the latter stages of his sentence, he had been held at a low-security facility in Sudbury, in the Midlands. O'Sullivan went to meet him at the gates. He was shocked by his father's appearance. "He looked like a burglar," he said. They spent the day at a hotel. When Big Ron called O'Sullivan's mother, his hands shook. In the evening, O'Sullivan dropped his father off in the prison parking lot and watched him troop inside with the other inmates; he seemed happy to be back. "I just thought, Where do we go from here? I've been waiting twenty years," O'Sullivan said. Since his father's final release, his parents have lived apart. After one or two experiments, Big Ron decided to stay away from O'Sullivan's snooker matches as well. (He declined to speak with me for this article.)





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When O’Sullivan took a break at the training facility in Romford, he invited me to share his lunch—salmon with ginger, which he had cooked and brought from home. “This game can fuck your head up like no other game,” he said. Another player had come in to practice, and in the background there was the quiet, irregular sound of colliding balls. “I have told my son he ain’t fucking playing snooker, because I love him too much.” His son, Ronnie, is seven years old. “I love him too much to see him coming in here. Because, you know what, there should be no money in this game. There should be no fame in this game. They should take TV away from this game. They should take it away. This is like a fucking”—O’Sullivan hesitated, grasping for a word of sufficient violence—“an *eccentric* sport.”

By 2009, O’Sullivan was thirty-four, old for a snooker champion, and playing poorly. He came to believe that his decline was permanent. His breakup with Langley dragged through the courts. They fought over money and the custody of Ronnie and his older sister, Lily. O’Sullivan lived on a barge. He lost in the first round of four consecutive major tournaments. His income from snooker fell

from around seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds a year (\$1.1 million) to a hundred and fifty thousand (two hundred and twenty thousand dollars). He pulled out of risky shots. He lost the conviction necessary for topspin. “I was stuck inside,” he said. “I couldn’t really deliver the cue.”

His manager persuaded him to see Steve Peters, a professor of psychiatry at Sheffield University. Peters used to be a doctor at Rampton Hospital, one of England’s three maximum-security psychiatric facilities, but in the past ten years he has enjoyed a second, high-profile career working with élite athletes, including the British Olympic cycling team, to improve their mental performance. Peters, who is sixty-one, lives in a gloomy villa in the Peak District, a region of gaunt beauty in northern England. O’Sullivan arrived in the spring of 2011. “He was in a really bad place,” Peters said. “It was quite disturbing to see.”

Many of the surfaces in the psychiatrist’s house are filled with plastic, china, or knitted figures of chimpanzees. In the nineteen-nineties, Peters came up with what he calls the “chimp paradox” to explain to first-year medical students how the mind functions. According to his analogy, there is a contest within the brain between its more rational, “human” parts and its anciently evolved “chimp” regions. The chimp fulfills essential functions, but it is also powerful and prone to panic. “A chimpanzee is five times stronger than us,” Peters told me. “If you have this animal sharing your life with you, you have to treat it with respect.” Peters does not call himself a doctor when he is dealing with athletes. He thinks of himself as a coach, teaching them how to manage their chimps.

O’Sullivan immediately related to the idea: “I was, like, ‘That’s how I’ve been living my life for seventeen years.’ ” Since his father’s

imprisonment and the subsequent fracturing of his snooker and his life, O'Sullivan had alternated between searching for inner peace and trying to stop thinking altogether. Peters encouraged him to write down his negative thoughts—O'Sullivan's chimp worries a lot about his right arm—and then rebut them with proven facts about his ability and his achievements. Peters calls this inner dialogue "boxing the chimp." For O'Sullivan, it was revelatory. "I didn't know I could behave like this," he said. "I didn't know I had the ability to hold it down."

At first, seeing Peters had no effect on his snooker. At the U.K. Championship in 2011, O'Sullivan suffered a particularly dispiriting defeat to a player named Judd Trump. Trump, who was twenty-two at the time, has a flamboyant potting style, which he calls "naughty snooker," and he is often described as the closest thing to O'Sullivan's heir. He plays in spiked Christian Louboutin loafers and has black stars sewn into the collar of his shirt. In York that year, O'Sullivan lost to Trump even though his mind felt clear and he thought he had played well. "I didn't think that was possible," he said.

The following spring, the white ball came back. In the quarter-finals of the China Open, in Beijing, O'Sullivan was clearing the table and on his way to victory in the game's deciding frame. He faced a routine backspin stroke to position the white for the final red. "I remember thinking, Well, I know that is the right shot to play," he said. "Ten times out of ten, it will go in." Instead, O'Sullivan went for a subtle, almost impossibly difficult topspin shot—entirely needless under the circumstances. The ball loped across the table, touched the cushion, and rolled a few inches too far. It cost O'Sullivan the match, but he was elated. No one else plays like that. "That shot still sticks in my mind, because it was the wrong shot to play but I

didn't care," he said.

He won his next tournament, the 2012 World Championship, and put his cue away. He fully intended to retire. He went running, and spent time with his children. Away from the table, O'Sullivan's life is modest. He goes to the gym, and buys bagels in Chigwell. He likes finding new Chinese restaurants. He hardly played for the rest of that year. In the winter, he volunteered to work on a local farm. He dug ditches and fed the pigs. He was somewhat afraid of the goats. People didn't ask him questions or seem to know who he was. He enjoyed the quiet solidarity of the farm and of his running clubs, spending time with ordinary people, with ordinary lives and families. But life without snooker was boring, and frightening, too. "It's scary," he said. "I thought I could look at it, and then I looked at it and I didn't like it."

O'Sullivan became anxious about money. He fell behind on his children's school fees and realized he hadn't planned adequately for the future. "I was quite happy not playing," he said. "But then it hit me—'Fuck, I've got another forty years to get through, here.' " He announced that he would defend his title in Sheffield. The bookmakers made him one of the favorites. O'Sullivan practiced for six weeks. Even if he lost in the first round, he reasoned, he would still make twelve thousand pounds, enough for a semester of school fees. In the end, he won his fifth World Championship and two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, becoming the first player since Stephen Hendry to win in successive years. "This is my last farewell," he told reporters during the tournament. "I can't keep putting myself through being unhappy." A month later, O'Sullivan decided to rejoin the tour.

Since his return, in 2013, O'Sullivan has thought more about what

comes after snooker. He has his own TV program, “The Ronnie O’Sullivan Show,” on Eurosport, and wants to do more broadcasting. But preparing for the rest of his life is distracting. This past winter, he was worried about his form. He felt vulnerable and wondered if he was sufficiently focussed on his game. In early February, he began to prepare for this year’s World Championship. But on any given day, he said, his mind throbs with what he should or shouldn’t be doing: “Should I be playing more? Am I taking on too much other stuff? Am I becoming a jack-of-all-trades and master of none? Am I now becoming this person, a commercial animal?”

In tournaments, he remains a bully, a greedy old king. In December, at the U.K. Championship, the injured O’Sullivan was, by turns, kindly and vicious toward opponents. After he beat Anthony McGill, a young Scottish player whom he admires, he spent ten minutes advising him on his technique. (McGill stayed up all night replaying the game and texted O’Sullivan to thank him.) In the semifinal, O’Sullivan found himself 4–1 down and on the brink of losing to Stuart Bingham, the ninth-ranked player in the world. “That was a match where I just thought, I’m not going to be pushed around by someone like Stuart,” O’Sullivan told me afterward. “I’m not ready to accept that role yet. I fucking hated that match.” He won, 6–5.

The final was against Judd Trump. Their rivalry is now snooker’s main attraction. The match spanned nineteen frames; the winner would be the first to ten. It started at lunchtime on a Sunday, twelve days after O’Sullivan had broken his ankle. Outside, it was a sunny winter afternoon. Inside the Barbican, it was the perpetual midnight of snooker. A thousand people were there. Trump walked out first. “The ace in the pack,” the m.c. hollered, “with his own brand of naughty snooker!” Tall and thin, Trump retained the disconcerting

legginess of a teen-ager who's grown too fast.

In the early frames, Trump drew frequent gasps for the skill of his potting. When he arranges himself for a shot, it is like watching a heron preparing to catch a fish. But he found himself in dead ends. He would pot five or six balls and then have to cede the table to O'Sullivan. Most of the match was played in silence. Spectators at snooker matches often wear earpieces, to listen to commentary on the subtler points of the game. Through a trick of acoustics, this commentary sometimes drifted into the hall, and the players heard themselves being described. In the fourth frame, O'Sullivan lifted his injured ankle up on the table behind him to sink an awkward brown. "He makes shots look so easy," a voice said. At the end of the afternoon session, O'Sullivan was ahead, 5–3.

In the evening, he took control. Every time Trump faltered, O'Sullivan rose to clear the table. He won four of the next five frames. In the twelfth, he made a break of a hundred and thirty-three, zigzagging the balls home around the black. Two red balls hugged each other in the middle of the table, seemingly inseparable, until O'Sullivan broke them apart with a ricochet that bordered on the abstract, like a thought. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" a man behind me murmured.

When O'Sullivan got to 9–4, a frame from victory, his friend Chic Gourlay emerged from the dressing room to watch. Then Trump woke up. With nothing to lose, he began to hit balls even harder than before, and now they flew in. Trump reclaimed a frame, and then three. In the space of twenty-six minutes, he scored three hundred and thirty-three points. O'Sullivan, more or less stuck to his chair, scored eight. "O'Sullivan-esque," the wandering voice of the commentator said, describing Trump. The score moved to 9–9.

How does it end? O'Sullivan's untrustworthy mind leaves him fearing that he will not recognize the signs. "I could lose it for the next two years, and then come back for another two years," he said. "That's the worrying thing, in some ways. How do you get closure on something like that?"

The players came out for the final frame. They shook hands. A spectator near the front wore a T-shirt that said, "Keep Calm and Play Snooker." Trump broke. O'Sullivan potted an early red. Suddenly, it seemed dangerous to go first. With sixteen points on the board, O'Sullivan missed and gave up the table. But Trump couldn't take advantage. The men exchanged safety shots: long flicks of the white ball, down the table, to catch the edge of a red, hit a cushion, and then retreat up behind a barrier of colored balls. They did this until Trump snagged a red and brought it back up the table as well. "All the fancy fucking footwork, the control that he has had for maybe twenty, thirty shots," O'Sullivan told me once about the art of safety. "Bang, I'm going to pounce on him." He blocked the white ball behind the green. Trump missed his shot, and O'Sullivan had the freedom of the table. He opened his mouth slightly and padded faster in his sneakers. The match clock showed four hours, fifty-three minutes, and six seconds.

There was a moment, only a moment, after that when O'Sullivan was in trouble. He got too close to the blue and had to sneak around it. But for the rest of the match the balls were where he wanted them to be. Red followed by pink, red followed by yellow. The white stayed with him. He got to the end. Later, after the confetti and the prize, I found him backstage. Workmen were dismantling snooker tables, to transport them to the next tournament. "It came back," O'Sullivan said. He looked relieved and haunted at the same time. "Sometimes you know it will." ♦

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