

LARGEST ISSUE — Includes Index of Issues 1-75

# WOODWORK

A MAGAZINE FOR ALL WOODWORKERS

Rick Chudy  
Cuestick Maker

Trestle Desk From  
Recycled Wood

Making A  
Joiner's Mallet

Dovetailed Letter Tray

Wood Turning  
In North America  
Since 1930

High School  
Woodshop

Turning A  
Greenwood Chalice

British Trug Baskets

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# Hits Like A Ton

BY JOHN MARLOWE

*He sat down on the side of the bed and opened his little leather case at the top; the two-piece billiard cue inside was intact. He took it out and screwed the brass joint together, pleased that it still fit perfectly... The weight was still firm and solid. The tip was good, its shape had held up, and the cue's balance and stroke seemed easy, familiar...*

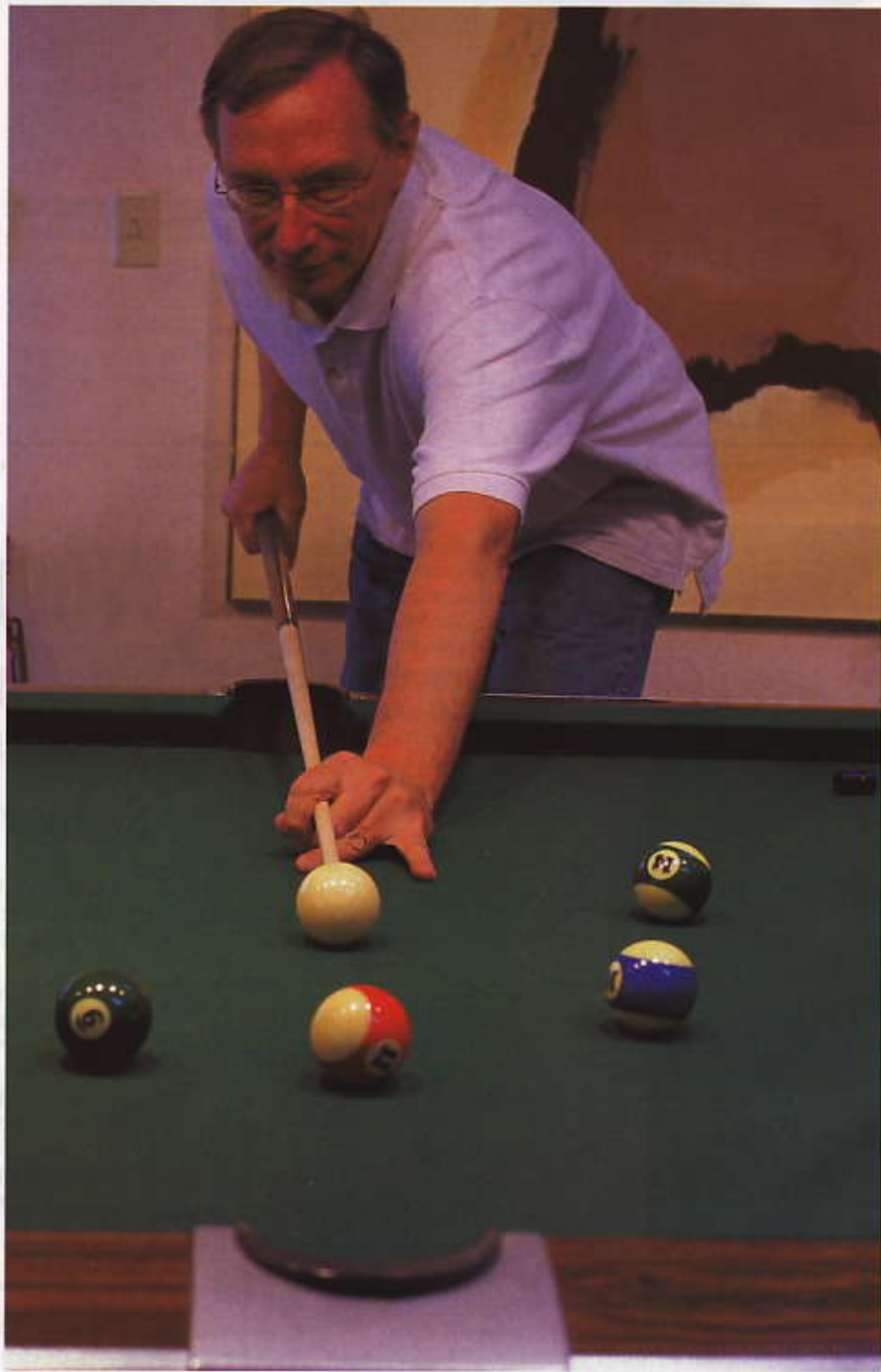
—From Walter Tevis's "The Hustler"

Humans have hit balls with cues since balls were rocks and cues were sticks. Gradually they shrunk the games, put them on a table with imitation grass, and brought them into homes, halls, bars, and pubs. Billiards, pool, and snooker have been played continuously for longer than any sports except boxing and wrestling (which have occasionally interrupted pool games); as in all sports, the rules and the equipment have evolved.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, when even the fanciest of cues were about as complex as a hammer, they were made from one piece of ash or maple, and as recently as fifty years ago, according to Victor Stein's and Paul Robino's massive and beautiful *The Billiard Encyclopedia*, "...great cuemakers...created their best work with the simplest equipment, using tools machines and methods that today's cuemakers would consider primitive; for example, each used basically one lathe for their entire careers."

Contemporary maker Rick Chudy, who makes the RC3 (Rick Chudy Custom Cues), began simply as well, but today he uses five lathes, two milling machines (one of them computer-controlled), and a few others of his own design. He makes cuesticks that hit well, look good, and have a combination of high craft and high mystique that gives them, and their owners, a special character.

Chudy, who now works in Pleasant



ALL PHOTOS BY JOHN LAVINE EXCEPT AS NOTED



Hill, California, began his career in Detroit in 1968 when he walked into a billiard supply house and never came out. He was studying art at Wayne State at the time, well on his way to a life as a painter and sculptor, but the clicking, rebounding balls, brightly lit tables, and dark smoke-filled rooms, like drink and wicked women, led another brave youth astray.

Back in the sixties and early seventies, pool was in the air. Paul Newman's Fast Eddie Felsen and Jackie Gleason's Minnesota Fats made all young men pine for a mid-night life and a cool nickname. Walter Tevis, who is to pool what Melville is to whales, wrote a short story that first appeared in *Playboy*, then expanded it into the novel *The Hustler*, which eventually morphed into the classic movie.

Chudy hung around pool halls, played, and discovered that he had a talent—not as a hustler, but for repairing the tools of the trade. He found work with a small shop that repaired damaged and aging tables and mended wobbly cuesticks. After a while, the owner let him do his own freelance work on the side.

All the while, Chudy watched games and joined in, using house cues. Like someone who drinks house wines, he was not too particular at first; you have to play a lot to notice the difference between a production and a custom cue.

In pool, your stick and your stance define your character, as explained in this snatch of dialogue from *The Hustler*:

*Gordon: I don't think there's a pool player alive who shoots better pool than I saw you shoot the other night at Ames. You got talent.*

*Eddie: So I got talent? So what beat me?*

*Gordon: Character...Everybody's got talent, I got talent. You think you can play big-money straight pool or poker for forty straight hours on nothing but talent? You think they call Minnesota Fats the best in the country just 'cause he got talent? Nah, Minnesota Fats's got more character in one finger than you got in your whole skinny body.*

Now Chudy doesn't just hang around pool halls. He is one of the best cuestick makers on the scene today. As with doc-

Chudy's neighborhood (the best place to play pool in the Bay area, according to Chudy), was remodeling his brand-new-to-him bar one afternoon in 1986 when Chudy appeared at the back door and casually asked if the new place was going to have a pool table. They've been friends ever since. Chudy made his first stick for Davis—a heavy clumsy 24-ounce club, which is like playing pool with a baseball bat. Davis says, "I won my first tourney with it, but Rick wanted it back because it was his first one."

David Handley, a friend from high school days, went to Chudy's first Billiards Expo in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in the early '90s and watched Chudy sell zip. By contrast, Handley was at a recent Vegas show where Chudy sold everything he brought in the first ten minutes.

George Felts says in *A Smarter Way To Play Pool*, "...you definitely need your own two-piece cue if you plan to play regularly and Chudy's clients are willing to suffer the six months waiting time for classy cues that say 'I am here and I am good' because pool is just

not about making the balls go in the pockets. It requires style and stance. It demands small motor skills and mental skills. Players psyche each other out with visual voodoo. Screwing together the two pieces of your own cue like a rifle makes you look like a marksman, a professional, like you might have mob connections. And the decorations on the butt of your cue create a certain elan and confidence."

Not all sticks make you look good. David Ellsworth, a woodturner who makes the occasional cue for his own use, opines there are some pretty tasteless cues



ABOVE—A selection of Rick Chudy's RC3 cues (minus the screw-on shafts) from 1999-2000, as they appeared in the catalog for the *Objects for Everyday Use* show at the American Craft Museum in New York.

OPPOSITE—Cuemaker Rick Chudy with one of his RC3s in its everyday use environment.

tors, lawyers, and architects, an accrediting association provides a set of standards. And to be one of the elite, you have to be a voting member of the American Cuemakers Association (ACA). Chudy is. That means his cues meet rigorous demands for structure, fit, quality of inlays and wraps, with no production weaknesses like non-flush abutments. Buying a cue from a voting member of ACA guarantees the highest level of craft.

Chudy wasn't always so successful. Scott Davis, owner and operator of Magoos, a pool-sympathetic bar in





#### CONSTRUCTION AND INLAY MATERIALS—

1. At far left of photo is a piece of specially stabilized and dyed maple burl from Wildwood Company in Monticello, Ohio. All the rest are "recon" (reconstituted) stones, including coral, malachite, and various forms of turquoise, available from Mazecraft Supply in Connecticut.

2. Burlwoods used for construction and inlay.

3. Amboyna, ivory, tusk, abalone, and a dowel of stabilized wood from Wildwood.

4. Selection of squares of stabilized and dyed woods from Wildwood.

5. An array of "high-end" cues made by Chudy for the 1998 "Gallery of American Cue Art," an exhibition showcasing the best cuemakers in the country. The cue in the middle, made of purple-heart, ebony, burlwood, and silver nugget joints, is now in the collection of the Smithsonian.

Chudy crafts such cues in a 20' x 30' shop. In this productive and cluttered workplace—crammed with machines, and every flat surface covered with work-in-progress, stacks of exotic materials, notes, tools, waxes and glue bottles, scraps of sandpaper, all with the sound of Brahms or blues floating in the air—Chudy makes both "spec" and custom cues.

Specs are his own design—custom without customers—which he markets at shows, Expos, on the web, in pool halls, and by word-of-mouth. For every four specs he makes, he makes one custom. Custom cues are made for specific clients, with the length, weight, and design worked out in advance. Used to be a maker measured a player's arms, checked out their play, and like a doctor, prescribed a cue, but these days sophisticated players know their desired weight and length. For example, one of Chudy's customers is George Milbury, a New York player and collector who has shot pool since he was ten years old. He knows exactly what he wants: a light cue, 18-1/2 to 19 ounces, between 57" and 57-1/2" long.

Chudy's first lathe, a machine lathe, is a tracer, used to follow Chudy's singular patterns to cut shafts and handles. His main lathe, also a machine lathe, is for straight work: dowels, repairs, drilling holes for joint connectors. He has another machine for straight turning and wrap-

and players: "The more gaudy the cue, the more obscene the player." Mass-produced cues have tacky decals. Custom sticks like RC3s feature sophisticated joints, beautiful inlays, carved sleeves, and other decorative techniques.

But the fanciest inlays in the world don't mean a thing if you can't grip the handle comfortably and hit the ball smack on. At the simplest level, cues must be straight and true, the tapers exact, the transition from shaft to butt smooth, the inlays flush and non-abrasive—all so that it balances in the player's hand and slides smoothly through the fingers. The joints must be solid so

the power moves efficiently from the stroke through the stick to the ball. Cues are also constrained by weight and length. A 24-ounce cue is heavy; most cues weigh in at 15-21 ounces. The Billiard Congress of America regulates that no cue used in their tournaments be less than 40" long. For comparison, baseball bats are typically around 34".

Cuemakers, like haiku and limerick writers, must create within a strict format, considering weight, balance, length, junctures, vibrations, taper, sound, and aesthetics. A bespoke cue has to be so good even the sound of the tip hitting the ball is just right to the discerning ear.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RICK CHUDY





#### QUESTICK COMPONENTS IN PROCESS—

1. An assortment of cork cue tips, each with its own characteristics. Chudy favors "Triangle" brand and will use those unless otherwise specified. Tips wear and are meant to be replaced, either by the maker or a repair person.

2. Selection of butt sleeves, all made on his custom-built milling machine.

3. Fronts, made from a core of laminated pie-shaped wedges of maple that is tapered and fitted with a hollowed, tapered sleeve of varying material.

4. Inlay parts in various stages of assembly.

5. Three cues with shafts from 1995-96. From top to bottom, they are maple burl and holly on ebony; Australian "goldfield" burl with ebony and silver; and blue maple burl and ebony on bird's-eye maple. The handles are wrapped with different colors of Irish linen.

connected parts. To guarantee they are tight and the force goes through the entire stick, each junction is threaded, screwed, and glued. To further strengthen the butt and to allow for lots of decorative possibilities, he makes each section in two steps: a tapered core, covered by a tapered sleeve of different materials.

Chudy usually starts with the shaft, which he shapes on his custom saw lathe to create his signature tapers. There are two basic types of tapers: European and American. The European tapers in a straight line from the butt to tip. The shaft gets larger in diameter as it passes through the bridge hand. The diameter of an American taper remains equal for a distance of about 13" down from the tip, after which it swells in a straight line directly to the butt of the handle. This way the shooter feels no increase in the shaft diameter as he strokes through his shot. Chudy has created a blend of American and European, in which the cue has what he calls a "modified pro" taper, with the slightest of curve in it. Because an RC3 taper is unique, a customer wanting a different taper is politely directed to another maker. "If I change my taper, I change the cues; they are no longer RC3s. Custom cues must have an identity, a special feel."

Chudy turns maple shafts, starting with radially-laminated blanks that he has

ping the handle. He also has a general-purpose wood lathe for sanding, polishing and finishing, and a "saw" machine—a "tricked-out" Powermatic #66—that he uses like a slow-cutting router. As a nice touch, some original knobs on the machines have been replaced with numbered pool balls.

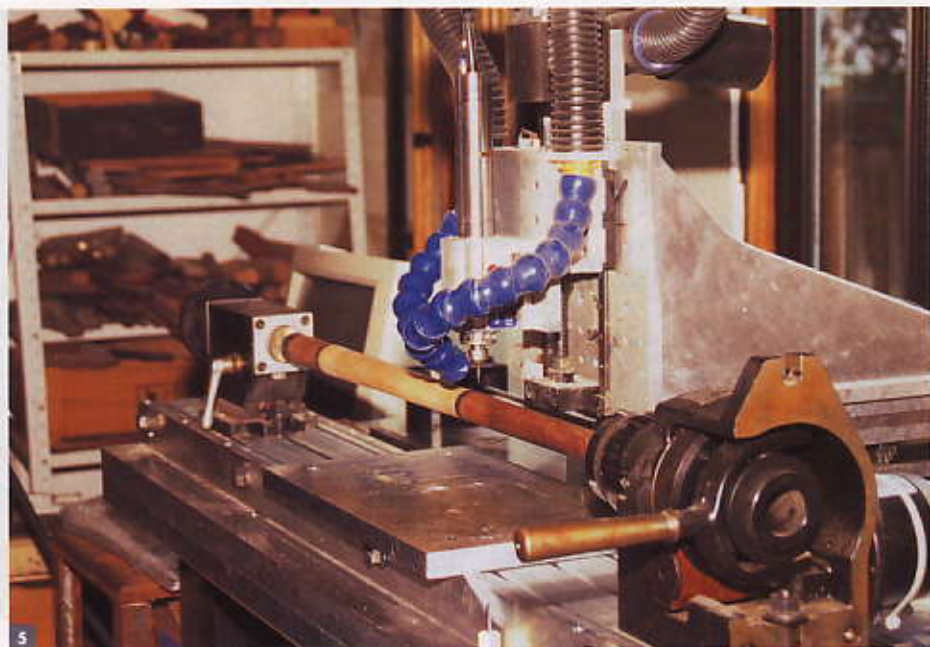
Like his machines, his sticks are unique for many reasons. The obvious is the high quality of the look, the aesthetics, but more important to player/buyers

are the unseen construction techniques that separate an RC3 from the herd.

His "butts," for example, are more complex than some of his competitors'. "Butt" is the gripped portion of the stick that screws into the shaft. The "front" is the part of the butt closest to the shaft, and the "handle" is the section of the butt gripped by the player.

Many custom makers save time and work by making one- or two-piece butts, while Chudy makes his in three separate





1. The process of wrapping a handle with linen begins by undercutting a handle by the thickness of the linen.

2. A bead of white glue is then applied.

3. The linen is started into a small hole in the handle and then wound onto the spinning handle by means of a bobbin. A specialized linen press tool tightens the material after the initial wrap.

4. Finally, the linen is waxed and worked back and forth by hand to burnish it.

5. Rick Chudy's custom-built CNC milling machine, which replaced his manual Gorton Pantograph Milling machine. The former machine used handmade templates to "trace" a pattern onto the workpiece. Now Chudy does all his design work on the computer in CAD and programs the milling machine to cut his intricate patterns, which are constantly testing the machine's capabilities.

lized and dyed burlwood from a dealer in the Midwest.

The butt has to be constructed so it properly balances the weight of the shaft as it rests on the fingers of the bridge hand. Different woods and materials create different strokes for different folks. Diamonds, pearls, gold, silver rubies and one hundred dollars bills, change the weight, density, and vibration.

To make his complex decorative points and inlays, he uses a custom-built milling machine which is more often these days hooked up to his computer and its CAD program. He designs his inlays on the screen, and the machine makes the proper cuts on the handles, and direct the angles and sizes of the inlays. Purists complain that what a computer gains in efficiency it loses in soul, but Chudy disagrees: "It's a tool, just like any other, and in a one-man shop with emphasis on design, it is one of the most creative tools to use. With CNC I have the flexibility to create and change a design and I am not bound by months and months of labor. I'm also testing the limits of the machine—I've broken a lot of bits trying to cut patterns beyond the machine's capabilities."

After the inlays and pockets are cut, the cue still has to be assembled. A well-made joint is like a shock absorber for the

stored and aged for years. The more dense the wood, the harder the hit. An occasional player orders exotic wood for the shaft, but that is an anomaly. He works slowly and patiently, turning and milling gradually, letting the newly-exposed wood stabilize to avoid warping. The shaft must stay absolutely straight and true. An added advantage of maple is that any rejects make great smoke for the BBQ.

Once the shaft has its proper length, taper, and width, he moves to a wood lathe to sand and polish. This description assumes for clarity's sake that his steps are sequential. Truth is, he works at many

tasks at once: turning some sticks, polishing others, assembling butts, and generally juggling the various steps of making a stick while waiting for glue to dry or wood to stabilize.

Decorating the butts features some of his fanciest and most demanding work. For the inlays, Chudy keeps a full larder of exotic materials: bird's-eye maple, snakewood, amboyna and thuya burl, ebony and cocobolo, as well as pink and white ivory, abalone, pearl, diamonds, sterling silver, and the occasional \$100 bill. He uses dyed veneers and reconstituted ("recon") stone, and specially stabi-

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY DANIELLE MARLOWE



mighty impact of cue and ball. The parts must, when connected, fit so well that the vibration of cue at the moment of contact with the cue ball sends the compression from wood to wood along the entire length of the cue, allowing the cue to act as a spring, adding speed to the cue ball. His joint screws, where the shaft and the butt (and the sections of the butt) connect, started as threaded and tapped wood, evolved into brass and stainless steel, and eventually arrived at space-age plastics. Milbury credits Chudy's joints for RC3's popularity, saying Chudy is "...not adverse to introducing new joint pin materials if they will enhance play."

Chudy carefully drills centered holes in the shaft and the butt where they come together. He fits the "male" butt with a plastic or some other material, which is screwed into a "female" wooden thread.

Chudy's precise wood threads rarely wear or crack. He had more trouble in the past with threaded metal inserts breaking. All RC3s have uniform connectors and joints. Shaft A will not only fit butt A, it will fit butts A to Z, seamlessly, so that once they are screwed together, they will look and function as one continuous piece.

The final step is wrapping the handle, making a secure and comfortable grip. He gracefully wraps the handle in string

made from Irish linen in a kind of fly-fishing motion on his lathe. After wrapping, he presses the wrap and seals it with a wax, then polishes, trims and tweaks all joints and fits. He then sands the shaft, beginning with 1200-grit and finishing with 2500. He uses automotive rubbing compounds and a sealer that is a two-part epoxy. Some players maintain that polishing a cue with high denomination paper bills will increase its shine and slipperiness.

Making cues is one thing; selling them

is another. On one hand, you have museums with their clean lights, pedestals, and polite crowds; on the other, you have rough and tumble pool halls. Art and craft are gravy. His real task is making and selling cues to hardcore, genuine pool players who take their best shots long after the museums and galleries are closed. Chudy's bread and butter comes from cues selling for around \$1500. He has sold more than a few for ten times that much, but not so often that he wants to take his attention away from those with a more modest price. He did not like a TV news item about him that emphasized his sale of a stick for five figures. "That doesn't help. It makes people think they can't afford me."

Fact of the matter is, though, that in addition to being used for play, sticks are bought as an investment, based on the

impervious to decay. Chudy sees it differently; he points out that just as contemporary paintings are considered art, many contemporary cues meet the same artistic (and functional) standards.

We could argue whether or not a cue is art, craft, production, or collectable. Stein and Robino make their case in *The Billiard Encyclopedia* as follows: "The beauty of simplicity in some, and the ornate craftsmanship in others, certainly prove that a cue can frequently be a masterpiece in its own right. Very few objects of art can boast such a usefulness, as well as unsurpassed beauty to the eye."

Cues by masters who are no longer with us, like Herman Rambow, Harvey Martin, and George Balabushka get top, top dollar—like Stradivarius violins and Gullwing Mercedes.

Some cues are famous for being famous. Cues with high profiles, like the ones used in the movies *The Color of Money* and *The Hustler*, are highly desirable. For *The Color of Money*, custom cuemaker Dan James made eight replicas of Balabushkas, and in the film, reference is made to sticks by the historic maker's name. All of a sudden everyone wanted a Balabushka, and that of course raised the value of originals and replicas alike.

Stein and Robino write, "One-of-a-kind models made

specifically as tournament prizes or as awards for professional players can bring as much as \$10,000 to \$20,000, depending on their age, condition, materials, and pedigree." Jim Buss, a Saint Louis-based rocket scientist (no kidding), cuemaker, past president and official historian of the American Cuemakers Association adds, "Some people like to buy a cue with a story, such as 'It was used by a certain player to win the world title etc...'"



Some examples of current work. From top to bottom, a manzanita burl butt with leather handle; ebony and holly on maple burl shaft; cocobolo, ebony, and silver with Irish linen handle; blue maple on kingwood, with ivory joints; ebony and ivory on amboyna burl shaft. All his pins are now a special plastic.

assumption that exceptional ones will increase in value. A collectable cue must, in unique combinations, play well, sport a fine design, possess a history, and, some would argue, have stood the wear and tear of time.

Stein, a leading authority on pool, billiards, and snooker, believes that to be a true collectable a cue has to gain respect through time. Not only look good to consecutive generations, it must have veneers, joints, and general craftsmanship



Cues have been based on Faberge eggs and contemporary design icons. Texan Richard Black once made a custom cue based on a reproduction of a famous Parker Pen; it sold for \$50,000. Black has even based some of his sticks on modern art, working with Basilia Poulus, Chairman of the Art History Department at Rice University, to design cues based on Picasso, Gauguin, and Erte. Definitely not Fast Eddie's crowd.

Serious collectors can have their cake and eat it too. Ken Koo, who started hanging around pool halls in Oakland when he was 14 years old, owns three RC3s, including a combination jump and break cue [see side bar] that ... "hits like a ton." A BMW mechanic, Koo knows fit and tolerance. He ordered a bird's-eye maple cue with two shafts; he stores one as an investment. Likewise, New Yorker Milbury bought his first RC3 with two shafts, one for play, the other for pay.

Susan Backman, a player, collector, and managing partner of San Francisco's Chalkers Pool Hall, is another Chudyite. She has 20 collectible cues, three of which are RC3s. She considers him "...one of the 10 or 15 best cuemakers in the nation, certainly the best in the Bay area." This was fur-

ther emphasized when an RC3 was showcased in the American Craft Museum's *Objects for Use: Handmade by Design*, which opened last year. This ambitious show featured functional objects ranging from kayaks to cues, brooms to pool tables made in "...the handmade, one-of-a-kind and small production workshops, and a uniquely American spirit of creativity." Curator Paul J. Smith told me, "Chudy's cues

Japanese collector, Iwao Hishinuma, who goes by the moniker "Lucky", stated simply that Chudy and his wife are "family to us." Koo says Chudy is "...more personable, more up front. He will tell you right away what he can and what he can't do for you." Backman gives him high marks for verbal skills, saying, "He loves communicating when you order a cue."

So, there is the whole package: a man who makes world class cues that hit sharply and exude character and collectability. What more could a guy ask for?

Like The Brunswick Company claimed at the turn of the previous century: "We don't make mop sticks! We don't make curtain poles, broom handles, or fishing rods! We just make cues."

Rick Chudy doesn't make mop sticks! He doesn't make curtain poles, broom handles, or fishing

rods. He, too, just makes beautiful cues, that, in the words of Charles Osgood during a radio interview of Chudy, "...not only strike the ball with perfect precision, (they) are works of art..."

While Woody racked the balls, Ned walked over to the green cabinet in the corner and took out his private cue, a twenty-ounce cue with an ivory point, his name engraved on the little brass ring around the middle where the two sections joined together. It had been years since Ned had needed a cue that could be taken apart for traveling like a hustler from town to small town. But he still used the old joined cue. He was used to it, to its weight, balance and stroke...

—"The Big Hustle" a short story by Walter Tevis

John Marlowe is a freelance writer living in San Rafael, California.



Top-of-the-line cues from 1997 included such details as worked silver Celtic designs and twisted gold wire and ruby inlays. The rc<sup>3</sup> (Rick Chudy Custom Cues) trademark can be seen on the cap piece in the middle of the picture.

come from a fine craftsman...we could only include the finest."

Another crucial aspect of his success is the respect of his buyers. Chudy gets high marks in this area. For example in November '01 he went to an Expo in Japan just to show respect for Japanese buyers. "They are fine people, and important collectors for me." A

**PLAYING CUE** This general, all-purpose cue, which is sometimes called a run cue, can be heavier, lighter, longer, shorter, thinner, fatter, all depending on the personal idiosyncrasies of the player. Little ergonomics. It is all in the head of the player. As Chudy said, "As long as it works in your head, it will work on the table."

**JUMP CUE** This leather-tipped cue,

lighter and with a larger "sweet spot," is used to make the cue ball jump over a couple of balls that are in the way to the target ball. It is shorter, stiffer and lighter.

**BREAK CUE** Since the break shot is the only shot that is always the same, some players like to have one special, familiar, single-purpose cue for the crucial shot that starts every game.