

= Rudolf Wanderone =

Rudolf Walter Wanderone Jr . (January 19 , 1913 ? January 15 , 1996 ; originally spelled Wanderon) was an American professional pocket billiards player , also known as " Minnesota Fats " . Though he never won a major pool tournament as " Fats " , he was perhaps the most publicly recognized pool player in the United States ? not only as a player , but also as an entertainer . Wanderone was inducted in 1984 into the Billiard Congress of America Hall of Fame for his decades @-@ long public promotion of pool .

Wanderone began playing at a young age in New York City . As a teenager , he became a traveling pool hustler . Later , in his 30s , he moved to southern Illinois where he met and married his first wife , Evelyn . During World War II , he hustled servicemen in Norfolk , Virginia . With the end of the war , Wanderone returned to Illinois and entered semi @-@ retirement .

Wanderone adopted the nickname " Minnesota Fats " from a character in the 1961 film *The Hustler* , claiming that the character was based upon him . He parlayed the association with the film into his own book deals and television appearances , including a series of matches with rival Willie Mosconi . Later in life , Wanderone divorced Evelyn and moved to Nashville , Tennessee , where he married his second wife , Theresa , with whom he remained until his death .

= = Early life and career = =

Rudolf Walter Wanderon Jr. was born in New York City to Rosa and Rudolf Wanderon , Swiss immigrants . He was born in 1913 but sometimes hinted he was born earlier , even as early as 1900 . The surname was later changed to Wanderone .

Known as " Rudy " to friends and family , Wanderone started playing pool as a child while living in Washington Heights , Manhattan . In 1923 , he traveled to Europe with his father where he received training from German balkline billiards champion Erich Hagenlocher . His first prominent match was in 1926 when he competed against former nine @-@ ball champion " Cowboy " Weston (Wanderone won , handily) . Wanderone left school in the eighth grade and became a traveling pool hustler , spending much of the 1920s playing at a pool hall called Cranfield 's in New York City , where Wanderone received his first nickname after beating another hustler known as " Smart Henry " . The intensity of their competition led Wanderone 's friend , Titanic Thompson , to dub Wanderone " Double @-@ Smart " . By the mid @-@ 1930s , during the Great Depression , Wanderone had become a manager of a pool hall , owned by a friend , in Anacostia , southeast Washington , D.C. He had acquired more notoriety and nicknames , including " Triple @-@ Smart Fats " , " New York Fats " , " Broadway Fats " , and " Chicago Fats " , attracting action from other hustlers , including the then unknown Luther " Wimpy " Lassiter .

In 1941 , Wanderone and friend Jimmy Castras arrived in southern Illinois ? major hustling center on a fast track to televised tournament play ? and settled in Du Quoin , Illinois , where he continued hustling . Eventually he met Evelyn Inez Graff ; they married two months to the day later , on May 7 , 1941 . Following their wedding , the Wanderones settled in Dowell , Illinois . In 1942 , the couple moved to Norfolk , Virginia . Norfolk had become a key mustering point for US soldiers , as well as a shipbuilding center . The growing population led to an enormous interest in gambling ; Wanderone , in partnership with fellow hustler Lassiter , quickly recognized the financial possibilities . Following World War II , however , the action " dried up " soon , and the Wanderones returned to Little Egypt . For a period throughout the 1950s , Wanderone entered semi @-@ retirement , making only occasional hustling trips to New York City .

= = " Minnesota Fats " = =

In 1961 , the film version of Walter Tevis ' novel *The Hustler* was released . The film tells the story of a pool shark named " Fast Eddie " Felson and his quest to beat the greatest pool player in America , " Minnesota Fats " . World Champion Willie Mosconi served as a technical advisor and trick shot stunt man for the film . Wanderone almost immediately dropped his " New York Fats " .

nickname , adopted the name " Minnesota Fats " and began spreading the story that the character was based on him . Tevis denied this for the rest of his life .

Wanderone 's notoriety as " Minnesota Fats " led to a job as executive vice @-@ president of billiard table manufacturer Rozel Industries , playing exhibition matches and giving demonstrations . Rozel , in 1965 , published Wanderone 's first book : Minnesota " Fats " Book of Billiards . On January 17 , 1965 , he appeared on the television game show What 's My Line , successfully stumping the panel .

In 1966 , he wrote his autobiography , The Bank Shot , and Other Great Robberies , with Sports Illustrated journalist , Tom Fox . His first TV game show , Minnesota Fats Hustles the Pros , debuted in 1967 , featuring " Fats " playing against other pro players .

In 1967 he completed and published an instructional paperback , Minnesota Fats on Pool , which was reprinted through 1976 in large @-@ quantity editions , then reissued as a hardcover in 1993 , and remains to this day commonly available .

The next year , on January 24 , 1968 , Wanderone was a guest on The Joey Bishop Show . By 1970 , Celebrity Billiards with Minnesota Fats , another short @-@ lived TV game show series , featured Wanderone playing against celebrity guests such as Sid Caesar .

In a feature film , The Player (produced in December 1970 , in Baton Rouge , Louisiana) , Wanderone played himself as " Minnesota Fats " and was featured prominently on the promotional poster . The screenplay was written and directed by Thomas DeMartini , also starred pool pro Jack Colavita , and had a limited release in 1971 by International Cinema . That same year Wanderone was a guest on both The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson (September 21 , 1971) , on which he hustled Carson out of US \$ 1 , and the British David Frost Show (October 13 , 1971) . His fame as " Fats " had already made it difficult for Wanderone to hustle effectively , so he relied more and more on exhibition games for income .

By 1979 , Wanderone was well @-@ known enough to be playing himself as a celebrity guest star on a Season 2 episode of the popular TV detective drama Vega \$, titled " the Usurper " , the episode featured " Fats " and pro Jimmy Mataya playing one another in a game of pool . In 1980 , while visiting a one @-@ mile stretch of St. Louis , Wanderone had to double his order of autographed pictures after he was stopped thirty @-@ seven times . During this trip he was beaten by Michael Boulton 4 out of 10 times in games of pool .

= = Rivalry with Willie Mosconi = =

Wanderone enjoyed promoting a feud with world champion Mosconi over how to present pool ? either as a rough @-@ and @-@ tumble gambling game (Wanderone) or as a genteel pastime and art form (Mosconi) . Mosconi 's widow , Flora , said of the rivalry , " My husband hated Minnesota Fats because he felt that [Wanderone] was always hurting the image of the game instead of helping it . " Wanderone would state smugly , " I may have ' given away ' a few games to deserving competitors , but I have never lost a real money game since I was old enough to spell ' Weeli Mesconi ' . " The two competed on Valentine 's Day (February 14) , 1978 in a televised match on ABC 's Wide World of Sports . With almost 11 million viewers , the game was the second @-@ highest rated episode of the show for that year , behind only the Muhammad Ali vs. Leon Spinks rematch . The game was held at New York 's Waldorf Astoria Hotel , and was announced by Howard Cosell . Although Wanderone lost the game , he won the audience with his banter , and with his joking manner . Mosconi on the other hand was reportedly perceived as cold .

" Fats " lost a number of rematches to Mosconi in the following years . However , in the nationally @-@ broadcast Resorts International Shoot @-@ Out of October 1984 ? Wanderone 's last notable TV appearance ? he finally turned the tables on his rival . The event began with a trick shot competition between four players : Wanderone , Mosconi , Steve Mizerak , and Allen Hopkins .

Next , Hopkins and Fats played against Mosconi and Mizerak in doubles seven @-@ ball , then nine @-@ ball . Wanderone and Mosconi ultimately played a one @-@ on @-@ one game of seven @-@ ball ; Wanderone won the match . During the exhibition , a very quiet and genteel Mosconi blocked Wanderone 's rough @-@ and @-@ tumble banter by wearing ear plugs ; yet that failed to

stop Wanderone from putting on a show for his fans . In an interview , Wanderone was asked about his strategy to defeat Mosconi , and replied that he had thought to himself , " I 'll make [the 7 ball] on the break and end it ... then I 'll help carry Willie out on a stretcher . "

= = Later life = =

The Billiard Congress of America in 1984 inducted Wanderone into its Hall of Fame for " Meritorious Service " in recognition of his contributions to helping popularize the game of pool . In 1984 , Wanderone abandoned his wife , Evelyn ; they divorced a year later .

Wanderone moved into the Hermitage Hotel in downtown Nashville , Tennessee in 1985 , remaining there for several years . In 1992 , while undergoing surgery for a knee injury , he suffered a massive heart attack , but survived . In 1993 , he met and married his second wife , Theresa Ward Bell . He lived in Bell 's Nashville house until his death on January 15 , 1996 , four days shy of his 83rd birthday (although some sources , including The New York Times , erroneously gave the date of his death on January 18) .

Wanderone had no known children . Singer Etta James said she believed that he was her biological father , having reportedly been told this by her mother , as well as by others who knew her mother and whom James described as " people who were there and should know " . However , there is no published evidence of such a relationship . James and Wanderone are only known to have met once , in 1987 .

In her autobiography , *Rage to Survive* , James recounted their meeting , writing that Wanderone neither confirmed nor denied his paternity . According to James , he told her that he did not recall the details of his life at the time of her conception well enough to know whether he could have been the father .

The epitaph on his tombstone reads : " Beat every living creature on Earth . ' St. Peter , rack ' em up . ? Fats ' " .

= = Personal character = =

Wanderone was known for ostentation , self @-@ aggrandizement , tall tales , fast @-@ talk , and entertaining banter . He was even publicly recognized by famed boaster Muhammad Ali as better at boasting . His critical biographer , R. A. Dyer , documents that Wanderone completely fabricated a " here @-@ by @-@ fate " tale about a car wreck which brought the player to Little Egypt ; it was a tale that Wanderone encouraged to spread and further embellished in his autobiography , to lend an air of the mystical to his public persona . He made false claims about beating Willie Mosconi so frequently that Mosconi filed a slander lawsuit , to little avail .

According to Dyer , Wanderone was notorious for non @-@ stop chatter on subjects about which he knew little , or stories about himself . At the beginning of his first TV match against Mosconi , Wanderone claimed " I 've never lost [a game] for money in my life ; beat everyone that ever lived . " Yet , as Dyer concedes , " Pool hustlers are , by nature , liars . And by this measure , Minnesota Fats was just a very , very good pool hustler . "

Wanderone was a lover of animals , and was reported to have had dozens of cats and dogs simultaneously , and to have devoted a lot of time to finding homes for strays . " I 'm crazy about every living creature " , he wrote in *The Bank Shot* . " It doesn 't matter what it happens to be . I even love insects ; in fact , I wouldn 't swat a fly or a mosquito for a whole barrel of gold . "

Remembered well for his turns of phrase and his puns , Wanderone once wrote , " If you happened to drive from Mobile to Dowell [Illinois] with a carload of pool hustlers , you would get bit so hard and so often that you would need a malaria vaccine and a new bankroll as well " , a reference not only to the area 's notorious mosquitos but also the predatory nature of hustlers . Wanderone is remembered for saying on his way out a pool room door , " Boys , the only difference between me and everybody else is that everybody else drives around in a Volkswagen , and Minnesota Fats drives around in a Duesenberg . " Wanderone would go virtually anywhere to help promote the game , and he was a crowd @-@ pleaser .

Wanderone owned various limousines throughout his career . He once toured the country in a colorful Lincoln limo , with his extended moniker painted along the side panels in translucent paint , changing colors as it moved with the reflections from the sun : " Minnesota Fats , King of Pool " . His 1980 Cadillac Fleetwood limo was later in the Nashville auto museum , until the facility closed .

Wanderone was notorious for his spontaneous wit . When he was named the " uncrowned king " of pool because he never got actively involved in tournament circles (due to being too busy hustling) , his reply : " You judge a king by the size of his wallet and his palace . You can leave the crown in the toilet . "