

It was with great sadness that the Snooker and Billiards Community acknowledged the passing of Henry John McKay on December 6th 2012 after a long battle with cancer. "John" or "Johnny" as he was universally known to everyone, was a larger than life character, a friend to everyone who knew him, always greeting you with a warm smile and the most painful of vice-like handshakes. The handshake was one of the most memorable and scary things about running into John, and it wasn't until you'd shaken his hand several times that you learnt there was a subtle tactic to limiting - not eliminating - the pain involved. You had to thrust your hand as far into his as possible - difficult given his huge hands resembled two large plates of meat about to squash your hand into oblivion - but if you did this, his crushing grip squeezed just the fleshier part of your hand, and didn't grind your knuckles together in the most excruciatingly painful way.

Having said that, the handshake was just about the only scary thing about John, despite his bear like stature and enormous arms and chest. He was epitome of the gentle giant. Legend has it he was once involved with another famous Brunswick local in a stand up brawl which shook the very foundations of the Brunswick streets, the two standing toe to toe trading blows. At the end, they put their arms around one another and retired to the pubs for some beers. Legend has it, anyway.

He was quick to flash you an encouraging smile, quicker still to ask you if you wanted a drink. Therein was possibly a second danger about being around Johnny. If you got drinking with him, it would almost always end badly - for you.

John loved people, he loved the punt, he loved snooker, and later he loved Trugo. Of course he always loved his beloved Denise and Mark, and then his precious grandchildren too. His family he loved the most, but he loved all the other things in his life too. Not in any particular order, he loved them all. A couple of favourite stories about John to share.

The first saw us at Launceston Casino for the 1988 Australian Snooker Championships. It was mid-year, and it was seriously cold. John always loved a swim, didn't matter the time of year or the temperature of the water, he was in there splashing about. You guess that must be why he managed the Brunswick Baths for so many years. Anyway, one morning John was splashing about in the indoor pool at the motel we were staying at. It was so cold that there was a fog above the water. Many boys had enjoyed a big night and were looking for a way to get started on the new day. Dick Davis, a jovial chap from the Bentleigh Club, was one of these. He ventured towards the pool, asking John how the water was. John replied "Its beautiful Dick, jump on in". Taking John at his word and mistaking the fog for steam coming off the water, Dick did just that, jumped straight in - to water that was probably about 8-10 degrees centigrade. FREEZING. Dick surfaced, his face was white, and he could not speak. He was in shock. Johnny just let out that familiar little chuckle and asked Dick what was the matter. Priceless, classic, Johnny McKay.

The 2nd story revolves around the punt - what else. We were at Gosford's Central Leagues Club for their annual tournament. It was mid-year, raining and very unpleasant. Most of the Vics were either out or just waiting to play, and the gravitational force of the local TAB was strong. A few bets were had, and then came a voiceover from the great John Tapp about the next race. "A 3 yo maiden for fillies in the absolute bog, you'd have to be dead-set carved out of chocolate to have a bet in this race" were Tapp's words. Asking each other about who they'd backed, there were strong shakes of the head. Not in this race, never, no-one could be that stupid - could they? Then Johnny emerges from the TAB, "Did you have a bet John?" "Yeah mate I've had 50eachway on so-and-so in the next". Only John McKay could do that - Raucous laughter from everyone.

The last story is about John the snooker player. He was a fine cueist, and a great match player. Limited by a very short backswing and a glorious inability to screw back, he always shook his head at how much cue-power the modern players like Hawkes and Gorski had. But John had accuracy and was the best pot down the rails that had ever been seen on tight Victorian tables in the 1980s. In the 1981 Victorian Championship semi-final at Yarraville, Johnny took on raging favourite Robby Foldvari in a best of 9. Robby led early, but the longer the game went, the stronger Johnny got. The match went to 4-all. In the decider, Robby had a slight lead with a handful of reds scattered all over the place, mostly on the rails. John took one on, made it, rolled a black in, carved another red down the rails, left himself on the cushion, rolled another black in and so-on and so-forth, carrying on with one of the finest displays of difficult single-ball potting under the greatest of pressure that you could ever see. His break totalled only 55, but when Robby got back to the table he needed snookers, and John went on to win that, and then in the final beat defending champion Robin Beggs, to take out the 1981 Victorian title.

John was a truly great man, a friend to everyone, and will be sadly missed. Goodbye Johnny, all our lives have been enriched by knowing you and the world is a lesser place for your passing.

Vale Henry John McKay. (Thank you Neil Croft)