# Inside snooker’s colourful past: the flamboyant stars and turbulent lives of the game’s legends



Snooker’s rich history has been marked not only by remarkable skill and thrilling championships but also by a colourful array of personalities whose lives off the table have been as eventful as their performances on it. As the World Snooker Championship approaches at The Crucible, attention turns to some of the sport’s most notorious figures whose antics once captured the public imagination during snooker’s golden era in the 1970s and 1980s.

Tony Knowles, known as “the hottest pot in snooker,” became synonymous with the playboy lifestyle. Hailing from Bolton, he earned the nickname “The Ladies Man of Bolton” by openly courting tabloid fame through stories of his romantic escapades, even earning £25,000 for one such interview. His flair extended beyond the baize; he was once photographed in a provocative pose with a topless Page 3 model draped across a snooker table. Despite his on-table talents, Knowles’ career took a plunge in the mid-1980s, a decline he partly attributed to the relentless media spotlight. Stephen Hendry, a snooker great himself, recalled playing the 14-year-old against Knowles in an exhibition in Scotland, noting how women were enraptured by Knowles’ charm.

Arguably the most emblematic figure of snooker’s wild heyday is Northern Ireland’s Alex Higgins, nicknamed “The Hurricane.” Higgins’ life was a whirlwind of highs and lows, both on and off the table. His early career saw him living in a series of derelict houses, moving from one condemned home to another as they were demolished. Known for his heavy drinking and chain-smoking, Higgins was as much a fixture of the tabloids as he was on snooker podiums. His infamous antics included arriving at the World Championship with three women allegedly hired from an escort agency and engaging in physical confrontations with officials. Disciplinary actions followed, including a five-tournament ban and a hefty fine for headbutting an official after being asked to take a drugs test. Higgins’ turbulent personal life included legal troubles, arrests, and a stabbing incident involving his girlfriend Holly Haise. Despite health struggles and battles with addiction, Higgins’ impact on the sport remains indelible. Former policeman Dave Moorhouse, who once housed Higgins, described the player’s erratic behaviour: “Alex suffers from great highs and great lows. He has sung love songs outside my window at 3 o'clock in the morning, woken me up and asked me if I wanted a sleeping tablet.”

Jimmy White, “the people’s champion,” is another of snooker’s charismatic figures. Self-admitted to a lifestyle marked by heavy partying and substance use, White spoke candidly about his cocaine use and gambling addiction. He told The Telegraph: “All of a sudden girls, beautiful girls... were all over you... I just went with the flow and it was great fun.” His struggles with drugs and gambling led to significant financial losses, but unlike some contemporaries, White never failed a drug test, having learnt to avoid detection. Barry Hearn, then-head of professional snooker, once assigned a minder to White in a bid to keep him out of trouble, though White often ‘gave him the slip’. He has since overcome many of his addictions and today maintains a quieter public life, known to indulge in poker rather than substance use. White’s personal life also captured headlines; in 2018, he began dating Jade Slusarczyk, a former darts walk-on girl considerably younger than himself.

Canada has contributed its own distinctive characters to snooker lore, not least Bill Werbeniuk. Renowned for his prodigious alcohol consumption during matches, Werbeniuk claimed to have drunk 24 pints of extra-strong lager and eight double vodkas before a career finale. His drinking feats even included a contest with fellow player Eddie Sinclair in Australia where they reportedly consumed a combined 85 pints. However, the underlying reason for Werbeniuk’s heavy drinking was medical; he suffered from a tremor that alcohol temporarily alleviated. Despite warnings from doctors to switch to prescribed medication, snooker authorities banned the drug, leaving him reliant on alcohol. Werbeniuk passed away at the age of 56 after retiring to Canada.

Among current stars, Ronnie O’Sullivan, known as “The Rocket,” is often viewed as the sport’s last true maverick. His career, marked by prodigious talent and controversial moments, includes a two-year suspended ban and substantial fines following an assault on an official in 1996. In 2008, he attracted criticism for making inappropriate and suggestive comments at a press conference in China, later apologising and expressing regret that his behaviour was counter to his father’s teachings. O’Sullivan has also been outspoken about his battles with depression and addiction, revealing in candid interviews the extent of his struggles with alcohol and cannabis. His sharp personality has led to public conflicts, including clashes with fellow players and referees. Notably, his personal background includes a traumatic family history, with his father serving an 18-year prison sentence for murder. Despite these challenges, O’Sullivan remains one of the game’s most successful and highest-earning players, chasing his eighth world title as the championship begins.

Another flamboyant figure from the past is Canadian Kirk Stevens, known for his striking white suits and stylish play. His career suffered due to drug addiction, including a period when he reportedly smoked crack cocaine with Jimmy White in a hotel room. Stevens candidly admitted to spending £250,000 on cocaine over six years. Following his rehabilitation, he transitioned to a new career as a car salesman.

Silvino Francisco, nicknamed “The Silver Fish,” had a contrasting fall from grace. Representing South Africa, Francisco attracted suspicion following an unusual number of bets on a specific match outcome at the World Championship. Subsequently, he was banned for five years for alleged match-fixing. Later struggles included losing his home after a fall from the sport, working in a fish and chip shop, and being sentenced to prison for attempting to smuggle a significant amount of cannabis through Dover.

The Daily Mail’s sports coverage highlights that while the modern game has largely moved away from these extremes—beyond isolated betting scandals—snooker’s past is intertwined with tales of flamboyance, controversy, and personal tumult. As the World Championship revives one of sport’s most cherished tournaments, these characters remain a vivid part of snooker’s complex tapestry.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_Knowles_(snooker_player)> - This Wikipedia page confirms Tony Knowles' nickname as 'the hottest pot in snooker' and his reputation as a playboy who courted tabloid fame, including earning £25,000 for interviews about his romantic life. It also details his career highlights and decline attributed partly to media scrutiny.
* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/snooker/56405915> - Provides information about Alex Higgins' turbulent life, including his heavy drinking, disciplinary bans for disruptive behavior such as headbutting an official, and his personal struggles with addiction and legal issues, corroborating the article's depiction of Higgins as a famous but controversial figure in snooker.
* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/snooker/10504796/Jimmy-White-why-i-ve-fought-to-save-my-life-from-cocaine-and-gambling.html> - This interview with Jimmy White in The Telegraph confirms his candid admission of struggles with cocaine use and gambling addiction, his partying lifestyle, and the financial and personal hardships he faced, echoing the article's claims about his life and career challenges.
* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bill-Werbeniuk> - This Britannica entry on Bill Werbeniuk discusses his heavy alcohol consumption during matches, including medical reasons for drinking to control a tremor, and the impact on his career, supporting the article's claims about his unique relationship with alcohol and snooker.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/apr/02/ronnie-osullivan-snooker-the-rocket-interview> - An in-depth Guardian interview with Ronnie O'Sullivan addresses his career controversies, including his suspension for assault on an official, his struggles with depression and addiction, and his complex personal background, validating the article's portrayal of O'Sullivan's personality and challenges.