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business

Pool's paradise

Cue the revelry for players and rack up revenue for bars as the sport brings everyone to the table

By Beth Potter, Special to The Denver Post

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Chuck Rooney, one of two league operators in the Denver area for the American Poolplayers Association, says there aren't too many jobs like his where you get paid to play pool and drink beer.

Watching Rooney in action in the upstairs pool room at the Wynkoop Brewery, where players rack 'em on a dozen or so tables, provides insight into how hard he works to keep his pool-league members happy.

"It's just a lot of fun," Rooney said. "It's a great indoor recreational sport, especially when winter comes around."

Rooney's Denver league, 2,000 players strong, appears to be riding a trend nationwide that has turned pool's image around in recent years, from something you do in a smoky dive bar to mainstream entertainment.

The national association is based in Lake Saint Louis, Mo. It represents amateur pool players, with an estimated 260,000 members across the country. More than 35 million Americans played pool at least once in 2005, the most recent period for which figures are available, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association.

APA operators from around the West met Thursday and are meeting today at the Radisson Hotel Denver Stapleton Plaza. President Renee Puehlman is pursuing strategies to meet the group's goal of 1 million members by 2020.

Rooney said his most important job is ranking players based on their wins and losses and handicapping them for league play. He also organizes schedules and hands out score sheets to teams. His league expects to send nine teams to play in a national tournament this year in Las Vegas.

Members on five-person teams pay \$5 each per week to play. Rooney estimates his revenues at about \$2,500 per week, since not every team plays every week.

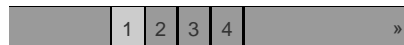
Players pay for their own food, drinks and pool tables at spots around town like the Mirage Café and Sports Bar in Littleton, the Rack 'Em Cue Club in Aurora, the Break Room in Littleton and the Skylark Lounge in Denver. Another American Poolplayers Association franchise holder also has 2,000 members in Denver. The Valley National Eightball Association, or VNEA, has about 400 members in the metro area. Other bars around town have smaller leagues.

Area drinking establishments rack up big revenues from the leagues, too, since they usually play early in the week, when business is slow, said Ginger Perkins, 36, an APA member. Perkins estimated she spends \$5,000 or more per year playing pool, including fees, equipment and tournaments.

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Denver resident Melissa Lake, 30, lines up a shot during a recent tournament... (Post / John Leyba)



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"It's providing different opportunities rather than just going out," Perkins said.

At the Wynkoop Brewery, a Tuesday league night can bring in \$1,600 or more in bar and pool-table receipts, Rooney said. Scott Stengaard, general manager, is projecting about \$2 million in pool-hall revenues this year from the restaurant-bar's estimated \$6 million in gross revenues.

"We make a lot of money off of it," Stengaard said.

At the Mirage in Littleton, pool accounts for about 35 percent of revenues, and the leagues have definitely helped business, said owner Dan Jensen. The bar's previous owner never did more than \$1 million in revenue, said Jensen, who did more than \$1 million the first year he was open in 1999 after beefing up pool-table interest.

"It's a really good and steady business," he said. "The revenue has increased because of the pool."

4,000

Members in the two Denver leagues of the American Poolplayers Association

260,000

Members nationwide in the American Poolplayers Association

35 MILLION

Americans who played pool at least once in 2005

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