

# Joe Johnson has remained in touch with reality

AFTER JOE JOHNSON won the Embassy World Snooker Championship, he took a working holiday on the QE2. Sitting at the bar one night he was approached, as champions tend to be after dark, by a stranger. The man wanted to say how much pleasure Joe had given him, wanted to shake his hand. Joe appreciated the gesture. But it had been a long day and he was, he now recalls, a trifle underwhelmed by the encounter.

An acquaintance joined him, "You know everyone you, don't you" (the acquaintance spoke Yorkshire).

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

"That guy" his pal replied "is Gerard Kenny".

The name meant nothing to Joe.

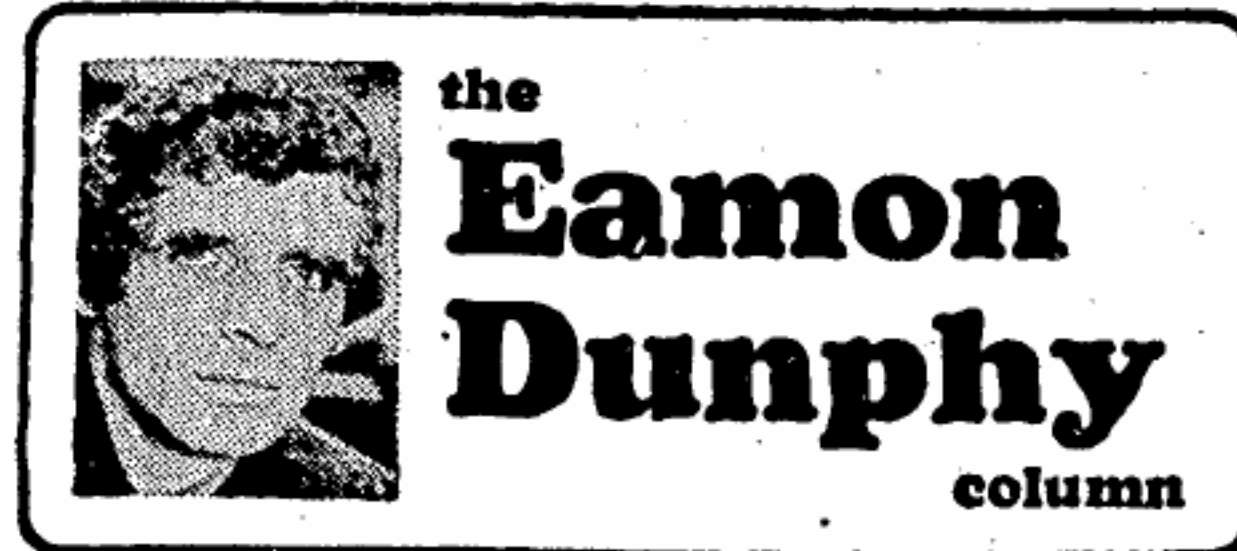
"He's a songwriter, wrote New York, New York and lots of other hits".

One of the other hit songs the congratulator had written was called "I Made it through the Rain". Before winning the world snooker title Joe had dabbled in the singing business. Through his days as a Gas Board fitter and his early years as a snooker pro when he

took home £60 a week, Joe had a song he would sometimes sing, a kind of anthem for a struggling dreamer. The song was 'I Made it through the Rain'.

"I were right impressed" Joe smiled recently (he speaks Yorkshire too) "Now the boot were on the other foot".

He went after songwriter Kenny, bought him a drink and sang 'Rain' once more with feeling accompanied by the composer on the QE2's piano. Johnson cites this incident as one of the nicest things that has happened to him since his victory last May. One minute Kenny was just another fan, next a hero's hero. The irony appeals



the **Eamon Dunphy** column

to Joe, puts his own fame in perspective.

Five months after defeating Steve Davis in Sheffield, Joe Johnson remains in touch with reality, a nice guy to whom something marvellous has happened, a 'pools winner who has stayed sane. He was in Dublin this week along with Dennis Taylor, Alex Higgins and Jimmy White for the Carlsberg Challenge — the snooker season's first televised tournament.

The Carlsberg event was distinguished by the presence of three world champions and White the games most gifted player (Others wishing to emulate Beamish and Crawford's feat of attracting great sportsmen

to this country should begin by treating their guests like champions. As the Carroll's golf tournament has also proved, charm, personal attention and respect can compensate for the lousy weather and the punt).

Joe Johnson lost to Dennis Taylor this week but he and his bluff streetwise manager Wally Springett will be back. Their hosts were "nice people" and nice people mean a lot to this World Champion. For example Joe chose not to join the Barry Hearn/Steve Davis stable after winning in Sheffield but to stick with Wally the smiling, portly character from Leeds who makes his deals.

On the face of it Joe's

decision to maintain his partnership with Wally seems like an overdose of loyalty. It confirms an impression created when Johnson won the Embassy title of an ordinary guy who got lucky, who perhaps hasn't got the 'cop on' to cash in. That impression is false.

Joe Johnson is a snooker pro. That is the key to understanding him. He loves the game. He loves it more than money, travel or celebrity, the trappings that became available to him after beating Davis last May.

That victory meant that Joe could go on the exhibition circuit . . . in a big way, earning up to £6,000 a week travelling the motorways of Britain. Joe said No. For two reasons: He wanted to live with his wife Terry and their six children and he thinks the exhibition circuit destroys your game.

"I like to play matches" he insists "I want to be a great match player".

For Joe as for all great sportsmen its the game that matters. Beating



JOE JOHNSON . . . a nice guy who "made it through the rain."

Steve Davis the ultimate match player meant more to Joe than the fame and money that went with the victory. Winning that match over two days justified Joe's existence, all the years of risk and struggle. He had made it through the rain.

Johnson started playing snooker in the Liberal Club his parents ran. He would slip into the snooker room, set up the balls and play . . . and dream. He became the best . . . in the Liberal Club . . . then Bradford . . . and then England. He was English Amateur Champion in his early twenties. He was a good match player long before last May.

When people ask him now about the pressure

of the Sheffield final he smiles indulgently. He knew pressure when as an amateur he played money matches in the clubs. Sometimes for money he didn't have. Pressure? That's pressure. Even if he'd lost to Davis, Joe would have won the price of a semi-detached house.

No, money doesn't create pressure. It's love of the game and desire to prove yourself a great match player that gets to you. If he'd lost in the final Joe knew he would have blown his big chance, perhaps his one chance, to prove himself to himself.

And to his kids. Davis was their hero, a man from another planet. Dad was . . . well Dad. "Why

don't you ever beat Steve" the kids used to tease Joe who laughs about it now. It was as if he wasn't a real snooker pro until he had beaten the real hero.

Now a World Champion, Joe remains in touch with the reality of kids and home. He has not become detached by celebrity. Life has improved. He always knew he was a good snooker player. Now the world knows. He likes that. He and Terry the four boys and their two girls are moving house. Just a mile up the road to a nice detached home with an acre of ground . . . and a snooker room. That's nice.

Being World Champion is nice, but there are snags. He hasn't changed much . . . but others have. Old friends became shy of him, didn't want to be classed as hangers-on round the new champion. Donald Proctor is Joe's best pal, a Gas board fitter like the old Joe, a fair snooker player. Donald stopped calling for Joe after Sheffield. He has never called for Joe since.

"I go round for him now", Joe says.

He won't become lonely but he has to work harder at his friendships.

And he keeps working at his game. In order to stay a good match player he stays in Bradford. His day devoted to snooker and his family.

He plays with the kids before they go to school. At ten o'clock he is in

Bradford Snooker Centre playing the best in town. He gives them a 21 point start. At twelve o'clock he goes to Morley Snooker Centre near Leeds to practice for an hour to an hour and a half. He plays a few frames alone.

"Did you ever dream you would be world Champion?" a journalist asked Joe last May.

"Yes" Joe replied "everytime I practise I'm playing for the championship".

And so it is between 12 and two each day in Morley.

Afternoons he spends in town with Terry, shopping, having a coffee, being together. Being extraordinarily ordinary. He still goes to his working man's club, the East Bowling Unity club, every night, for a pint and maybe a song.

Joe Johnson is a remarkable man. He is a natural.

In his moment of triumph at the Crucible last May he was remarkably gracious, his first words as champion being a generous tribute from the heart to Davis, the great match player he had just beaten.

As the current World Snooker Champion Johnson embodies the values, human and sporting, so often disposed of by the ordinary guy made good. His is a cause to cheer for in the snooker season to come.

His is a cause to cheer for, period.