

You catch yourself longing for Alex Higgins

*GOOD evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the quarter-finals of the Rot 'n Rattle Ready-Made Windows Classic." Yawn yawn, time for bed, the snooker's on telly again.

Seventeen-year-olds in sub-stovepipe trousers creep round a table to a soundtrack of people trying not to cough. They look like *Sindy's Boyfriend* only not so emotionally labile. It's all about as much fun as the mail order catalogue from a Soviet furniture showroom; you even catch yourself longing for Alex Higgins to come back and fall off his chair.

They say the viewing figures are still excellent and the housewives are as crazy about it as ever. Well, I've been a housewife for five years and I'd rather watch peas soak. Barry Hearn finds it all so interesting he's gone into boxing promotion.

Once the players had pasts. That was in the days before telly, Ray Reardon was a policeman and John Spencer was a bookie's runner. Reardon was 40 when he turned pro; he'd had half a lifetime doing something else for a living. Terry Griffiths packed in whole existences — apprentice blacksmith, postman, insurance salesman — before he became world champion.

By **JULIE WELCH**

These new players, the Nigels and Alans and Neals, they only seem to know snooker. Their faces stare back at you as hollow and flawless as goldfish bowls. Some of them, there's more expression on their backsides. A few of them are absolutely brilliant, and you don't care a bit.

Snooker players used to go on until they died. Some perhaps beyond that. It was one of a minute number of sports where youth wasn't essential to the job specification. In a curious sort of way, it was life-affirming, the possibility of honour and sporting glory beyond 50.

Now the best amateur in the country is 14 years old. This Alex Jones of the green baize wasn't born when Alex Higgins won his first world championship. On the way to turning pro and becoming the game's youngest millionaire, and he's only just stopped leaving stuff out for the tooth fairy. The game's lost its sleaze and is all the poorer for that.

I'm not talking about the tabloids

rich-yob sleaze of sex and drugs that nearly wrecked it during the Eighties. Snooker was exciting when it was raw and new, and the halls were a haven for boys skipping school. Jimmy White was 16 and lived in a council house in Tooting with a broken doorbell. Now he's as respectable as a bishop.

Whatever is done to cosmeticise boxing, it's still an inescapable fact that it is possible to arrive one day at your place of work by limo and leave it in a box with carrying handles. No-one ever died of being on the wrong end of a table clearance. Boxing's practitioners do exciting things like getting acquitted of murder. You can't imagine some of these snooker players even risking the acquisition of a parking ticket.

But there was a kind of heroic, hellbent quality about snooker once, the drinking, the dependence, the chain-smoking death-wishing of it all. Now the whiff of danger has gone. The game has taken on the aura of theme pubs in the suburbs.

To read the snooker calendar — The StormSeal UK Open, The Coalite World Matchplay Championship, The Sky World Masters, The Mercantile Classic — is to stroll along the high street of a southern

provincial town. Yet another six figure cheque to the winner, yet another announcement from the BBC Breakfast-time lady, quacking '... Nigel Thingy beat Dean Whoosit in last night's exciting final,' in tones of the presenter who says, 'And here's one we made earlier,' in Blue Peter.

I know, I know. Stephen Hendry's win over Steve Davis in the UK Open at Preston last week was one of the greatest matches ever. To say that it left you curiously unmoved is to risk yelps from true and loyal snooker fans who thought Hendry's potted blue the finest shot they'd ever seen.

Steve Davis isn't boring! You can go to Preston on your holidays and see great things! You don't have to watch it on TV! No doubt they're right. No doubt the impulse which drove 10-year-old truants to put on a crumpled tux and pose in front of the mirror with a hairbrush for a cue is still there. From the council estates all over the land they're on their way, the new generation of hungry delinquent young virtuosos.

The trick is only to separate the game from its later accretions, the dancer from the dance.