

THE CUE COLLECTOR

by *Andy Hunter*

Joe Davis is a player who needs no introduction. He gave his name to a number of cues over his career, which generally recorded the milestones in his career. The Joe Davis cues are very numerous and form a collection in their own right. They also have an added attraction as he was such a well known figure in billiards and snooker.

The Champion cue

The earliest Joe Davis cue I know is a machine-spliced black butted cue commemorating the "Joe Davis record break" of 980. It has an ash shaft with a plain ebony butt. The single example I have seen was presented to the Grandfather of the current owner who lived close to Joe Davis' Chesterfield home. The break of 980 was made in the preliminary round of the Second Division Professional Championship in 1924. The match was against Tom Carpenter, the Welsh Champion and played at the Great Western Hotel in Cardiff and by mutual consent, the players used a table fitted with the new "Janus" cotton cloth. This innovation was obviously to the liking of Davis who surpassed all his previous achievements with the break which was spread over three sessions. Davis, who was still only 23 years-old easily passed his previous best of 599 and also Tom Newman's championship record in the "senior" Professional Championship which at that time stood at 850. The cue is difficult to value, but could be expected to bring between £100-200, although being very rare, it may fetch even more at an auction.

After Davis made his record snooker break of 96 in 1925, the design of the plate changes to include both his billiards and snooker records. This design remained consistent for all the later Champion Cues with only the values of the breaks changing.

Davis held the record break at snooker on numerous occasions over a period of 30 years until eventually reaching the maximum 147 in 1955. Not all of these would have been commemorated on the cue, but the full list is as follows, and the production of the various cues can be quite accurately dated from these events:

Snooker break records: 96 (Feb. 1925), 100 (Jan. 1928), 101 (Nov. 1930), 105 (Dec. 1930), 109 (Jan. 1933), 114 (Mar. 1933), 137 (Feb. 1938), 138 (Mar. 1938), 140 (Feb. 1948), 141 (Jan. 1949), 146 (Mar. 1950), 147 (Jan. 1955).

The earliest of these cues, with the 96 snooker break, had either an ash, green heart or maple shaft with an ebony butt and a front splice of maple or birds-eye maple. These would have been both machine and hand spliced. The machine spliced is valued at £80-100 and the hand spliced, which is particularly difficult to find, would be valued at £150-250

A few weeks before the 1927 Professional Billiards Championship, Davis had extended his personal highest break at that game to 992, but during the course of the championship he set what would become his lifetime best, although he always considered it to be a "freak" break.

Just before the start of this tournament Tom Reece began a rumour that he was about to introduce a stroke that would stagger the world. The rules at that time limited "direct" cannons to a maximum of 25. Reece's method involved jamming two object balls in the jaws of a corner pocket, touching each other. When the 25 cannon limit approached an "indirect" cannon was played by striking the cushion first and flicking across the face of the ball, so extending the sequence indefinitely. This quickly became known as the "pendulum stroke".

Reece made a break of 1,151 by this means against Mel Inman, setting a new championship record in the process, but his claims that he had spent seven months bringing to perfection this secret weapon were regarded as "baloney" by Davis. He proved his point that the pendulum was "ridiculously easy for a good professional" when, in the final against Tom Newman the Orme Hall, Manchester, he manipulated the balls into position and proceeded to make a run of 2,501 on 3rd May 1927, establishing a new record for the Championship.

This new billiard record was mentioned on most cues after this date,



The "Champion" cue showing the earliest design (top) and later versions including the snooker break

but did not appear on some of the machine spliced cues. These cues have an ash, green heart or maple shaft with an ebony butt with a front splice of maple or birds eye maple. I have also seen one with a greenheart front splice. All cues of this type would be worth £80-120

Snooker Break cues

In addition to the dual-break badges, there is also a version which details only his "World Record Snooker Break". This has red lettering on a white badge with details of each of his records as they were achieved. The earliest of these I have seen mentions his 138 break from 1938 although the series could have started earlier than this. They certainly continue until his 1955 break of 147. These all have an ebony butt with a maple front splice and the badge is viewed with the cue horizontal. The value of all these variations would be in the range £90-110.

Century break cues

I have also seen a series of Joe Davis "Record" cues commemorating the milestones of snooker century breaks made in his career. These came as follows: his 100th century was reached in 1939, the 200th in 1946, 300th (1948), 400th (1951), 500th (1953), and 600th in 1955. I have only seen examples of the last three in this series, although it is quite possible that earlier ones exist. All of those I have seen were machine spliced. His 600th century break was written in red with a black triangle around it. This had an ebony butt with a maple, greenheart or ash shaft. The front splice has lines of maple running down the centre of the ebony splice with a maple veneer underneath. The machine spliced "600th" century break cue is valued at £80-120

Club cues

Joe Davis "Club" cues have a plain rosewood butt with a white veneer front splice with rosewood spliced on top. These are machine spliced and would have retailed as the cheapest in the range. Being relatively common, they would be valued around £40-50.

The "Special" cue

The Joe Davis "Special" cue has a black badge and is distinguished by having two ebony and two mahogany splices which are machine cut. Despite the name, these would also have been at the cheaper end of the range and would currently be worth between £100-130.

Riley variations

E. J. Riley also produced variations on the Joe Davis "Champion" cue with a tombstone badge. These could either have been a black badge with white or gold writing, or a white badge with black writing. These cues would have been of identical design, having an ebony butt with a maple or birds-eye maple front splice. I have seen these cues with 135, 140 and 147 break together with the 2501 billiard break. They are quite sought after and valued around £250 if in good condition. The black badge cue being rarer may fetch a little more.

All the Riley cues I have seen have been hand spliced. You can see the influence that Joe Davis had in their production by the cue having more of a snooker rather than billiard shape. I have seen Joe Davis cues in a billiard shape but these were probably produced on request for a personal order.

Other than those produced by Riley's most Joe Davis cues were made my Peradon and sold directly to other manufactures for retail to the public. I have seen Joe Davis cues with his badge accompanied by a smaller round badge variously bearing the names of Thurston's, Padmore, Raper & Son, amongst others. Joe Davis cues were still being sold in the 1970s and because of the sheer volume and variety there are probably additional versions I have not detailed in this article.

The ones I have seen are nearly always good playing cues. Some people think that all Joe Davis cues have a birds-eye maple front splice, but they did also use maple or greenheart. I have not seen other types of wood used and would question the authenticity of any examples which appeared.