

NANCY ROKOS / PHOTOJOURNALIST

John Smith, of Willingboro, is a picture of total concentration, as he plans his shot during a game of billiards at the Kennedy Center in Willingboro.

Right on cue

Willingboro billiards players chalk up their success to practice — and camaraderie.

By CATHERINE LAUGHLIN
CORRESPONDENT

In the brightly lit room, balls banged and plopped into pockets. Waiting for their turns, the regulars stood holding their cue sticks. One player sang along to Diana Ross and the Supremes trailing “Baby Love” from a portable iPod player. Another guy passed around a box of powdered mini donuts.

Just another day inside the billiards room at the senior center at the Kennedy Center in Willingboro, where a tight-knit group of 15 men have played the game they love and forged lasting friendships over the last six years.

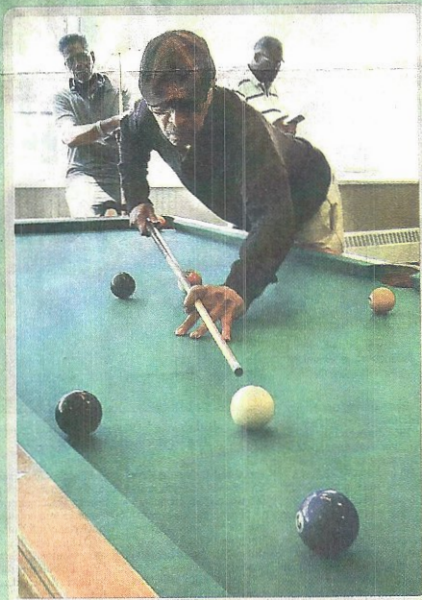
The Willingboro Ball Busters, the moniker they’ve given themselves, are retired township residents. Their backgrounds include careers in the military, engineering, sanitation, commercial printing, criminal justice and a transit system. They’re fathers and grandfathers, married and widowed.

They talk about family, their previous careers, trips and health issues. But mostly, it’s about pool.

Through the years, some have left and become snowbirds. Others have died.

On a Wednesday afternoon, Gregory Elliott, 61, leaned across one of the cloth-covered tables, eyeing his target like a hawk. He chatted about the importance of a stick’s joint system and how to best strategize shots.

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During a game of 8 Ball, Dan Davis, of Willingboro, sets up a shot to the corner pocket.



Members of the Kennedy Center's senior center billiards team.

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Billiards

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"You need to control the ball from the table's angles," said Elliott, who's retired from the New York City Department of Sanitation. Since retiring nearly six years ago, Sherwood Hopkins, 71, like most of the guys, plays daily. The center opens at 9 a.m.

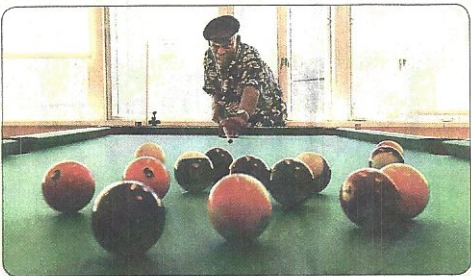
"But I sneak in a little early, right around 8. They're still setting the place up," said Hopkins, with a twinkle in his eye. "And sometimes I don't leave until around 6. You have to practice a lot when you know you'll be coming up against some heavies." Hopkins is referring to the South Jersey American Pool Association Championships in Atlantic City in June. Participants hope to win a tournament-awarded trip to the nationals in Las Vegas.

Jimmie Miles, 68, competed in Vegas in 2006. "I started playing when I was a kid, racking balls for old-timers in a barbershop that had a pool table," the retired corrections officer said.

The Ball Busters are also New Jersey Senior Olympic champs, having won six medals (two gold, two silver and two bronze) at the 2014 and 2015 games. Ten players will compete again this year in Woodbridge, Essex County, Sept. 9-11.

Darnell Chapman, 52, the "baby" of the group, was a commercial printer before blood clots in his legs forced him to retire. He likes the smaller matches that the senior center hosts annually. Winners are awarded prizes like portable music players. In response to a visitor's questions, Chapman said, "Oh yeah. One year, I won."

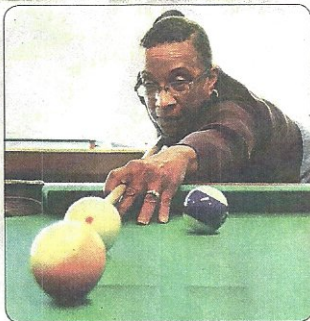
With that, the ribbing started. "He's exaggerating. He was the only one competing that day," said Uncas Hill, 66, to a room of raucous laughter. The former Burlington County resident was visiting from Stockbridge, Georgia. He moved there last June.



Floyd Goode, of Willingboro, breaks during a game of billiards.



Larry Jordan, of Willingboro, is all smiles after winning a game.



Lynda Jordan, of Willingboro, started coming to the center with her husband, Larry.

Retired from the Army, Hill learned to play pool in 1968 during a tour in Vietnam. He's an instructor and once played with Jeaneene Lee, aka "The Black Widow," among the world's top-ranked female players.

"For me, playing pool has always been my relaxation," he said, while also noting that it takes strong mental acuity to become better. "You have to play four or five balls ahead in your mind."

Men are the primary pool players at the Willingboro senior center, but women are welcome.

Lynda Jordan, 67, started coming to the center with her husband, Larry, a part-time drummer. Neighbors told them about the center and the three pool tables. On this day, she wore medical scrubs. A few more

shots, and she would leave for her part-time job as an ultrasound technician.

"He taught me how to play on our table at home. But now, I beat him a lot," she said, nudging her husband with her elbow.

Larry Jordan rolled his eyes, but admitted, "She's pretty good."

Reva Foster is the township's executive director of community affairs, department of aging and veterans affairs. She said when she first came to Willingboro 24 years ago, she knew she "wanted to grow the senior citizens' programs," particularly for men.

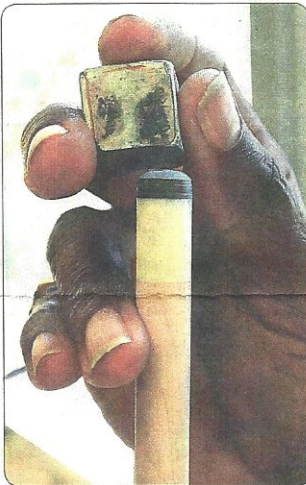
The former Johnson &

Johnson manager said the center also holds classes that teach yoga, crochet, quilting, ceramics and languages, such as German and French.

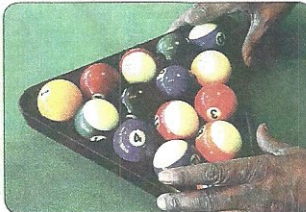
"Those classes mainly attract women," Foster said. "But the billiards room brings in men and gives them a purpose. They have found a real sense of camaraderie between them."

Throughout the month, experts hold seminars and speak to participants about nutrition and the importance of hydration, understanding, hospice, and chronic conditions such as hypertension and diabetes.

"Since the men have been coming, we've been putting



Former Willingboro player Uncas Hill, now of Stockbridge, Georgia, chalks his stick on a visit to see his old pool buddies.



Floyd Goode, of Willingboro, racks the balls for a game.

an emphasis on their needs," she said.

Toward evening, Charlie Palmer, 68, stopped by his old haunt to see his buddies and, of course, shoot a little pool. Last fall, he moved to Kissimmee, Florida. He was in South Jersey seeing his doctors.

The retired engineer won the gold medal (ages 65 to 69 category) at the New Jersey

Senior Olympics last year. He used to be the Ball Busters' "lead," a role similar to captain. His colleagues cite him as one of the better players, with precision accuracy.

He joined a billiards league shortly after moving to the Sunshine State. "And guess what?" he said. "My team's in first place."