

Running the table

Newly expanded Petros Billiards celebrating 65 years in business Page 10

PHOTO BY ROBB LONG

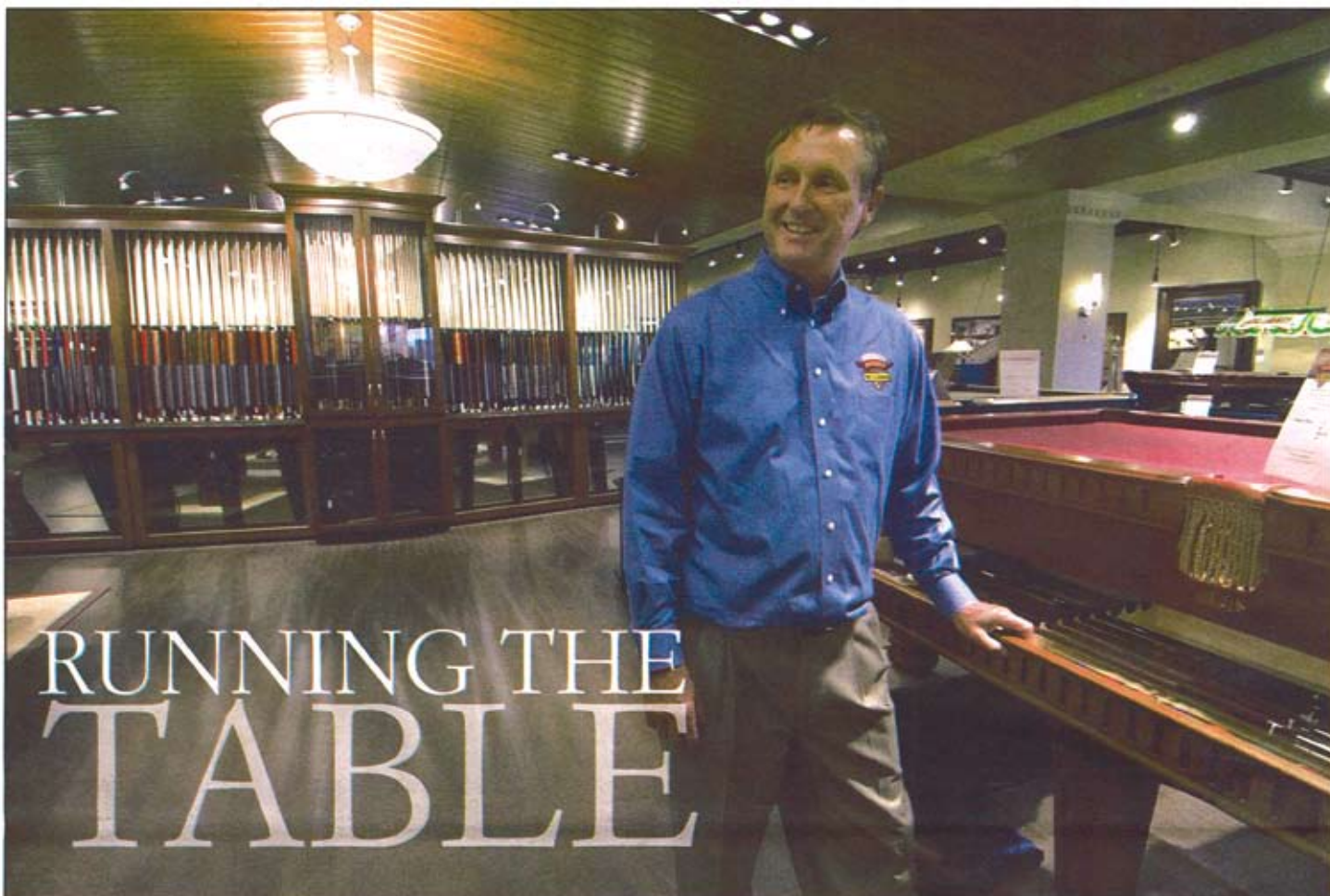


PHOTO BY JOE SZURSZEWSKI

Greg Peterson stands near a cue rack that is part of a high-end billiard table. In the background are dozens of cues for sale at Peters Billiards.

BY JAKE WEYER



Greg Peterson was a 22-year-old, shaggy-haired college student nine credits shy of an architecture degree when the owner of a little billiards shop in South Minneapolis popped a big question.

“I was just finishing my last year of school and Kenny Peters, who owned Peters Billiards, said he didn’t want to be in the billiard business anymore, would I be interested,” Peterson said.

Having built and sold tables as a hobby since age 15, Peterson was no stranger to the billiards scene, and he had developed a relationship with Peters through years of purchasing parts from him. Peterson said his dad had always advised that pool tables were a hobby and architecture would be the job, but the college kid wasn’t so sure.

“I went to work for Peters instead of finishing my last quarter of school,” Peterson said. “I thought that was really more important.”

Peterson took over Peters Billiards in 1972.

Since then, the business now located at Highway 62 and Lyndale Avenue has grown into the Twin Cities’ largest single-store retailer of in-home games and recreation equipment, selling new and restored pool tables, a variety of other games such as foosball and ping pong, and a large selection of furniture and home décor.

It’s all housed in a huge new store, which wears a banner this year touting the business’ 50th anniversary. “



SUBMITTED PHOTO
Greg Peterson covers table rails in the mid-1970s at his shop.

“I’ve often said that if I could have drawn up a specification list for the business, I could not have done a better thing than hiring Greg.”

Kenny Peters, founder, Peters Billiards



PHOTO BY JOE SZURSZEWSKI
Grant Crocker works on a section of wood inlay for a table at Peters Billiards.

Turning a joy into a job

At 58, dressed in khaki pants and a blue Peters Billiards dress shirt, hair cut short and parted to his right, Peterson walked the floors of his store last month, sure as ever that he'd made the right decision back in the early 1970s.

He'd loved billiards since childhood, when he played the game at a friend's house. Peterson asked his dad for a table when he was 15, but buying one was out of the question.

"He said, 'Well, we're not going to buy one, we're going to build one,'" Peterson said.

Inspired by a family friend who built his own table, the father and son team got to work. The finished product was made of oak and featured a particle-board bed, which Peterson didn't like because it wasn't as smooth as the slate tradition-

ally used for pool tables and it rumbled when balls rolled across it. So he sold it.

It wasn't long before he was building another table, this time with used slate purchased from what was then called K.E. Peters Billiard Supply. That's when he met Peters, who, coincidentally, had also started fixing and selling tables when he was 15 and originally ran his business from home.

Peterson sold his second table and continued to build, restore, and sell tables throughout high school and college, always going to Peters for supplies.

"I figured I was making pretty good money for a teenager," Peterson said.

Peters, only a decade older than Peterson, was in his early 30s when he decided to hand the store over and shift his focus to building tables. He

was Peterson's main supplier for many years, before billiards moguls Brunswick and Olehausen took over the showroom floor.

"I wanted to build tables, not deal with customers," said Peters, who at age 67 still occasionally builds tables for the company that bears his name.

Peters said he's developed back problems recently and plans to retire soon, but he's enjoyed watching the evolution of the company. The store was located in several South Minneapolis spots until Peterson followed some advice from an industry acquaintance and moved next to the freeway. He tripled the store's size there last year.

Peters recalled worrying about the store's survival in its early years, but he doesn't anymore.

"I've often said that if I could have drawn up a specification list for the business, I could not have done a better thing than hiring Greg," he said.

A family business

Peters Billiards has been largely family and friend-run since Peterson stepped in.

In the 1970s, his mom and sister did the bookkeeping. The family friend who inspired Peterson's first table became a builder. Peterson's brother-in-law ran the company's warehouse — and he still does.

The list of family and friend involvement has always been a long one.

"You've got to pretty much know somebody or be a friend of a friend to work at Peters," said table finisher Curtis Chapin, 40, who used to attend the same church as Peters. "And usually if you ask what's your story, what's your claim to fame to anyone here, that's it."

Curtis and Grant Crocker, 41, Peterson's second cousin whose mother bought the original rumbly particleboard table, are responsible for the restoration of antique tables. Some of them are more than 100 years old and sell for \$75,000 when finished. The warehouse, located in Edina, is full of highly detailed, hand-carved old tables and parts that have been scavenged from around the globe.

One infamous table that was restored and sold was found in dirty, weathered pieces in a chicken coop.



PHOTO BY JOE SZURSZEWSKI
Curtis Chapin points out some of the rarer parts of antique billiard tables at the Peters Billiards warehouse. Parts are stacked floor to ceiling and constitute a virtual history of billiard tables from the 1800s on.

Curtis, Crocker, Peterson and others at Peters can rattle off the history of just about any table with ease, excitedly pointing out the various types of wood and other details. The woodworking has always been Peterson's real passion, he said.

None of the employees claim to be great at any cue game variation, whether it's billiards, snooker or pool, though many of them do have tables in their homes. Peterson has four.

Crocker said many of the employees get more excited about the tables themselves and will examine tables at outings to see what could be done better. A lot more goes into the creation of a table than most people think, he said. Levelness, rubber bumper height and size of the pocket openings are just a few of the details that need to be dead on.

"It's really a technical piece of furniture," Crocker said. "First of all it's a game, I guess, then after that, especially with antiques, it's a beautiful piece of furniture."

Pool tables make up a third of sales at Peters these days, with other furniture, games and décor making up the rest.

Peterson's wife, Carol Peterson, 58, who has been a part of the business as long as he has, focuses on selling the kitchen furniture, barstools and art.

She spends each day working alongside family members and never tires of it because, she said, everyone is dependable and gets along. Plus, the store's entertainment focus makes working there enjoyable, she said.

"Whether it's in the kitchen area or in the game room area, it's great product to sell because it's fun," she said.

Peterson's cousin-in-law Jan Peterson, who has been managing finances at Peters Billiards since 1986, said working in the store is comfortable because everyone knows each other so well.

"It has a family feel to it whether you belong to the family or don't belong to the family," she said. "Everybody cares about everybody else."

Far from the eight ball

The new store — a pool-table-shaped behemoth with three floors, a winding staircase and a Willy-Wonka-ish glass eleva-



PHOTO BY JOE SZURSZEWSKI
The spray booth and all of the related equipment at Peters Billiards restoration facility.

tor (Peterson said it does not fly) — holds far more tables and furniture than the last one, so he's still figuring out how to stock it.

Offerings are being tweaked all the time, he said.

The new store was necessary because the old shop was in the path of Crosstown Highway 62/Interstate 35W interchange construction, which is underway. Peterson decided it was time not only to rebuild, but also to expand the store, which hadn't grown since he was a shaggy-haired kid.

He still gets a kick out of coming to work at the new place.

"It's still a real thrill for us because it's been such a journey," he said.

And when your hobby is your career, there's no reason to retire.

"As soon as my family kicks me out, I will," Peterson said. "I'll try not to be a bother as I get older, but it's too much fun coming in."

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