

DON VALK

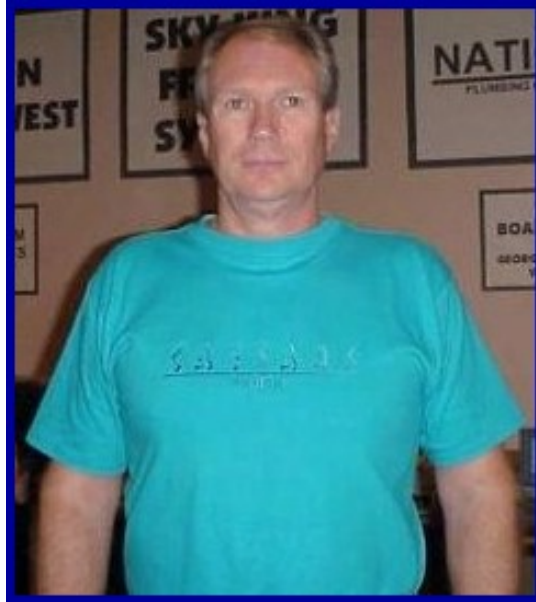
TEXAS SHUFFLEBOARD HALL OF FAME (3/20/99)

AND

**SHUFFLEBOARD FEDERATION'S
"SOL LIPKIN" AWARD (11/13/93)**



Above: Brian Walker presents Don Valk the TX HOF honor at Danny's Sports Bar tournament in Houston, Texas on March 20, 1999



(Don Valk was inducted into the Texas Shuffleboard Hall of Fame in 3/99!)

**COLOR OF MONEY!
BIRTH & GROWTH OF SHUFFLEBOARD
IN THE AUSTIN AREA Compiled by, Lynda French (Austin Shuffler)**

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"Question: WHO IS THE SINGLE MOST PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PROMOTING SHUFFLEBOARD AND INTRODUCING PRO PLAY IN THE AUSTIN AREA?"

Answer: THE SAME MAN WHO WAS HONORED WITH THE FIRST SOL LIPKIN AWARD IN 1993 - "DON VALK" OF COURSE!

After you read this article, let me know if you would compare Don to Jackie Gleason in the HUSTLER or to Paul Newman in COLOR OF MONEY!!

The following is a biography focused on some of the highlights of Don Valk's Shuffleboard career and how he has influenced and promoted Shuffleboard in the Austin area and contributed to the sport all across Texas and elsewhere. Let's start with a big "THANK YOU" to Don for the "BIRTH OF SHUFFLEBOARD IN AUSTIN" from all the Austin Shufflers!

Tom and I want to personally thank Don and Linda for taking the time out of their busy schedule to join us at the Shoal Creek Saloon to get the initial scoop straight from the "horse's mouth" and later joining us at the Horseshoe Lounge for a Thursday night tournament. We really enjoyed the chats and you will never know how enlightening these visits were for two newcomers to the Shuffleboard community. You shared so much history of the game and players with us. For instance, we had never even heard about Bank Shuffleboard. It is much different sitting down for a real visit than trying to squeeze in a conversation between matches in a major tournament.

When we visited with various other players who have known Don for years (gathering Don stories for this column), the single most common message that was unanimously delivered was that Don is not only a superb and dedicated player and sponsor of the sport, but he is also regarded by all (coast to coast) as one of the most reputable and honest players they have ever known.

Most everyone we visited with started out with comments such as "hell of a guy" (Billy Mays), "man of integrity" (Brenda Moore), "most conscientious and honest man I've ever known" (Joe Spratt), "an honest man and my mentor" (Ken "Doc" Strong), "there wouldn't be any Shuffleboard in Austin if it weren't for Don" (Bill Melton), and on and on with nothing but good words to say about Don.

We learned that Shuffleboard was brought to Austin by the strong determination and persistence of Don. His love of and dedication to shuffleboard started at an early age with his dad playing game after game of Bank Shuffleboard. His dad started playing Bank shuffleboard in the Austin area in the late 40's and early 50's. Don described the Bank Shuffleboard as about 1/2 as long as our standard boards with a bank on each side and says it was a REALLY hot sport in the Memphis, TN area by the early 80's. Billy Mays said that one of the best Bank Shuffleboard players he has ever known from the Memphis days is Glenn Young (who was also a good long board player) and that in the 80's there were only a couple of long boards in the Memphis area, but Bank Shuffleboards were in abundance.

Don started his career with Southwestern Bell Telephone Company in August of 1984. His job entailed a lot of travel, giving him an opportunity to really play the game in various Texas towns. His travels frequently took him to Rosenberg (near Houston) where he spent much of his free time playing at the Mustang Lounge on the "long boards" that we all know and love. His play evolved from freehand to thumb shots, to his expert variety play today.

Don enjoyed his job and travels from August 1964 until January 1966 when Uncle Sam called him into the Army and sent him to his initiation at Logan Heights in El Paso. He continued his Shuffleboard play while in the Army, averaging about 4 hours a day for 2 years. He had some great times in El Paso playing at Tom Bells (Dyer Street) which has since been torn down and the Buckaroo which has since relocated and does not have a board anymore.

In January, 1968 Uncle Sam released the noose. Don returned to Austin itching for a match only to find there was very little activity in Shuffleboard. He had much difficulty finding a board or players. He played some at Curtis Boyce's Texas End Zone (which was closed by the ACB after a year), the TAP on Guadalupe and the historical Horseshoe Lounge on South Lamar. But boards and players in the Austin area were few and far between. It was common practice for Don to drive to Lake Buchanan or Canyon Lake on a Friday or Saturday night or to San Antonio for league play on a Tuesday night. He loved the game so much that time and distance made no difference. As Brenda Moore puts it, "he drove his white Cadillac across Texas playing every board he could find from Abilene to Brownsville." Billy Mays attests that Don ran the rodeos across Texas, driving his infamous Cadillac, combining his love of the rodeos with his love of Shuffleboard play.

The big event which introduced Don to a score of Pros came when he attended a tournament in Tulsa, OK in the late 70's or early 80's. Don went to observe the big boys who paid \$300 entry fees. He had read and heard about these big boys, Texas Billy (Billy Mays), Bill Melton, Glen Davidson and finally got to meet them face to face. This was an exciting and rather interesting trip for Don. Texas Billy waltzed in after driving 2100 miles nonstop (California to Oklahoma) only to find out that he had been banned from the tournament. Well, Billy didn't drive 2,100 miles to turn around and drive right back, as he was ready for some play. Billy did not know Don, but asked him to partner up in some challenge games against some very good Arkansas Shufflers (C.B. Faulkner, Gus McKinney and Dick Thomas). Don played \$20 on his end against C.B. and Billy played the big bucks on his end. Don was amazed with Billy's plays when he kept covering his opponents weights, only to clean the board with his last shot and leave his own weights standing mighty!

This was the first of many times Don would join up or cross paths with Billy in his Shuffleboard travels and career. Tulsa was an impressive experience for Don and really intensified his ambition to gear up for real tournament play. Besides being dazzled with Billy's expert play and his introduction to the Pros, he has great respect for all the Pros. He considers Darrol Nelson as the "best tournament player" and feels that Bill Melton "has class and is one of the most respected, skilled and professional players around".

Shortly after the Tulsa event Don and Linda started going to Dallas to visit friends. Of course they had to check out the Shuffleboard scene. One of the first introduction was when they walked into the Cottage Lounge. Don was handsomely

dressed in his cowboy attire with his big belt buckle shining He had the appearance of a Texas Ranger and the entire club got real quiet. There was a sense of uneasiness and distrust flowing through the air. But, Texas Billy came to the rescue and stood up when he recognized who had just walked in. He assured the crew that Don was "okay" and one of the "good guys", putting everyone at ease. Don then learned that the Texas Rangers had staged a football gambling raid at the club only a few short weeks before. Guess they all thought--"Oh no, the Texas Rangers strike again!". Don says one of his biggest problems, even today, is walking into unknown territory and "all the outlaws think I am a cop, and all the cops think I am an outlaw".

Don played several locations then in the Dallas area. He met and played some matches with Earl Kelly for the first time at the Pilot Lounge's Annual Play. Later the Annual Play event moved to the Honeycomb where there were 3 boards (Pilot Lounge only had 2 boards). Don didn't play in the first Honeycomb Annual Play, but the next year he got in for a \$20 Single Handicapped event. He paid \$15 for his Calcutta (bought himself) - so only had \$35 invested. He got to play and observe all the big boys again, Darrol Nelson, Bill Melton, Glen Davidson, "Fast" Eddie Jeffries and all the crew. He had to play against Bill Melton, Fast Eddie, Glen Davidson and the finals against Bob White (tough matches), but ended up taking 1st Place and winning about \$1,700 with only \$35 invested. Don then drove straight back to Austin after the event - hoping not to get mugged before he could get his winnings safely home.

He enjoyed the tournament so much, he returned the next year. This was a Singles (no handicap) Double elimination and his Calcutta jumped to a whopping \$35! Jeffrie's brother bought him and Don pitched in for his 1/2 of it. He was in the Winners bracket finals with a 6-0 lead against Billy Mays. Don gave up 9 points in one frame and Billy went on to win the match and tournament. This second year was a bit more difficult because there was no handicap and there were rule changes so that the winner had to win 2 out of 3 instead of the one working back to the winners bracket having to win two straight games. So, 2nd place was quite a victory against a score of skilled and seasoned players.

Don coerced Billy Mays into doing a Shuffleboard Exhibition at Canyon Lake. He told us how Brenda Moore was awed by the exhibition. In talking with Brenda, she said that this exhibition was her first time to see a "pro" in action and she was really impressed. She said this is when her life of bar shuffleboard changed to a desire to really make a concentrated effort at real play.

While Don was not out wearing the tires off the white Cadillac following the rodeos and playing shuffleboard, he stayed busy trying to build up the interest in shuffleboard play in the Austin area. He had started a little tournament at Spring Hill Bar in Pflugerville and decided he wanted to get a bigger tournament going to bring in more players to Austin. This is when the U.S. Open was born!!

In 1988, Don sponsored the 1st U.S. Open at the Villa Capri (since closed) in Austin. Linda helped get the location established through her friend Jami Rudduck who was in charge of Sales at the Villa Capri and she came up with the idea to sell sponsor T-shirts. Linda worked at sponsor T-shirt sales. Bill Melton brought in the boards. Don borrowed \$1,000 from a friend to add to the pot and with a lot of help from many dedicated shufflers such as Bill Moody, Joe Redden, Bill and Billy Melton, the boards were set up and the "pros" started coming in. Brenda Moore had told Diana Hagen about the "Billy Mays Exhibition," so they drove in to see all these "pros" do their expert tricks. Brenda said she expected a room full of these big boys doing tricks and exhibitions like she had seen from Billy. So she and Diana had come to see this! Brenda was surprised to find that Billy's and the other pros' play was quite different in a tournament than in an exhibition. Now she got to observe the real methodical pro play and was really determined to get serious about the game. As we all know, she is definitely a skilled and serious player today. She attributes this to Billy's Exhibition followed by the 1st U.S. Open sponsored and organized by Don Valk - getting to know there was something beyond bar shuffleboard when you get to observe and play with the pros from around the country. Brenda feels that Don bringing pro players to the eyes of Texas had a tremendous impact on the interest and play in Texas. She said just watching the methodical play of the pros really changed her whole life. The U.S. Open was the first taste of pro play in Texas. They had 5 boards at the Villa Capri and the entry fee was \$300 per person.

The U.S. Open continued at different locations each year from 1986 through 1991. Don went in debt on the first one to get it started and bring in the pros, but he paid back his debt and the U.S. Open held it's own thereafter.

Everyone that Tom and I have talked to that attended or participated in the U.S. Opens agree that they did a lot to promote real "pro" play in Texas and got players interested in real tournament play.

Billy Mays said he participated in the U.S. Open every year and that Don was really a "hell of a guy, a hard worker, and a real promoter of the game". Billy Mays, Bill Melton, Brenda Moore, Ken Strong, Joe Spratt and all attest that whenever Don ran a tournament everyone knew the money was going to be right, games would be played with integrity and honesty, and that Don would always publish a financial statement for all to review.

Joe Spratt says he has known Don for 10-12 years and to call him a "square" would be an understatement. Joe said Don is one of the most conscientious and scrupulously honest Shufflers and friends he has ever known. He puts Don in the same class as Bill Moody, Bill Melton and Ron and Sharon Huddleston - really nice and honest friends and Shufflers! Joe gave an example that will forever be marked in his memory. Don was in Houston when a notorious gambler came in - very intoxicated - who would drop \$4K-5K in a night without the blink of an eye. Joe said this player got better with each drink, rather than slowing down. He tried to get Don to challenge and play, but Don would not take advantage of someone who was intoxicated. As Joe stated, Don really would not have been taking advantage because this player really did get better with each drink. Joe said Don would never take advantage of anyone. Any play he has is always fair, professional, and honest.

OTHER MEMORABLE EVENTS FOR DON

1991 was a real PRO year for Don. Don ran the last U.S. Open, married Linda in October in Lake Tahoe, and followed that up with the Reno tournament at the Sands when he had to play Bob Shaw two straight games in the finals. He was behind 12-0 in the final game and came back to put the score at 14-13 (Don's favor). Bob had the hammer and lagged a deuce - taking 1st place, and Don taking 2nd place. An exciting match for both Bob and Don and the spectators!

One of Don's most memorable earlier experiences (1979/80 time-frame) was when he was driving to San Antonio for league play with Terry and Brenda Moore. Sportsman Ice House seemed to most always win league play. Don went down to play on Hank's Hide Out team to go up against the Sportsman Ice House champs. The owner, to tick everyone off as a joke, had placed Billy Mays on the roster for Hank's Hide Out. Don, unaware of the roster joke, asked Billy Mays to come join their team. When Billy showed up, it was a surprise to all. Don recalls Freakie Fred's wife, with the Sportsman Ice House group, having a big fit when Billy really came in for the play! They won and everyone got jackets and had a blast!

Then there is the "NICE GUY" story of a Houston player that kept coming to Austin beating the socks off of everyone he played. Everyone that ever played against him always said, "I lost but he is such a Nice Guy." This "Nice Guy" was Mickey Ball from Houston. Don said he kept hearing all this talk about the "Nice Guy" which he thought was unusual coming from the mouths of all these Austin-ites that kept losing to him, and was anxious to meet up with this WINNER. He finally got to meet Mickey and definitely agreed - Mickey Ball really was a very "NICE GUY"!

One of Don and Linda's favorite Shuffleboard hot spots is Jerry D's in Dacona, CO. The owner is a barrel of fun and the players always have a blast. He said that many Good players will show up at about 10.00-10.30 PM and the play is on! There's usually at least 8 great players that show up anytime he has been there, including Rick Boyer, Morry Balin, Jody Slack and Grady. Don and Linda both said there is never a dull moment at Jerry D's. So, if we haven't tried it yet we must!

Then there was the Colorado Open where Don drew up with a good player from Florida. They had to play Rick Boyer and Darrol Nelson 2 out of 3 and they went on to win 3rd place!

Morrie Estes, a real estate broker from San Antonio, sponsored Don at \$800 a person entry for the singles in the 1984 Las Vegas tournament This was a tough tournament (3 out of 5, triple elimination). Don placed in the upper 1/3 out of 32 players.

George and Donna Wilber, printed a great big "CONGRATULATIONS TO DON VALK ON YOUR WELL DESERVED HONOR!" in their February, 1994 issue of Board Talk for Don's November, 1993 receipt of the SOL LIPKIN Award. Don was honored by The Shuffleboard Federation "for your tireless and unselfish efforts in promoting the sport and for the new standards of tournament excellence you helped to establish through the U.S. Open Shuffleboard Tournament, we proudly present the 1993 SOL LIPKIN Award in recognition of your extraordinary contributions to the advancement of shuffleboard".

John McDermott, a close friend of Don and Linda's, arranged with Linda to get Don there for the award without letting Don know about it. Don was up with his camera ready to take a picture of the one to be honored - only to have to put the

camera down and take the stand himself. He was very surprised when they announced his name while he was standing there ready to snap a shot of the winner!

For a wrap-up, I just want to say that for us newcomers to the world of Shufflers, Tom and I have learned a lot from Don Valk and all the players he so highly respects. Some of our best "practice" is watching the big boys, which is as beneficial a practice as hands-on. We are very thankful to Don for gearing up the interest in tournament play in our area years ago (and continues to promote and keep up boards and supplies across town) or else we may not be the newcomer addicts that we are! We were not around to directly benefit from his early endeavors, but we certainly are around now to benefit from the growth and results! So, Let me say it again, Don ... "THANK YOU" - not only from the French's, but from all the Austin Shufflers!"

Don Valk: A Long-time Table Shuffleboard Promoter! Not only has Don been instrumental in running tournaments, supporting and promoting this great game for many years, but he was also part of the core staff and the key expert "Tournament Official" (including lead board adjuster) at the Board Talk Open 2002-2004 tournaments.
Thanks Don, from Tom & Lynda French, Board Talk Open (2002-2004) Tournament Directors