Masterful Cuemaker

In Martin Scorsese’s “The Color of Money,” Fast Eddie Parker, played by Paul Newman, bestows a one-of-a-kind Balabushka pool cue upon an eager young hustler played by Tom Cruise. It’s a pivotal scene in the film - the young prodigy replacing the fading hero who struggles to accept his aging.

More importantly, it is also one of the most prominent film depictions of the pool cue as art form. Any player who has nurtured at least a passing affair with the soul of colorful numbered balls clicking across the green baize of a billiards table will tell you straight up - all pool sticks are not created equal.

Two-tone cues called Sneaky Petes line the walls of pool halls all over the world. Each with a different weight, some straighter and in better condition than others, those house cues are yours for a few hours of call shot. Handmade cues, carried in leather sheaths or slender briefcases by amateurs and hustlers alike, are a different story altogether.

Savannah native Keith Josey knows this difference very well, for he is a master at transforming bedpost-size wood blocks into these gleaming javelins. You can find him on page 229 of Brad Simpson’s “Blue Book of Pool Cues,” where he shares space alongside veterans of the art such as Bill
Schick, Tim Scruggs and Ernie Gutierrez.

Considered one of the top 10 cueists in the country, Keith is one of only five members of the American Cuemaker’s Association board of directors, the governing body of cuemaking.

“It shows what his peers think of him,” said Georgetown, S.C.-based pro Shawn Putnam, a touring player for seven years who is sponsored by Josey.

“You could call him a master cuemaker.”

A little more than 15 years ago, Josey was climbing power poles for Savannah Electric and Power and shooting occasional weekend rounds on the felt with his wife Sherri at Player’s Place, a pool hall on Eisenhower now called the Green Room. He sponsored a league for a while, owned a pair of custom pool sticks and placed as high as third in an Atlanta tournament.

While Josey’s interest was growing from that of a hobbyist, the sport itself was undergoing a renaissance, bouyed by Scorsese’s “Hustler” follow-up film and the attention given the Las Vegas tournament circuit by the growing Connecticut-based sports television network ESPN. No longer the province of derby-hatted drunks and cigar-smoking gamblers, pool halls were evolving into upscale venues suitable for family outings.

“That’s when I bought my first cue, and I think I paid $100 for it, and then I bought another cue that was $250,” said Josey, an avid weightlifter and martial arts enthusiast.

The more expensive Josswest cue, though well made, began to wear and show a typical sign of stress - the rubber tip mushrooming from a hard shot. “I asked the local guy there to fix it for me, and somebody cut it with a razor blade and messed the ferrule (the cap on the end of a cue stick) up and when he gave it back to me, he said, ‘that stuff’s going to happen.’ I try to be a perfectionist at everything I do and when I saw that big old gouge in my new cue, you know, I was like, sick.”

It was a definitive moment in Josey’s life, the epiphany that led him to take a sabbatical and eventually quit his dangerous job climbing poles. Soon, he would build a shop for shaping pool cues and embark on a self-imposed quest “to become the foremost maker of handmade superior quality cues.”

“It triggered something in me,” he recalled of the botched repair.

Hoping to fix his precious cue, Keith bought a repair kit at a Tampa billiards shop while on a trip visiting Sherri’s father. After inquiring if anyone local was working with cues, the cashier pointed him in the direction of Wayne Gunn, an older cuemaker whose shop happened to be a few blocks away.

“When I walked in the shop and they were turning shafts and turning cues, I had no idea what they were doing,” he said. “I told him that I was trying to learn repair work, he said, ‘well, if you promise to do a good job, I’ll teach you to do repair work.’”

From then on, company vacations were spent in Tampa staying with his father-in-law and apprenticing in Gunn’s shop. Josey soon could replace tips properly and re-work broken ferrules. Dale Perry of DP Custom Cues from Orange Park, Fla., was another invaluable resource who critiqued Keith’s work.

With money borrowed from his father-in-law, Josey purchased a lathe - a machine for shaping wood by turning it against a blade - that opened up a new dimension of possibilities for more advanced repairs. As a client base developed, he re-invested profits in more woodworking equipment such as table saws and sanders, each machine a key piece in a complete cue-making studio.

Soon he was no longer content simply doing minor repairs. Josey decided to engage the process from start to completion. By the end of 1992, after four years working on cues as a hobby in his
backyard tin shed and laundry room, Keith signed his first Josey Custom Cue. It was a break stick (break sticks are used by players only when breaking a rack of balls because such a powerful hit wears a tip down over time) with hand-carved spades that he finished on Christmas Day for local pool enthusiast Paul Brown.

Brown, a two-time winner of the Southeast regional championship in ‘87 and ’90 when playing for Georgia Southern University’s billiard team, was the first convert.

“He made that cue as a break stick because I already have a rare Bill Stroud Josswest cue,” he said. “I happened to be in Savannah and left the Josswest at the house. I had that stick in the back of my car and started shooting with it. After a few games, I said, ‘My God, this is wonderful.’ I packed up my Josswest.”

Five years later, Keith was a full-time cueist minting 125 cues a year, his name recognizable in billiard halls in countries as far away as Japan, Italy and Taiwan and his cues the centerpieces of magazine spreads in “American Cueist,” the top industry publication.

Keith will tell you the Lord’s guidance led to his mid-life discovery of his true calling. When taking into account his background, it is not altogether that surprising. Josey, 44, was raised by a woodworker, a man who often took Keith and his four brothers to the pool room after a hard day’s labor building homes.

Skip Josey was more than just a man adept at hammer and nail. After 17 years as a machinist, he switched into custom home building and together with his boys produced many fine homes in the Savannah area. A consummate professional, Skip would regularly check the boys’ work at day’s end, pointing out bent nails and substandard work to be redone until perfect.

“We could have a two-story house that we were building and way back in the last rafter, you could bend a nail,” said Josey. “Bend it, ram it in there and put another one in. He would go back and check everybody’s work and if he found a bent nail, you could hear him holler. We’d have to climb back up there, pull the nail and do it right.

“And my mom was the same way. If you made up the bed and it had wrinkles in the sheet and she came back in to check what you did, she’d rip everything off the bed and say, ‘Now do it again and do it right.’”

This unerrring quest for perfectionism carried over into Keith’s first cue. His work ethic, fired in his Southern upbringing, is reflected in the tireless attention to detail readily apparent in any finished cue.

On a typical day in the classical music-filled studio, Sherri, the technical support of the business, manages wood orders and accounting duties, thus freeing Keith to focus on his art. Intricately inlaid cues near completion will be set to dry while a fresh shipment of wood blocks are being turned on a lathe.

“It’s a continuous process from start to middle to finish, and I might be finishing some cues and I’m also getting wood ready,” he said.

The process begins with a high-quality square wood block. It is then shaped into a slender dowel-size piece and allowed to breathe for weeks before being fused with glue to another interlocking piece. While this thicker handle piece of the cue dries, the slender forward shaft piece is turned several times over months and allowed to sit dormant while Keith outfits the handle piece with precious stones.

When a player contacts Josey about
a custom cue, he/she must decide whether he/she wants a standard Sneaky Pete or a cue with inlay work. Unless specific instructions are given, length- usually 58 to 60 inches- and weight of the cue are dictated by the person’s own dimensions. With the exception of stock pieces like the rubber tip, black rubber bumper at the base of the cue and the screw that joins the shaft and the base, Keith makes the entire stick from scratch. Ten to 14 weeks later, depending on the time demands of the inlay work, the cue is ready.

“It’s like getting a suit made for you - all tailored,” he said.

With such a high standard of craftsmanship, it is no wonder that Josey prefers exotic imported woods such as ebony wood, burlwood, cocobolo, purple heart, bocote and bird’s-eye maple, woods with undulations that bring to mind a spider’s web or the scattered lines on the retina of the eye. Etched into the base and tapered shaft of the butt section are the Josey trademark - medieval shields cut from precious stones such as malachite, turquoise, mother-of-pearl and ivory.

Chicago-based Timothy Lilek, a former circuit player in the Midwest and a cue collector, designs the intricate medieval webwork that is inlaid near the butt section of each cue. These ornate patterns, all hallmarks of the Josey cue, are carved by a computer numeric controlled (CNC) router, a $22,000 computer aided machine made by the Techno Isel company. Picture a sewing machine with a woodcutting blade on the end that cuts tiny designs in wood and stone based on a computer program. The CNC router allows Josey to realize the exotic designs of Tim’s imagination. They are programmed onto a floppy disk that Lilek ships to Keith to test and then incorporate into the next batch of cues. Prior to the purchase of this machine, Keith used an exacto knife, dremel tool and pantograph to cut designs by hand.

“Now I’m not limited by design. I can do anything,” he said.

Never one to get too comfortable, Josey continually pushes the medium and prefers to mint only a handful of each design before engaging a more difficult, yet visually stunning, schematic. Not only does this challenge him creatively but it brands each piece with a virtually unmatched uniqueness, a quality that will soon establish the Josey cue as a prized collectable on the emerging vintage cue market.

“You don’t get a second chance to make a good first impression,” said Josey who uses optical lenses and goes over every inch of each one of his creations before shipping it out.

When you hit with a Josey cue, the stick, if aimed and stroked with exactitude, will deliver the target ball into one of the six soft cups that frame a billiard table. The cue itself, honed from hours and weeks of one man’s attention, performs flawlessly. A missed shot with a Josey is the player’s fault.

Along with the exquisite patterns that gleam beneath their reflective finish, it is this stiff-hitting consistency, a result of the cue’s forward balance (the weight slightly favoring the front of the cue), which characterizes all cues that leave the Josey studio. “Besides the fact that the workmanship is on parallel with anyone making cues, his cues are very, very consistent and that’s very important with a professional on tour,” said Lilek. “You can take a $7,000 cue and a $500 cue, and they both hit the same. That’s the key.”

Putnam, currently ranked #1 on the Viking Pro Tour, plays in most of the 56 Viking tournaments as well as some of the eight major tournaments hosted by the Billiard Congress of America,
the NBA of pool. He depends on this constancy when competing, as it makes his famous jump shot easier to shoot accurately.

“You’d have to pay me a lot of money to switch cues,” he said. “I can tell you I wouldn’t have been able to win the Viking tournament without the Josey.”

If pool cues are in essence weapons used in a highly strategic chess-like competition, then a Josey custom cue, with its medieval inlays of malachite, ebony and mother-of-pearl, befits a high-ranking lord. On the felt battlefields of Savannah, warehouse parlors like B&B Billiards downtown or the Billiard Club on the south side, players bear witness to a pecking order established by skills with a stick. The mighty in this field play with sticks of their own; the best often shoot with a Josey.

While the average price for one of these few cues tops $1,000, Keith, unassuming and always friendly, will continue to produce $200 Sneaky Petes and do repair work for local players, often shuffling his schedule to accommodate their needs. He seems truly happy that his life-long love of billiards and his enjoyment of woodworking have led to a passion-filled, successful career.

“His business is huge, all over the world ... but he still hasn’t forgotten where he comes from,” said Brown. “He takes a great pride in what he does and he’s one of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet. He’s not going to produce anything short of perfect and that says a lot about him as a person and a cue-maker.”

(For more information on Keith Josey and his unique custom cues, Josey Custom Cues can be reached Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 356-1816 and on the web at www.joseycues.com.)