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## TEACHER GETS STUDENTS RIGHT ON CUE

**By DENIS HAMILL****DAILY NEWS COLUMNIST**

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This teacher is behind the 8-Ball.



Tracy for News

Madison H.S. student Dwayne Thomas gets cue tips from teacher Erica Nathanson at Skyline billiards.

In the old days we used to play hooky from John Jay High and go down to Biff's Poolroom on Fifth Ave., smoke cigarettes, talk tough and the only math work we'd do all day were games of 8-Ball.

That was in the good ole 20th century.

These days, four afternoons a week, a school bus picks up 60 kids from Madison High School and drives them over to Skyline Billiards at 2515 McDonald Ave. near Avenue X, for a regular Department of Education gym class in the esteemed game of pool.

Talk about racking up credits.

"I was a gymnast most of my life," says Erica Nathanson, a phys ed teacher at Madison High.

"Two years ago when the school was refurbishing the athletic field the school asked us to come up with some ideas for off-site activities for gym classes. Well, my father, Eric Nathanson, was a semiprofessional three-rail billiards player, which is a pocketless game of angles.

"I grew up playing billiards and pool, and I learned the game the right way from my dad. So I knew I could teach kids the proper fundamentals of this skilled game."

Nathanson wrote the curriculum two years ago and it was approved by the Department of Education.

"I personally selected all the kids for the program," she said.

"The valedictorian is in our class. Kids from Arista. Kids who earned this kind of fun gym class by being serious in all their other academic classes.

"I wanted kids who would properly represent Madison High."

The course costs each kid \$60 per semester, which covers the price of the tables and bus transport from the school to Skyline Billiards.

"The kids absolutely love it," says Nathanson.

"We now have two classes, with 30 kids in each class, who take pool twice a week."

The kids are taken from Madison High as their last period at 2:30 p.m. and are dismissed from the pool room at 3:30.

"I'm telling you, these are such nice kids they've restored my faith in the younger generation," says Bobby Pole, manager of Skyline Billiards.

"The kids couldn't be more respectful. They behave themselves, they're eager to learn, they clean up after themselves. Such nice kids that when the class is over, we usually let them stay to play free until 5 p.m."

Skyline is no dingy pool room out of some film-noir B-movie.

This is a well-lighted, state-of-the-art pool parlor with 16 Brunswick Gold Crown tables and two Chevillotte heated billiard tables, carpeted floors, a spotless dining area, a repair shop, backgammon

and chess tables and an Internet juke box.

"I run the place for my son and his partner," says Pole.

"My son Robert and his partner Sammy Wu are semipro pool players. They opened the place a few years back and it's really starting to catch on.

"These Madison High classes have helped because some of the kids come back on their own spare time and they bring friends."

Pole says Skyline had its first regular tournament and that several of the Madison students participated.

In fact, Nathanson is quick to point out, one of the Madison kids, Scott Seidler, won the first Skyline Nine-Ball Tournament.

"The people at Skyline have been amazingly accommodating to us," she says.

"They give all Madison High students a special discount when they play at any time.

"By the way, the kids love the cheeseburgers they serve here. They really do make good food."

Nathanson says the owners also award the best kid in each class an expensive two-piece cue stick in a carrying case and have their names engraved on plaques.

No one is expected to walk away as the next Minnesota Fats, running green felt tables in the pro tournaments.

"But my job is to teach these kids how to properly use a cue stick," says Nathanson, a teacher who uses blue chalk.

"The proper stance. The stroke. By the time the course is finished every kid will know the fundamentals of 8-Ball, 9-Ball and straight pool.

"I teach them how to line up a ball, use the cushions, and figure out the angles. I even test them by placing one ball by each of the six pockets and see how many they can sink in six strokes."

Nathanson says her biggest challenge is helping kids who learned pool improperly to break bad habits.

"But they stick at it, and they do catch on," she says.

"The class is fun but it teaches kid sociability, how to play by the rules and some lifelong skills.

"And I gotta say my father is simply amazed that I'm using the skills he taught me 20 years ago to teach kids in a New York City public school."

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