



THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF RONNIE O'SULLIVAN



FHM travels to the heart of Essex to meet the most naturally gifted – and most-controversial – snooker player to ever grace the baize

Words Tracy Ramsden Illustrations Kim Thompson Photography Adam Hinton

# THE “MOZART OF SNOOKER”. NOT OUR WORDS, BUT THOSE OF ROLLING STONE KEITH RICHARDS, A GOOD FRIEND OF RONNIE O’SULLIVAN.

“I may not be up on my classical music, but even I know that’s a compliment,” Ronnie laughs, reclining on a huge, black sofa. Dressed down in jeans and a black polo shirt, if it wasn’t for the obligatory sports car on the driveway (an Audi R8, if you’re interested), Ronnie would look like just your average Essex boy, kicking back in a Chigwell manor.

That’s if your average Essex boy happens to be the reigning, five-time world snooker champion, and potter of the fastest-ever maximum break (320 seconds). He’s the child prodigy who made his first century aged 10 and went on to do for snooker in the past two decades what Alex Higgins did for the sport in the ’70s. Ronnie turned pro aged 16, was UK champ by 18, and became the most gifted player to ever play the game. Another mate of his, artist Damian Hirst, describes him as “like Picasso”, and most of the world is in agreement that watching him play snooker is akin to admiring a master painter at work.

But, as if often the case with masters of their craft, the pressure of being a genius can become too much. For each soaring high, Ronnie has been dogged with crippling bouts of self-doubt, addiction and family trauma that often threatened to destroy his career, and the man himself. The tale of two Ronnies – tortured genius and petulant prima

donna – is one unique to the game of snooker, perhaps any sport. It’s a contradiction summed up in one particularly heartfelt line in his new autobiography, *Running*: “Snooker is my game. The sport that I sometimes detest so much I can’t bear to look at a cue; the sport that has been the love of my life.”

It was six-time world champion (and Ronnie’s boyhood hero) Steve Davis who said, “Ronnie O’Sullivan’s interviews are a bit like the British weather – changeable.” With that in mind, today’s forecast is reassuringly bright. For now.

## TROUBLE-MAKER

“I’ve caused a bit of aggro on Twitter this morning,” the 37-year-old says over a cup of coffee. Namely, he’s been retweeting comments by controversial conspiracy theorist David Icke while taking a swipe at US Secretary of State John Kerry over the Syrian conflict. So far, so Ronnie. This won’t be the first time he gets into trouble this week. But more on that later.

Today, we’re at his manager’s opulent Essex pile, just up the road from the whitewashed cottage Ronnie is renting while he house-hunts. Right now, he’s riding the wave of an unprecedented career renaissance, on the back of what he describes as “the craziest 12 months of my life”. Which, given



the O’Sullivan back catalogue, is a mighty claim indeed.

FROM TOP: TEENAGE RONNIE; TAKING A BREAK FROM OPPONENT MARK KING; PLAYING LEFT-HANDED WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT

After winning the 2012 world championships, Ronnie announced a sabbatical to take a “gap year”. But against all odds – and despite not picking up his cue for nine months (“Did I miss it? Not at all, I loved it!”) – he came back earlier this year to successfully defend his title, the only player to have done so since Stephen Hendry in 1997. It was a triumph made all the more poignant when his six-year-old son, Ronnie Jnr, helped lift the trophy.

“On a scale of one to 10, I’d say I’ve been playing at about a five or six for the past 18 years,” he reflects. “But the past two years I’m playing like I did when I was 16. I feel relaxed, confident, like I can dominate games again. I believe I’m going to win before I even get to the table.” That’s Ronnie the world champion speaking. But we’ve met the other Ronnie too.



RONNIE RELAXING ON HIS FAVOURITE SILVER POUF DURING THE *FHM* SHOOT



**“I’M OBSESSIVE. I HAVEN’T GOT A STOP SWITCH”**

The one who walked out of his 2006 UK Championship quarter-final match with Hendry because he wasn't feeling it. The one who sat with a wet towel draped over his head during a 2005 match against Mark King because, "watching him play isn't my dream day out". The infamous "nosh-gate" scandal in China when he was penalised for making lewd comments at a press conference. Playing with his weaker left hand. The mid-tournament head shave. The Priory. The threats to quit.

"The thing is, I truly mean it when I say I'm out," the ultimate boy-who-cried-wolf tells *FHM*. "The first time I said it I was 18 and struggling with my game. If I didn't succeed, I felt like I'd let myself down. I wanted to enjoy it, but a part of my brain was sabotaging that. Then I'd walk away and think, I can't. It's a buzz to perform. Put 1,000 people in front of me and I'll play for them."



## TURBULENT TIMES

What the crowds at Sheffield's

Crucible didn't know about last May – when The Rocket won the title – was the personal battle that had sparked Ronnie's snooker exile in the first place. Throughout most of 2012, he was embroiled in a messy custody case with his ex, Jo. It was a legal wrangling that cost him around £200,000.

"That's over a year's salary for me, so I was like, fuck!" he admits. "Truth is, I decided to take a year out because I thought fuck the snooker, I need to be available for Lily [his seven-year-old daughter] and Ronnie. But I realised that wasn't sensible because I ran out of money. I'm not an extravagant bloke – I don't wear jewellery, or go clubbing – the car was my only treat. I'm not on a footballer's salary and the court case sucked me dry."

Following the settlement, Ronnie took some time off. Last year, he spent six weeks volunteering on a pig farm. Imagine Wayne Rooney doing that. "I wanted to feel useful again," he explains. "I loved the simplicity. I met a bunch of kids who'd been thrown out of school for being naughty and sent to shovel

shit. One lad was convinced I was an undercover copper!"



## RUN FOR YOUR LIFE

At the moment, his true saviour, though, is running. "It's been better than alcoholics and narcotics anonymous," he tells *FHM*, tucking into a banana.

He's already run two miles this morning, then it's back to the track for a session this evening. An addiction? Certainly. But he'll take this one over his others. "Oh God, I lost many nights to 15 pints of Guinness. And I loved a joint. I'm obsessive and haven't got a stop switch. I'd carefully time my binges around tournament drug testing, but I was pushing my luck. I still have the odd vodka and orange but I know my limits now."

There was one epic boys' night in, with fellow snooker player Jimmy White and two of the Stones, Ronnie Wood and Keith Richards. More remarkably, Ronnie remembers it. "We were smashed but me and Jimmy played some of our best



## CURRICULUM VITAE

Ronnie "The Rocket" O'Sullivan  
38, Chigwell, Essex  
Snooker superstar

*I have never done any other job apart from play snooker. Let's say I have a degree in snooker!*

## EDUCATION

**Woodlands Infant School, Ilford:  
1980-1984**

"I hated school, hated getting up in the morning, putting on my gear and walking there. Because I knew I was going to school to do nothing."

**Highlands Primary School, Ilford:  
1984-1986**

"I was nine when we moved from one end of Ilford to the other. Apart from sport, I was bottom of the class for everything. Rubbish. The teachers either really liked me or they couldn't stand me."

**Wanstead High School: 1986-1990**

"I left at 15 without taking my exams when Dad got nicked. I had just come back from Thailand where I was playing in the World Juniors and Mum took me to the school to explain that Dad had been arrested. They told me to take as much time as I wanted. I thought, lovely, and never went back."

## EMPLOYMENT / WORK EXPERIENCE

**First tournament**

"I was nine and I won three hours' free time on the table down the snooker club, so about £15. Happy days!"

**On playing his heroes**

"Playing Davis and Hendry was always weird. You feel like you shouldn't even be in the same room and it didn't feel right when I beat them. But I had to start seeing them as competitors."

**Current competitors**

"John Higgins is one of the all-time greats; on his best days virtually unplayable. Neil Robertson: great temperament, great competitor. Then you've got Selby. And Trump, a very aggressive attacking player."

**First running win**

A week after becoming 2008 world champion, Ronnie won a charity race in Epping Forest. "I couldn't believe it – the thrill of running through the tape, and winning £80 worth of vouchers. I was buzzing. Ecstatic. It was on the back page of the local Epping Forest paper."

**Regrets**

"I wish I had met Steve Peters [sports psychiatrist who's worked with cyclists Chris Hoy and Bradley Wiggins] when I was 18. I'd probably have won about 11 world titles now. He taught me it's not wise to put all my self-worth into winning."



PROFILE OF A  
CENTURY SMASHER

## "I TRULY MEAN IT WHEN I SAY I'M OUT"

snooker ever, with only a couple of Stones to witness it," he laughs.

O'Sullivan credits his dad with driving him to achieve, comparing his parenting style to that of Serena and Venus Williams' or Tiger Woods' dad. "Cor, the pressure he put on me as a kid! I wasn't allowed to just play, then say, 'Oh well, I lost.' Dad would say to me, 'It's gotta hurt.' I was eight years old! I grew into the type of person who constantly needed to prove myself. It's probably why I succeeded."



### MOUTHING OFF

Ronnie's competitive streak isn't all he's inherited from his old man – like his outspoken dad, he's unafraid to share his views. The

week after our interview, he's back in the tabloids after a spat with World Snooker's chief Barry Hearn over his comments about match-fixing being rife in snooker, following the 12-year ban of convicted cheat Stephen Lee. Days earlier, we'd contacted Barry Hearn's office to ask for a few words on snooker's boy wonder, and now assumed this wouldn't happen. But on the same day the press was banding about claims of a bitter rift between the pair, this email landed in our inbox:

"I have been a fan and friend since Ronnie was 12 years old and there have been plenty of times when I would have gladly strangled him. But Ronnie O'Sullivan is a sporting genius. Simple fact. Watching him compile extraordinary break after break is like watching the finishing touches to an artist's masterpiece."

You see, the measure of this man will always be in his game. Mozart. Picasso. O'Sullivan. It ain't easy being a genius. **FHM**

Running: The Autobiography  
by Ronnie O'Sullivan is out now