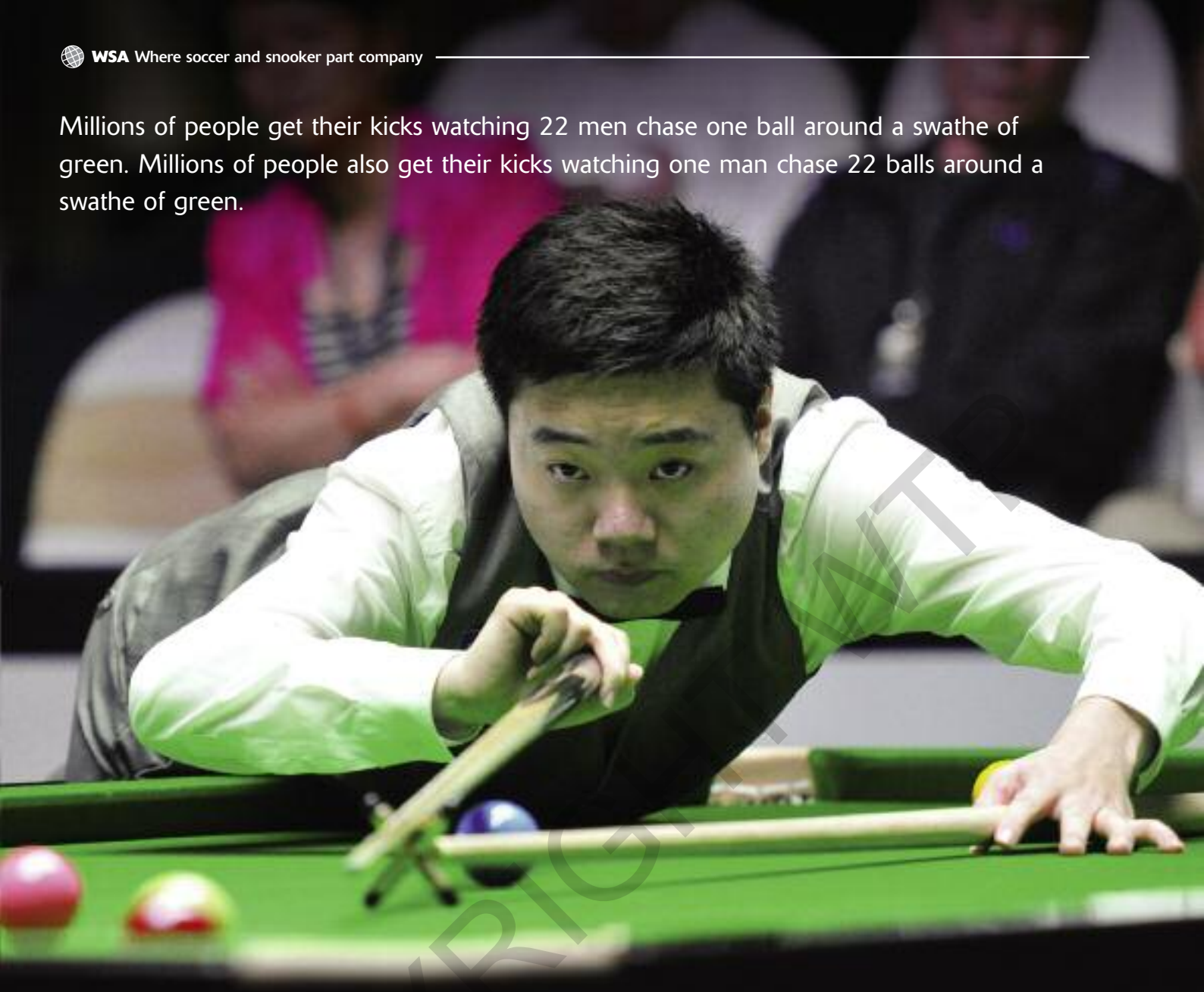
Millions of people get their kicks watching 22 men chase one ball around a swathe of green. Millions of people also get their kicks watching one man chase 22 balls around a swathe of green.



Where soccer and snooker part company

It may be called the beautiful game but by comparison football, or soccer, lacks the infinite skill and understanding of trigonometry that is required to play snooker, especially among professionals. Following a specific sequence of potting balls, the perfect maximum that a single player can score in a single frame is 147. Rarely achieved, to understand the intricacy of the game take a look at one of the game's masters, Ronnie O'Sullivan, at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=McThDshEgU0*. In order to play snooker, it needs an absolutely level table and a perfect covering of green cloth, quite unlike any other.

Before we get down to striking a ball on the cloth, some background history will help those readers who are not familiar with snooker and its origins. Grass might have been the reason for choosing the colour green. Croquet, an even older game, played on grass with mallets and balls to be hit through hoops could only be enjoyed in dry weather. Converting croquet to an indoor game played on a flat table is relatively easy to visualise and, instead of getting a ball through a hoop, the table would have pockets.

Snooker is defined as a cue game, along with pool and billiards. It developed into its modern form in the late 19th Century, with roots going back three centuries earlier to billiards. Popular

World Number 9, Ding Junhui of China. The popularity of the game has burgeoned in recent years and with over one million amateurs playing every day.

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with British armed forces stationed in India, billiards was only a two-player game with two cue balls and one red. It needed more excitement. Sir Neville Francis Chamberlain came up with the answer: snooker *(see history panel at end of feature)*.

Having established the new game, snooker's popularity generally followed the route of the UK's overseas trading and military interests and its ex-pats: Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan and others.

Whilst the professional game is still dominated by the UK, its extraordinary popularity is to be seen in South-East Asia and China. At the 2016 World Championship, 22 countries* had qualifying players. The final, that lasted 13 hours over two days, was between the world No.1 player, Mark Selby of England, and the world No.9, Ding Junhui of China.

The television audience for the match was in excess of 300 million, possibly one-third of which were in China, where it is estimated that there are some 60 million amateur players, with one million playing every day. It can be argued that the phenomenal increase in the game's popularity is down to 29-year-old Ding, who began his professional career in 2003. He started playing at the age of nine and in 2002 won the Asian Under-21 Championship and, six years later, won the international billiards and snooker federation's IBSF World Under-21 Championship.

The table, the cue and the fabric

It is clear that the table must be absolutely level and stable, which is why heavy plates of slate form the base. A full size snooker table is 3.5 x 1.8 metres, and the cue is around 1.5 metres in length. The cue has a tip, usually made from leather, that strikes the surface of the ball.



Greige fabric being woven at full width.
WTP

The most popular pool table in the US is 2.4 x 1.2 metres, which will give you an indication of why snooker requires more skill and finesse than pool, for instance. (Pool usually has 16 balls, snooker has 22 — 15 red, 6 colour balls and a white cue ball — 52.5 millimetres inches in diameter. Snooker's six pockets are narrower than on a pool table, the pocket lead-in is curved and the balls smaller.)

It is, however, the cloth that makes the difference and it is a very specialised area of textile production. Those who consider that the cloth is simply green baize or felt have probably never touched the No.10 Strachan Championship cloth on which the world title is decided. The cloth used on snooker tables is a

**Besides England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, players came from Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Iran, Ireland, Isle of Man, Latvia, Malaysia, Malta, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, and Thailand.*



The traditional green of the cloth probably has links to early outdoor sports.
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Carefully selected fine Merino wool from Australia is the foundation of cloth.

WTP

specialist quality pure wool material with a raised nap and is a much more costly engineered product.

There is only one producer of this cloth: WSP Textiles, based in Stroud in the west of England, some 100 miles from London. Its history dates back to the mid-1800s; its ownership has gone through a number of changes — at one time it was part of Milliken in the US — and most recently it has come under the family umbrella of the Belgian Peltzer & Fils Group, owner of Iwan Simonis S.A. and Saluc S.A., the global leader in the production of true phenolic billiard balls.

The Strachan (pronounced 'strawn') cloth, unlike the worsted cloth that has been used on European and US style billiard and pool tables, has a nap, produced by the thousands of threads in the fabric's structure. On the table, the cloth is absolutely smooth in the direction of the black ball position, but on the return you can feel the nap. One theory for this was that the cloth used for the cloaks worn by the drivers of horse drawn coaches had a nap that ran from the shoulders to the bottom of the cape; this encouraged rain to flow off the cape which would have kept the coachman drier for longer.

The yarn used in producing the woollen cloth comes from the finest merino wool from Australia and goes through numerous processes before it becomes the finished article. Many of the initial stages would be familiar to manufacturers of woollen and worsted cloth — the bales are opened, the raw wool is lightly oiled to lubricate the fibres which helps the blending, carding and spinning stages before being woven. (All traces of oil are subsequently removed in processing.)

At this stage, the greige cloth has been woven to a width of three metres before it enters the finishing processes, where it is washed and shrunk to the width that will eventually be required. As it progresses, the weave is getting tighter and by the time it has gone through the milling machines the original structure of the cloth is almost invisible. The threads have been 'burst' and the surface is getting smoother and smoother. The nap of the cloth is developed through the precise milling stage (uniquely for the modern industry, the WSP rollers are made from oak).

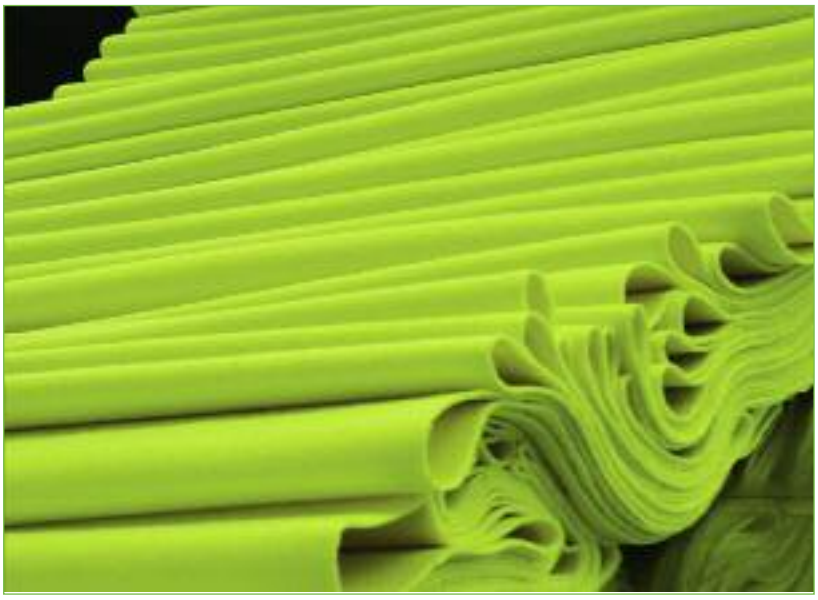
Dimensional precision

Timing and humidity control is precise as each length passes through the milling machine. The skill in producing the cloth is that shrinking has to be perfectly proportional — it is akin to scaling a picture for enlargement or reduction — so that the percentage of shrinkage is similar on both the width and length of the cloth.

Dyeing is also a skilled art. Speed is not of the essence: the cloth goes through traditional dye baths. If modern jet dyeing were used, forcing the dye through the cloth, it would destroy the carefully managed construction of

WSP Textiles also produces the yellow melton fabric under its Playne brand used to cover tennis balls. The company supplies major brands such as Dunlop and Slazenger. Playne's fabric is used at three grand slam tournaments: Wimbledon, the French Open and the Australian Open.

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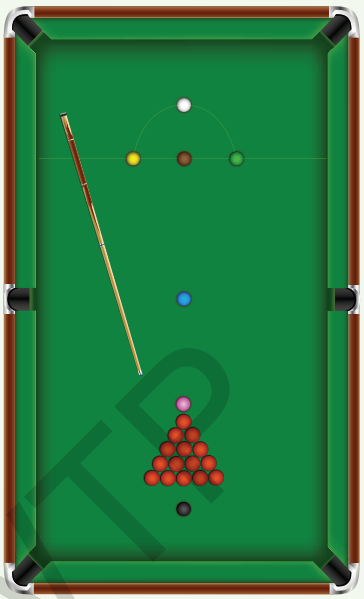
the surface of the cloth. The cloth then passes through very fine cutting blades to remove any surface threads that may still remain. The company can also adjust the speed of the cloth through its finishing.

Unlike most modern mills, where speed of production is a must, the WSP mill must be seen as a place of calm, where it can take weeks for the finished cloth to be finally finished and tested before shipping to table manufacturers around the world.

Not all snooker tables are covered in the No.10 championship cloth. WSP produces a range suited for tournament use at different levels, as well as cloths for snooker clubs. They all vary in fabric weight. The mill also produces long-lasting, club-quality cloth in widths of 155cm for the small table market in China.

For the top players, the technological perfection of the cloth is paramount and something they take for granted. WSP continues to analyse the techniques of the players and add perfection to its products. If players blame the cloth for their missed shots, or bad kicks (when the cue ball takes a jump on striking the object ball) it highlights the fact that they don't really know how the cloth is designed or produced. Perhaps they should consider how and how much chalk they put on the tip of their cue.

History in a nutshell



Full size table illustrating ball positioning.

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Having been posted to India in 1873, Francis Chamberlain noticed that the young officers were spending much time playing billiards during the rainy season and they had developed variations which allowed some gambling: 'pyramids' and 'black pool'. The former arranged 15 red balls in a pyramid shape on the table, which had strategically placed pockets, and when one potted a red his opponent had to pay a fee; in the latter, if one of the players (all using different coloured cue balls) potted the black ball, he would have to pay a fee to rejoin the game.

Merging the two forms was again relatively easy and the new game — snooker — was the result. Why was it called snooker? It is reported that one day a player missed an easy shot; Chamberlain remarked that he was a 'snooker' - slang for a new recruit at Woolwich Military Academy in London. He went on to say that they were all snookers at this game, the name stuck, and as he moved from post to post around the world he introduced the new game.

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