

HOMESCHOOLING

As the Covid pandemic continues to keep poolrooms closed, students go online.

By Keith Paradise

IT WAS originally supposed to be a couple of weeks of vacation in Japan for billiards instructor Mark Finkelstein and his wife.

They arrived on March 13 and planned to return towards the end of April. While they vacationed, the Covid-19 pandemic continued to worsen worldwide and Finkelstein, who was stationed on the East Asia island while in the Navy and owns a home there, found himself locked down through canceled flights. What was expected to be a month vacation could last as long as nine months, with the instructor now anticipating a possible return in either November or December.

“Fortunately, we have a car and a house here, and Japan is not as locked down as New York,” he said.

What he doesn't have access to is a pool table, but shortly into his extended trip he received a message from a student in Connecticut who wanted to take a lesson — with the only option available being video conferencing. For a guy who once carried a beeper and a handful of quarters in his everyday life, it probably would have been easier to ask Finkelstein to swim home and teach. After a couple of consultations with his less technologically challenged son and daughter-in-law, the Professional Billiards Instructor Association master instructor was up-and-running on a Zoom call, with his student positioning a camera above their home pool table so the teacher could survey the results.

As he slowly acclimated to the operating system, the instructor realized that



Anthony Beeler saw the value and need for online instruction nearly a decade ago.

virtual teaching does have its benefits.

“It's really amazing what you can do in terms of time and distance,” said Finkelstein, who operates the Cue Master Pool School with partner Mark Powell. “As long as someone has a table and a good internet connection, you really are free to do whatever you can and want to do.”

As the pandemic continues to hamstring the billiard industry's ability to travel and gather in poolrooms, instructors and instructional programs have seen their face-to-face business either severely hampered or eliminated completely. While weekend clinics that had

been booked for spring and summer have been postponed, some teachers are being forced to develop new methods for reaching students, working with pupils through online instructional courses that involve computers or cameras. For the teachers and coaches who had embraced online learning years before, the pandemic is creating a unique learning and marketing opportunity.

With a background in information technology that has included overseeing the virtual high school for Kentucky's Department of Education, Anthony Beeler realized over a decade ago that cyber learning was going to be part

of the learning experience for students in the future.

Shortly after he began working with the high school program, Beeler started developing a curriculum eight years ago for what would become the industry's first virtual pocket billiards academy. The American Cue Sports organization level four instructor recorded a series of lessons, mapping out a complete lesson plan for students. He then uploaded the videos onto the learning management software Schoology, which allows his pupils to progress through the syllabus-style online class in a manner similar to what the students in the virtual high school experience.

"I tell people doing an online class with me is as simple as operating Facebook," Beeler said. "You don't want to get a software that's too complicated because if you do and people don't like it, they won't use it and there goes your business."

Online pupils have the ability to record a video of their play and send it to the instructor, who then analyzes the footage and responds within 24 hours. Beeler takes notes on what the student performed correctly and incorrectly, timestamps different points of the recording to provide illustration for his point, then reviews the video breakdown with the student.

"That's really powerful. They can see their own progress," he said. "There are a lot of cool things that you can do when you're teaching that way."

Beeler still occasionally gets calls from players adamant that they want in-person lessons, something the instructor isn't currently interested in with a son at home who has a medical condition which makes him a Covid risk. Instead, he steers the prospective student towards his online class and offers to make a special deal for face-to-face lessons whenever it becomes safer to either meet at a poolroom or have people to his home. Although he understands the desire for an in-person, hands-on experience, Beeler has the ability to work with a student long-term over the internet in a way he

normally can't through to face-to-face instruction.

"I can take someone in Florida and work with them every day for a year," said Beeler, who estimated he has taught close to 1,000 players via online methods since creating the program. "But if it's face-to-face, there's no way that's going to happen because I'm not moving to Florida and they're not moving to Kentucky."

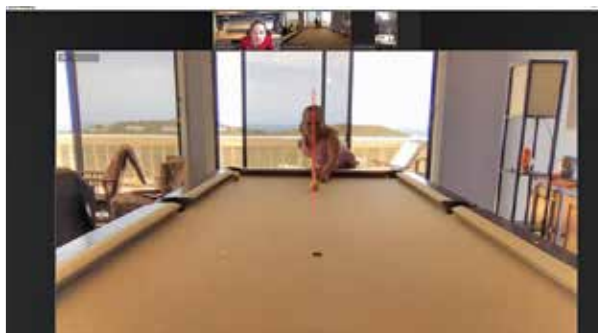
The ability to work with a student anywhere in the world seems to be the most popular positive among instructors who are offering virtual lessons.

Shortly after her instructor position for Denver's recreation centers was put on a pandemic-related hold

immediately, a former student who now wanted a lesson as well. Even without a pandemic, the chances of Burnett being able to take a face-to-face class were practically nonexistent, having relocated from Colorado to St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands last year. After some maneuvering of the camera by Burnett, Diep-Vidal was able to get the view that she desired and the student received some practicing tips, drills to work on and was introduced to straight pool.

"Obviously, face-to-face is better, but in a pinch, virtual is great," Burnett said.

Before Diep-Vidal starts one of her 90-minute instruction sessions, she uses the Thorsten Hohmann-created phone application CueLab to send a series of shots over to the student. When the pupil has their camera positioned, the teacher has three computer moni-



Diep-Vidal sends her students a series of shots, then reviews the student's recorded efforts and returns marked-up footage and a recap of the session.

in March, Samm Diep-Vidal also was approached by an old student inquiring about learning through a video conference. Although she'd considered teaching virtually previously, she had not had the time to create a game plan for such instruction. But now that she was housebound with her two children she had plenty of availability to experiment and learn on the fly, sending the student a series of shots to set up as well as directions on how to position the camera.

Diep-Vidal was pleased enough with the results that she shared her experience on social media, then heard from former student Karen Burnett almost

tors on her desk to view, record and mark up the broadcast. Diep-Vidal then reviews the video with her student so that they can see where they've made progress and what needs to be corrected. After class, she uploads the footage in its entirety to the student — another benefit which students and teachers find impactful — and emails a recap of the session, notes and list of techniques to work on.

"I want them to improve as much as they do," Diep-Vidal said. "They're taking the time to spend that hour with me and they're putting in the time to practice. The least I can do is be professional for that time together."

Long before the word “pandemic” was a part of the everyday lexicon, Roy Pastor understood the value of instruction through modern electronic devices.

Pastor was a semicompetitive player in his youth who took a 20-year hiatus from the game when college, careers and children came along. When he got back into playing recreationally around 2000, he also ventured into teaching and established an instructional program at the Bromfield School in Massachusetts where his two children were enrolled. The program slowly outgrew the school, morphing into a regional youth program hosted by a local, upscale poolroom. Pastor’s knowledge of the game became more sophisticated as well, earning certification as a PBIA master instructor.

When the Billiard Congress of America, which operates the PBIA, was looking for ways to promote and grow the game a couple of years ago, Pastor, along with fellow instructors Walter Zincavage and the late Gary Nelson, proposed taking the junior instructional system and implementing it virtually.

“They socialize, they collaborate and they learn on their phones,” Pastor said. “Why wouldn’t we use that and just modernize some of our old teaching techniques that we have to take advantage of that?”

BCA President Rob Johnson and Communications Manager Shane Tyree were intrigued and the Break-and-Run Premier Junior Instructional Program was born.

When a family inquires about instruction for their son or daughter, Pastor requests a short video of the child practicing from various angles be submitted to showcase the stroke, stance and skill level. He will then either work with the student himself or assign one of his 12 instructors and begin working through the program’s lesson plan. Much like Beeler’s virtual academy, Break and Run has a series of about 25 videos that serves as instructional learning units which offer approximately two hours of instruction per month. The strategy is to keep the instruction, which is free of charge to the student, bite-sized and manageable.

“We spread what another instructor



Pastor, with several of his pupils, helped launch the BCA Break and Run Junior Program.

might teach over a weekend, with the pupil retaining almost nothing, to little pieces at a time. This way the pupil retains almost everything,” Pastor said.

Each student has a private Facebook page set up that is only visible by the teacher and the student. The pupils start with the basic fundamentals — a section on grip, stance, bridge — and

then work on drills that players can practice, record and upload to the page to display progress. Instructors review, critique and offer input to the student — unless the student’s teacher is Steve Sherman, who loads the footage into the Coach’s Eye software program and gives the content the John Madden treatment.

“I always thought video analysis was a fantastic training tool,” Sherman said. “I can circle things that need to be corrected.”

In order to connect better with the children, all of the video demonstrations are performed by fellow students so the pupils can see someone their own age executing these techniques. Eight-year-old Ezra Seymour had been in the program for only a couple months, slowly developing his fundamentals and uploading his progress for Pastor to observe. He logged onto the Break and Run’s main page for students one day to see his video being used as the training example, receiving immediate reinforcement as well as motivation.

“When he sees a video of a child doing a drill he goes after it and spends more time at the table,” said his father, Matt Seymour, who also has 6-year-old son Donovan enrolled as Break and Run’s youngest pupil. “It helps motivate him to try to be the examples for those videos.”

Pastor estimates the program has

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taught between 20 to 30 junior players in the short time that it's been in operation, and Tyree said that interest in the program has increased 10-fold since the pandemic began — both with parents looking to enroll children and instructors inquiring about teaching the young players.

"It's just kind of steamrolled into something that's a pretty good program for everyone involved," said Tyree, who emphasized that all instructors must complete a thorough background check before they are enlisted as a teacher.

Unlike the Break and Run Program, online training was not something that the National Billiard Academy had been looking into before at the beginning of the year. That was, of course, before the pandemic wiped out all of the academy's scheduled weekend clinics for the foreseeable future. With most of the poolrooms where the program operates currently closed, the academy is looking into growing its instruction staff while developing remote instructional methods through uploaded videos similar to what Beeler offers — at least until the organization can begin offering clinics again.

"There are some things that can be done so I'm more optimistic than I had been in the past now that I've experienced it," said Israel. "But it will never be a replacement for an intensive pool clinic."

The biggest negative that instructors talk about in regard to teaching virtually is the lack of literal hands-on work that can be accomplished. During a teaching clinic or private lesson, the teacher has the ability to tactfully manipulate the student's hand if they aren't making a proper bridge or can place a hand on a player's back if they have a predisposition for jumping up on a shot. In the online video world, the trainer can only show the player through a video replay or remind them in dialogue.

"It's very frustrating to not be able to walk up and adjust someone," said Sherman. "As a result, the process may take longer. We may go three video iterations where, face-to-face you may have been able to get someone aligned in an hour."

"I think it's a poor substitute, looking at a video of somebody rather than looking at them face-to-face," said Billiard Congress of America Hall of Famer Nick Varner. "I think that's going to be hard to replace, that eyeball-to-eyeball contact."

Speaking of eyeballs, although cam-

end clinic, a group of instructors or students can get together over a meal or a couple of drinks and share ideas. In the cyber world, there isn't much hanging out, only logging in and logging off.

"There are a lot of logistical reasons why online is better," Finkelstein said, adding that he and Powell are exploring methods to do seminars with video. "I think there are a lot of interpersonal relations reasons where I think it is lacking, but I think given the situation and the circumstances, I think we'll go towards that more than not."

While Finkelstein and fellow instructors were developing ways to reach students through videos, Mark Wilson and Varner were teaching the old fashioned way, driving to Florida in early July to teach a pair of two-day clinics. The former Mosconi Cup captain and two-time U.S. Open 9-Ball Champion had basically been on hiatus for the last three months, having roughly a half-dozen instructional sessions throughout the country canceled over the past three months. Wilson was approached about having additional teaching sessions in Florida after breaking the ice with a teaching clinic in Huntsville in late June. As parts of the country began to reopen, the two were looking to make up for lost time.

Wilson did dip his toe into virtual teaching while he was laid up at home, using FaceTime and a second camera to record the student and review his technique. He believes that effective teaching can occur virtually with a properly motivated player, but also lamented the lack of synergism that usually takes place in person. That said, he added that virtual learning could provide an effective and cost-effective alternative to driving throughout the country.

"I think the better thing is face-to-face but that's probably not a reality in the future, so you're going to have to morph," Wilson said.



Students like 8-year-old Ezra Seymour uses the Break and Run program as motivation to improve at the table.

eras offer a vantage point for instructors to view players, not everything is visible. Poor lighting or a lower-resolution camera could result in teachers missing stroke characteristics or hinder seeing a player's stance. Israel brought up not having a clear view of a student's eyes to monitor where a player is focusing.

"The issue is that 70 percent of pool players cannot see the vertical axis of the cue ball," he said. "That's a vision issue and that's going to be very difficult to correct in a virtual setting."

Finkelstein also voiced concerns about the lack of in-person interaction involved in online teaching. At a week-