



Kristi M. Carter

Allison Fisher holds more titles than any other sportsperson in history, including Tiger Woods, yet most people have never heard of her. She is the greatest female player ever to wield a snooker cue and, although she now lives in America, she grew up in a village in East Sussex. 'I'm a secret,' says Fisher, laughing, when we meet for lunch in New York, 'the best kept secret. I like it like that: I wouldn't want to be David Beckham or somebody. But I'd like to be an MBE - I'd like to be recognised by the Royal family.'

I'm not sure if she is joking or not - in America she already has semi-royal status. On the pool circuit she is known as the Duchess of Doom, partly because she usually obliterates her opponents, and partly because she is from Britain. 'I think they think that because I'm British I must be royal. I don't really like the title; I'm trying to lose it. When people introduce me as the Duchess of Doom, I say, "Allison Fisher, please!"'

Now 40, she has lived in America for 13 years, where she

Queen of the cue

She's won more trophies than Tiger Woods, hails from East Sussex and is the best kept secret in sport. Time for Allison Fisher, aka the Duchess of Doom, to step into the light, writes **Helena de Bertodano**

established herself immediately as a top-ranking pool player, having dominated the game of snooker for 10 years in Britain. 'I've won 74 professional titles here, four world championships and eight nationals,' she says matter-of-factly as she tucks into a beetroot salad. 'I've been player of the year 11 times out of 12.' I ask her what made her miss a year. 'It was 2001, the year my dad died. I couldn't win an event that year. I got in the finals all the time, but I couldn't get over the winning line. It was weird.'

Ranked number one last year on the Women's Professional Billiard Association Tour, Fisher is due to kick off 2009 with an open tournament (predominantly male competitors) in Verona, New York, on Thursday. 'I rarely play in open events, but this year it is my intention to be more competitive,' she says. Her first WPBA event is on 1 April in San Diego.

SNOOKER LOOPY

She is pretty and petite, with blonde hair and very blue eyes, and there is something of Grace Kelly about her – until you hear her speak. Her accent is estuary English and she rarely draws breath. 'As you can see, I do like to talk,' she says after a two-hour virtual monologue. Friendly and easygoing, she is dressed in black jacket and trousers, her only concession to femininity being a little frill at the neckline.

Fisher left England after going as far as she felt she could in snooker. 'I look at snooker as my apprenticeship for my pool career.' She had also become frustrated as she felt that snooker was not respected as a sport, at least as far as the women's game was concerned. 'I was at the world championship in Delhi in 1995 in the semi-final, and I turned round and said to my mum, "This is the last time you're ever going to watch me play snooker." And it was. Once I'm done, I'm done.'

'I told my mum I was going to America. She said, "You must be out of your mind." But I felt I had nothing to lose; I'd been doing the same thing over and over again for very little return. So I got a one-way ticket to the States, and I just felt at home immediately. I started playing pool and I really, really liked it. It was so professional: the conditions, the way they introduced the players.' She played her first tournament in Charlotte, North Carolina, and came ninth. 'I got more money for that than winning a tournament in England.' She set herself a goal of six months to start winning tournaments, but within two weeks she was coming first. 'It was a great start for somebody who doesn't play pool. After that I was on a roll.'

Now she lives very comfortably in a small town called Waxhaw, near Charlotte, where she has established a teaching academy, Allison's World Champion Academy. But her home is scarcely big enough to accommodate all her trophies. 'They're all over the floor, actually. I love trophies – if I fall in love with a trophy I'm probably going to win the event.'

Although similar in some respects, snooker and pool require different skills. Pool is a much faster, more aggressive game. But, mentally, both sports are very draining. 'They're both so intense – every shot requires so much focus. I don't show emotion when I play. What I do is internal. At the end of a tournament I feel worn out. I just want a nice meal, a glass of wine and a chance to unwind, then I'm ready for bed. I don't want to go out partying.' I ask if she is just as focused in her life outside the sport. 'Absolutely not,' she laughs. 'I get overwhelmed. I'm a little chaotic. I'm a wing-it person.'

The daughter of a newspaper-lorry driver, she grew up on the Sussex coast with two elder brothers. As a child she was always feisty and outgoing and never drawn to dolls. 'I grew up a tomboy. My mum says I used to send my brother's friends home crying... It was all about guns and football for me. My mum used to get upset with me because I used to swap the dresses she put me in for trousers, because I wanted to go and play rough and tumble with the other boys out the back.'

At the age of seven she saw a snooker table at a wedding. 'My cousins wouldn't let me play. They said I was too small, so I did the scoring. But I couldn't stop crying because I wanted to play.' She became obsessed with the game, so her father gave her a small snooker table for Christmas and later she used to



This guy said, "If I ever lose to a woman, I'm giving up the game." I played him and he lost. So he gave up then and there'

to a woman, I'm giving up the game.' I played him and he lost. So he gave up the game then and there. It was just so silly.'

Despite her huge success, she says she has never let it go to her head. 'I'm competitive, but I keep the ego in check. My family has always been very down to earth with me. I had a great upbringing, great parents, great friends. I'm very humble by nature, I've never taken anything for granted and I've been pretty sensible with my money.'

Although Fisher has in the past been very guarded about her personal life, when we meet she volunteers the information that she is gay. 'I knew it very early on. My mum asked me when I was 16. She was fine about it and so was my dad. They saw I got into good relationships and that was what mattered.'

For the past few years she has been with Kristi, 35, a former professional pool player. 'She realises what I go through as a player – the highs and the lows. In the past I've had a few relationships, but I do believe in "forever" with somebody, and I really feel like I will stay with Kristi forever. We'd actually like to have children one day.'

Fisher thinks she will play pool for another five years. 'But I've been saying that for the past 10 years...'

I ask her if it's all been a little too easy. 'In some respects it has. I've definitely been very lucky. I've done a lot of what I wanted to do in life. I've got to create some new goals now.' ●