

STEFANO PELINGA never actually met his idol, Dean Martin, but the Italian trick-shot master owes his international career and suave style to the legendary Rat Packer.
— By Mason King

A HANDSOME ITALIAN man clad in a deluxe tuxedo saunters onto a stage. He spies the audience, and seems taken aback. He holds a beat, and spouts with surprise, “How did all these people get in my room?”

Sounds familiar. It was a signature gag for Dean Martin, the boozy Italian-American crooner and member of the show-biz fraternity “The Rat Pack.” You then might expect an orchestra to launch into “Everybody Loves Somebody,” but, in this case, the guy in the tuxedo will launch a cue ball into the air and knock a 3 ball onto the mouth of a Coke bottle.

Stefano Pelinga, the suave trick-shot master from Rome, loves Dean Martin. But that’s not it, entirely. He *worships* Dean Martin. He collects Dean Martin. He credits major life choices to Dean Martin. And in his jaw-dropping artistic pool exhibitions — clad in that tuxedo and idly nursing a beverage between bits of patter with the crowd — he’s pretty much *channeling* Dean Martin. That includes the “How’d you get in my room?” bit.

“I picked up a lot from him, a lot of lines I say in my shows, a lot of mannerisms,” Pelinga said, taking a break after a private exhibition for sponsor Gorina Cloth in Chicago early this year. “But that was not on purpose. I just did it naturally, because I’ve been watching him for so many hours, for

thousands of hours, since I was a kid. I knew all his movies. I knew all the lines by heart.”

Born in the heart of Rome in 1964, Pelinga shaped his life with Martin as a guide. He took up pool as a hobby at age 12 because he knew Martin was a good pool player. He enjoyed amateur boxing in his teens, in part because Martin did the same. He specialized in foreign languages at a Roman university in hopes of meeting Martin one day and carrying on a conversation in English.

He never did get to meet Martin, who died on Christmas Day in 1995. But had they sat down over a couple cups of espresso before that date, there’s no doubt that Martin would have been equally impressed with Pelinga. Whereas Martin had played the James Bond-style government agent Matt Helm in several 1960s movies, Pelinga has forged a 21-year career in Rome as a real-life lawman — *poliziotto* — specializing in high-speed car chases as harrowing as anything seen on the screen.

“I wanted to be a cop when I was a teenager, when I was maybe 13 or 14 or 15,” he said, segueing into what sounds like a superhero oath. “I wanted to help people, to be there when they need some help, when there are criminals harassing them or threatening them.”

It’s almost *absurd*. Imagine leading a

life *this* exciting and glamorous: Driving an assortment of Alfa Romeos, BMWs, and Fiats at 80 mph through the streets of Rome, slapping the cuffs on criminals, and then playing pool in the evening on a specially reserved table in your local poolroom. And, then, traveling the world in a tuxedo, performing trick shots.

Sounds like a good movie role for Dean Martin, doesn’t it?

Matt Braun, co-producer of the ESPN-televized Trick Shot Magic competitions, sees some resemblance.

“Stefano has the ‘cool’ of Dean Martin — he’s very laid back, and at the same time somewhat charming,” Braun said. “Stefano is very personable, and quite attractive to the ladies.”

But he’s not just some goof in a suit. Pelinga cemented top status in the artistic-billiard world by winning the 2005 Trick Shot Magic title.

“Anyone who can go through the field of eight players we had last year is deservedly recognized not only as one of the elite, but an absolute master of trick shots,” Braun said.

PELINGA’S FIRST MEMORY of Martin was of the entertainer sliding down a fireman’s pole to kick off his wildly successful NBC variety series, “The Dean Martin Show,” which aired from 1965 to 1974. He saw a lot to admire in the fellow Italian who



Like his idol, Dean Martin, Pelinga seems at home performing in a tux.

MARTIN PHOTO: CORBIS; PELINGA PHOTO: DIANA HOPPE.

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who made a living off of improvising his way through tight situations and on-screen screw-ups.

"There was his velvet voice, his charisma, his easy-going style, and his determination that brought him up from being a poor Italian immigrant to the top of show business," Pelinga said.

Born in 1916 in Ohio as Dino Paul Crocetti, Martin spoke only Italian until age 5, and was the target of schoolyard ridicule for his broken English. He ultimately quit school at 16, and made a living working in steel mills, fighting in amateur bouts as "Kid Crochet" and later delivering bootleg liquor. *His* idol was Bing Crosby, and he soon remade himself as a club singer. The legendary career of "Dino" was under way.

Pelinga never tried singing, but he did latch onto Martin's penchant for pool.

"I always liked the game, ever since I was very, very young. But then I found out that Dino was a very good pool player," he said.

"I played straight pool, and I became pretty good, but it was hard for me to find a game. By the time I was 18, I hustled a little bit, and nobody wanted to play me anymore, so that was quite a problem."

By chance, he saw a documentary on TV about trick-shot artist Paul Gerni, and that gave him a light-bulb brain-storm.

"I said, 'This is probably something I could keep practicing on my own. I don't need an opponent to practice trick shots, so I can still enjoy the game and learn some more,' because I didn't have a clue how to make those shots. So, I started to practice, and I built up a small repertoire, maybe 20 to 30 shots."

Pelinga already had started studying foreign languages with the expectation of meeting Martin, but, as luck would have it, his language skills put him in touch with another tuxedoed mentor in 1990 — Gerni himself.

Learning that Gerni would be performing at a billiard trade show in the Italian resort town of Rimini, as well as a couple exhibitions in Rome, Pelinga pulled some strings and arranged to meet him at the airport.

Gerni remembered getting a police escort from Pelinga through customs.

"He flashed his [police] badge and said, 'Come this way,'" Gerni said. "He



Officers at rest: Pelinga, standing outside his Roman precinct, is usually speeding through the streets of the city, stalking crime scenes with his fellow poliziotti.

was very kind and introduced himself. ... So while all the people on the plane were going through customs, I went straight through."

Pelinga ended up translating for Gerni at the exhibitions, and he took him aside at a local poolhall to pick his brain about a career in trick shots. Impressed with Pelinga's enthusiasm and polished demeanor, Gerni eventually invited Pelinga to tour with him in the U.S. in the mid-1990s in what was essentially a trick-shot apprenticeship.

"I didn't expect any payback," Pelinga said. "I was learning how to deal with the crowd, what lines to use, how to make more shots."

"He looked like a young Mosconi; he had that look about him," Gerni said. "He had the fever for pool, and the ability to communicate with people and be a gentleman. ... He just carried himself well. There are a lot of players who just aren't polished."

Pelinga's mania for Martin was evident early on. Gerni recalled climbing on stage with Pelinga at a bar called The Country Luau in Kingsville, Texas, to sing a karaoke version of Martin's hit "Volaré" in the original Italian.

"You can ask him any Dean Martin trivia," Gerni said. "I remember I stopped a show once and said to the crowd, 'Ask him anything about Dean Martin.' And he turned around and said, 'He's not kidding.'"

FORTUNATELY FOR Pelinga, he was able to coordinate his fledgling artistic pool career and international travel with his full-time job as a policeman.

After six months of police training in early 1985 in the Calabria region at the point of Italy's "boot," Pelinga joined the force in Rome. Thus began two decades of shoot-outs with suspects, halting robberies in progress, and high-speed chases through Italy's notoriously knotty and crowded streets.

His workload can range from 911 calls to anti-terrorism and organized crime cases. In the best-case scenario, Pelinga is able to arrive at the scene of the crime before the suspects leave.

"I get there before everybody else," he said. "We feel good when we get there so early, right after we get the call, to the surprise of the criminals who wouldn't expect us to get there. We switch the sirens off to get there quietly, but still speeding with the car really fast."

Amazingly, after arresting literally hundreds of criminals, Pelinga has never been injured and has never wrecked a car.

"Nope, no, no — not really," he says emphatically. "No, no, never, never a scratch on a car."

"I love the job. It's kind of tiring, and of course risky, but we're aware of that, so we can't complain."

Pool obviously took a backseat to his

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career as a police wheelman, but Pelinga still is diligent about practicing and promoting himself. He practices maybe 10 hours a week on a table specially reserved for him at the two-level, upscale Laser Club in Rome. And, often for several hours every evening, he relentlessly hawks himself for international exhibitions via e-mail and phone calls.

Taking into account the limited amount of time he had to develop his trick-shot career, Pelinga is intensely proud of his accomplishments. His major titles include the 2003 U.S. Open of Artistic Pool and the 2004 European Artistic Pool Championship. But his impressive resumé was capped in 2005 with his first Trick Shot Magic title.

Because of the quality of competition assembled, Pelinga equates Trick Shot Magic events with world championships. And in 2005, he earned the title by besting heavyweights Tom Rossman, Mike Massey and Nick Nikolaidis.

Pelinga flummoxed former champ Massey in the quarterfinals with massé shots, which he later employed in the finals to forge a tie with Nikolaidis. With the score knotted at 7-7, both men were required to perform a tie-breaker: kicking the cue ball a minimum of eight rails and stopping it on a \$100 bill. Pelinga won the lag and let Nikolaidis go first, in order to glean the attitude of the table. After his foe missed the bill by about an inch, Pelinga nailed Ben Franklin for the win.

"I was not after the \$25,000, which is still a lot of money for pool players, but I was really after the title," he said. "I had missed first place by so little too many times [2nd place in 2001 and 2002]. You get afraid that it could happen again and over and over, like a curse

that is following you. I broke the curse."

PELINGA WILL have more time to add to his resumé and practice his portfolio of 700-some trick shots around the end of 2007, when he retires from the police force with a pension.

He'll also have more time to indulge in his hobby of collecting Dean Martin memorabilia. His treasure trove of artifacts is located in the apartment he shares in downtown Rome with his wife, Helena, and his father, Paolo — just a 10-minute

walk from the Coliseum. The collection includes about every applicable book and record album, plus publicity photos, newspaper and magazine clippings, novelty statuettes, comic books, and even a copy of Dino's death certificate.


"I could open my own museum," he said. "Since the first time I came to America in 1990, I spent days and weeks in all the antique stores in the United States. And now on eBay, I still find some interesting things.

"I even got one of his personal checks, signed by him. He was buying new tires for a sports car he gifted to one of his children. He bought new tires. At that time, it was maybe 80 bucks. We're talking early 1960s."

Sadly, Pelinga doesn't have any pool memorabilia associated with the star, due mostly to the trouble of authenti-

cating the items. He cites one instance when a collector asked \$65,000 for a cue allegedly given to Martin by Frank Sinatra, but with no supporting evidence. "I wouldn't trust it," Pelinga said. "Who can certify that?"

What Pelinga really values are the intangibles, the Dino-esque qualities he hopes he has incorporated into his act, his personality and his outlook. The smooth style. The unflappable, or *menefreghismo*, attitude. The c'mon-get-happy *gioia di vivere* spirit. The deft way he can make an audience enjoy a missed shot more than a successful one.

"Dino always had the right words to get out of a difficult situation," he said. "Even when other people made mistakes, he always kept playing and made everybody relax and feel good." 



Pelinga's home in Rome serves as a Dino museum.

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