
Supporting narrated video (NV) demonstrations, high-speed video (HSV) clips, technical proofs (TP), and all of my past articles are available online at billiards.colostate.edu. Reference numbers used in the articles help you locate the resources on the website.

Have you ever played 3-ball? If you have been around pool awhile, I am sure you have. And you have probably won or lost lots of \$1 bills in the process. The goal of 3-ball is to pocket three balls with as few shots as possible, including the break. Let's look at different strategies for the all-important break shot, all of which are demonstrated in online video [NV J.4](#).

One approach is to just hit the break hard from the side or center and hope something goes. Obviously, this is not a very good approach. The probability to make a ball is low, and you don't always get an easy shot after the break. Sometimes you will make a ball and get good shape for an easy run; but more often than not, no balls will go and you won't know where things will end up. If you don't make a ball on the break, the best score you can get is a 4, assuming you don't scratch on the break, have a shot after the break, and don't miss any shots. Another option, shown in **Diagram 1**, is to use a soft break and play for a post-break shot at the 1. You're unlikely to make a ball this way, but you give yourself a good chance to a run out for a score of 4.

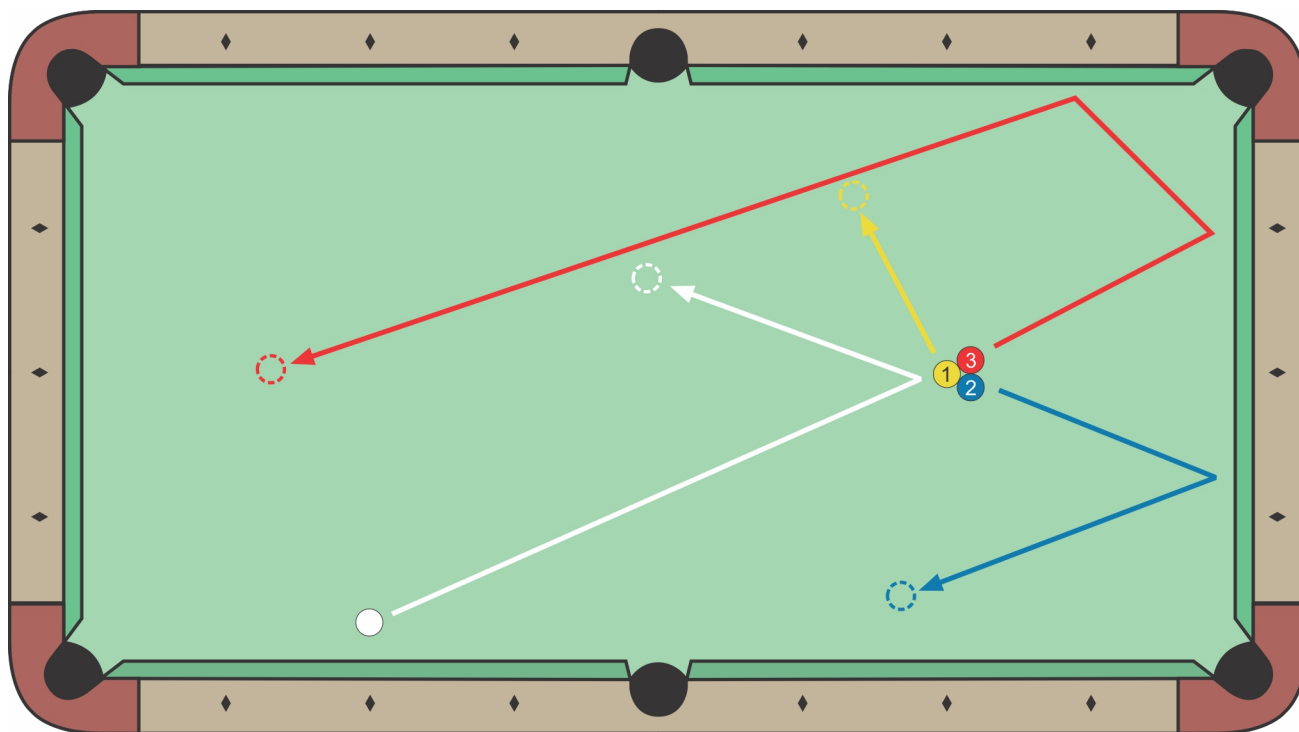


Diagram 1 Soft break

Another approach, as shown by the solid ball paths in **Diagram 2**, is to use power, breaking from the side, focusing on pocketing the 3 off 4 rails. If you back-cut the 1, the 3 usually goes long; and if you hit the 1 squarely, the 3 usually goes short. If you use just the right amount of slight back cut, you can make the 3. However, as shown in online video [NV J.4](#), the 2 can sometimes get in the way. Sometimes you can get better results breaking from the other side of the table, which is always a good thing to check with all of the approaches. Regardless, the 3-ball direction is very sensitive to the angle of the hit, so this approach is also nonideal.

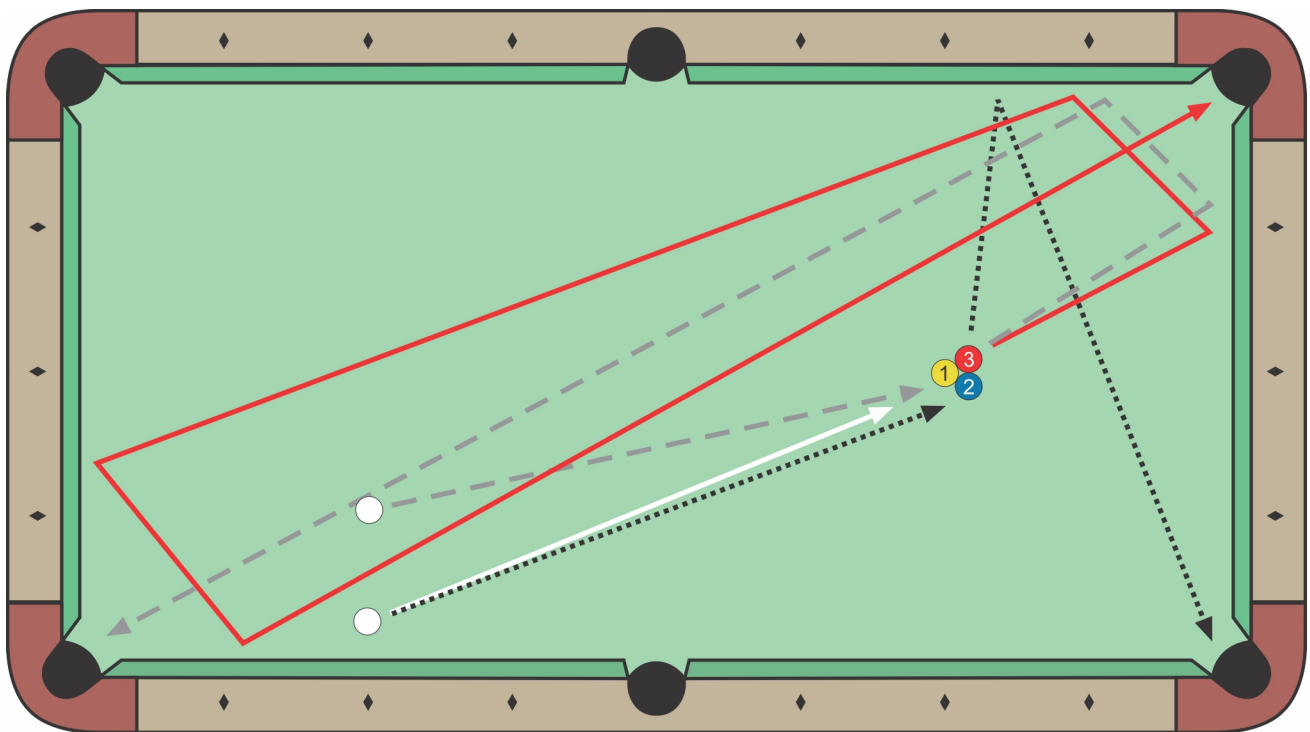


Diagram 2 Banks

Another approach, shown with the dotted ball paths in **Diagram 2**, is to hit the 2 first, attempting to bank the 3 cross corner. It doesn't go on my table because I can't get quite enough throw and spin-transfer from the 2 to the 3 to get enough angle. However, on a table with old and dirty balls, or with cushions that bank long, this might be a very easy and reliable approach. I can make it work on my table by adding chalk to the contact point between the 2 and 3, creating more friction to increase the amount of throw and spin transfer, but that's cheating. An advantage of the soft-bank approach, if it works on your table, is the balls stay close, usually resulting in a fairly easy run out for a score of 3. As demonstrated in online video [NV J.4](#), an option on my table is to use more speed, attempting to bank the 3 twice across. A benefit of the extra speed is the 2 also has a chance to bank to the upper-left corner. However, this approach is low percentage since the twice-across bank requires a near-perfect hit.

Another option, shown with the dashed ball paths in **Diagram 2**, is to hit the 1 at a slight angle to send the 3 off two rails to the opposite corner. And with the right speed, you can also leave an easy shot at the 1 or 2 for an easy score of 3. This approach might seem good, but it is tough to get the hit just right to pocket the 3.

Diagram 3 shows my favorite 3-ball break strategy, using soft speed with inside english, just barely clipping the 1 ball. With a good hit, the 3 goes into the corner and the 1 and 2 come to rest in the middle of the table, usually for an easy runout. Also, the inside english kills and straightens the cue ball's motion to get a good shot after the break. With the leave in the diagram, you can use a combination to both pocket the 2 and follow the 1 into the side for a score of 2, which is awesome. Sometimes, you can pocket both the 2 and 3 on the break for an easy score of 2, but this is difficult to do consistently. Online video [NV J.4](#) demonstrates several ways to get a score of 2 using these approaches. And even if you don't pocket the 3 or the 2, you usually still get a very good chance for an easy score of 4. And even if you entirely miss the 1, you still usually get a decent chance for a score of 4. So this break approach has very little down-side risk. You almost always have a good shot at a score of 4; and with a good hit, a 3 is very easy, and even a 2 is possible. You can't ask for much better than this.

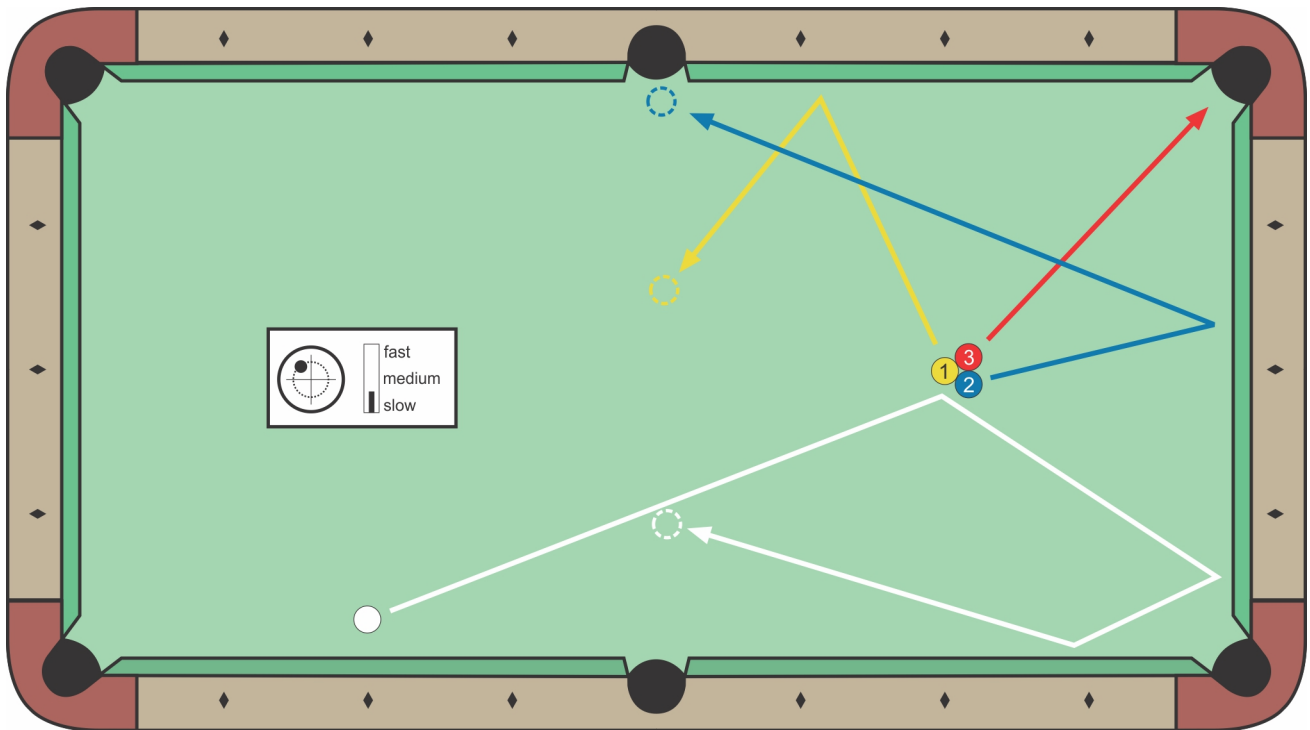


Diagram 3 Thin with inside

Actually, you can ask for better than a 4, 3, or 2. You can ask to pocket all three balls on the break for a score of 1! There is an approach to do this, but it is very aggressive with down-side risks, and it is low-percentage. As shown in **Diagram 4**, you need to break from the side and thin the 1 with fast speed and a center ball hit. With just the right hit and conditions, you can make the 3 in the corner, the 1 in the side, and the 2 in the upper corner. Online video [NV J.4](#) demonstrates several good attempts on my table. As with the earlier soft-speed approach, the key is thinning the 1 the exact amount necessary to send the 3 to the corner. I wasn't able to pocket all three balls on my 9' Olhausen; but on a table that banks short, like most Diamond tables, you have a better chance of succeeding for a score of 1!

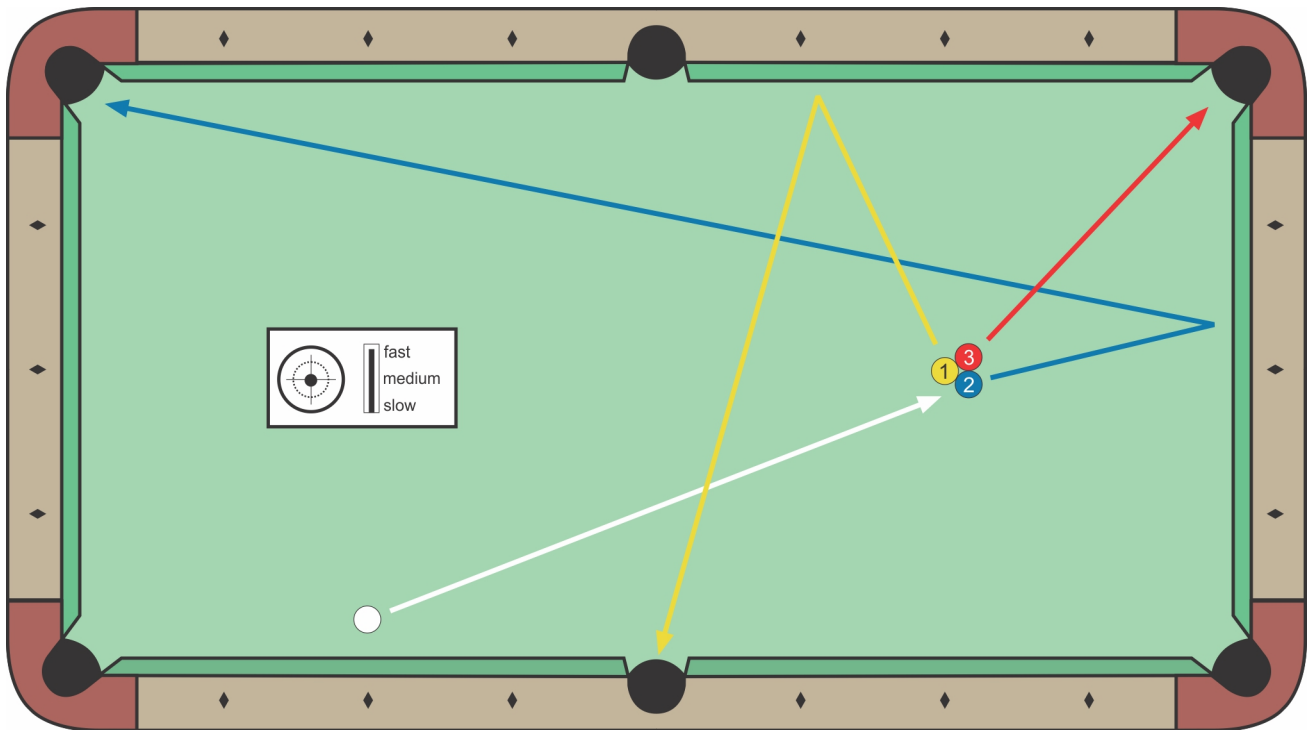


Diagram 4 Fast thin hit

I hope you enjoyed learning about all of the different 3-ball break strategy options. The next time somebody challenges you to a friendly 3-ball gambling match or proposition, you should now be better prepared to teach them a lesson with some low scores.

Good luck with your game,
Dr. Dave



[NV J.4](#) – 3-Ball Pool Break Strategy and Tips - How to Make a Ball and Score Low

PS:

- I know other authors and I tend to use lots of terminology, and I know not all readers are totally familiar with these terms. If you ever come across a word or phrase you do not fully understand, please refer to the [online glossary](#) at billiards.colostate.edu.

Dr. Dave is a PBI Advanced Instructor, Dean of the Billiard University, and author of the book: [The Illustrated Principles of Pool and Billiards](#) and numerous instructional DVD series, all available at: DrDaveBilliards.com.