

BY Bob Jewett



MORE THE MERRIER III

Cutthroat is a starting point, but there are plenty more options.

IN MY last article, I mentioned scotch doubles, a game for two pairs of players with the players on a team alternating innings. At the Mosconi Cup in London last December, this idea was taken to the limit with the 10 players from both teams taking turns shooting in the first match of the competition. I think it worked quite well to introduce the players to the audience. It was interesting to see the interaction between the players — all of them champions — when deciding what position to play for the following player. Of the other matches, about half were in the doubles format, and the pairings added to the atmosphere of the event.

Here are some more fun games for more than two.

Three is generally an awkward number for a game of pool. It is not really enough for a ring game, and most games are based on two players or two teams. The game of Cutthroat is an excellent game for three friends of roughly equal ability if there is little chance that anyone will run the table. There are several versions of the rules; I'll cover the way we used to play it many years ago at the Cal Rec Center.

The balls are divided into groups, like 8-ball, with 1-5 belonging to one player, 6-10 to another and 11-15 to the last. The goal is to keep your balls on the table and sink the other two groups of balls. Rack the balls with one of each group on the corners. Choose the order of play by any agreeable method. The game begins with an open (smash) break. There is no call shot and any ball may be struck first. If you make a ball, you continue at the table.

When a player makes his first ball, he chooses which group of balls he has. The last player to make a ball has no choice, of course. You continue to shoot in the starting order, but if all of a player's group is gone, he doesn't get a turn. When a player fouls, the penalty is that one of each of his opponents'

Summary of Rules for

CUTTHROAT

3 PLAYERS, 15 BALLS:
Each player has a group of five balls (1-5, 6-10, 11-15). Your goal is to sink your opponents' balls while keeping yours on the table.

GROUP DECISION: The first player to make a ball chooses her group, then the next player to pocket a ball chooses.

WIDE OPEN: There's no call-shot and any object ball may be struck first.

FOULS HURT: When a player fouls, each opponent spots a ball (thus, a previously eliminated player can return).

LAST ONE STANDING?:
The winner is the last player to have a ball or balls on the table.

balls is spotted, so it's possible for a previously eliminated player to return to the game. If all of a group is already on the table, nothing spots for that group. Any ball pocketed on an illegal shot or jumped off the table is spotted as long as it doesn't belong to the fouler.

The last player to have a ball or balls still on the table is the winner. We played by the additional rule that if a player happened to pocket his own last

ball, he could continue at the table with a chance to clear all the balls and win the game. We also played cutthroat as a scored game, with the winner getting one point for each of his balls left up at the end. The winner of the game breaks in the next.

I think it's clear that cutthroat loses its charm if any player is likely to run 10 balls, or even clear off one group from the break. If a runout is not viable, the two main strategies become the two-against-one game and bumping your group to safer areas of the table. When not shooting, you can try to persuade the shooter that the third player's balls are well disposed for annihilation.

There are at least two multi-player games that use three-cushion billiards as their basis. "Box Billiards" is described in Robert Byrne's "Wonderful World of Billiards." More common where I played was "fifth billiard," which can be played by any number of players. The rules are the same as for three-cushion with the players shooting in order, each scoring as many points as possible in his inning. Score is kept on a common string or counter, and whoever scores point number 5 wins one unit from each of the other players. Points 10, 15, 20 and so on are similarly remunerative. The problem with this scoring is that no one will want to score the first point of a set of 5, so a multiplier is added: any point scored in a run of 5 or more is paid double. This encourages everyone to play aggressively. If you make a run of six with scoring points on each end, it's doubled to 4 points. The traditional bead scoring strings are very convenient for this game, as each fifth bead is normally a different color, and a quick glance at the beads tells you how far away your next payday is.

Normally in ring billiard games, an incoming player will take as his cue ball whichever ball was not the shooter's cue ball on the previous shot. This is known as the "still ball" option, using still in

the sense of motionless. An alternative is the "optional cue ball" option in which the incoming player may choose which cue ball he wants to use for that inning. A big advantage of optional ball is that there is almost no way to play defense and the game moves along faster.

Last October I had the pleasure of visiting what may be the nicest pool room in the U.S. — Fargo Billiards in Fargo, N.D., which is a past winner of the BD's annual Best New Rooms contest. Host and owner Mike Page introduced me to a new format for ring 9-ball he calls "Fargo Flip." The game can be played by three or more players, but I think it is best for four to eight. The rules of play are the same as for tournament 9-ball, including safeties, ball in hand for fouls, and three fouls for loss of game. Each rack begins with each player flipping a coin to determine teams. The Tails play the Heads with the Tails breaking.

The rotation of play is the same as scotch doubles, so the players on a team take one shot each in turn until a miss or foul. The order is determined

by agreement within each team as the need for a shooter comes up. At first I thought this would lead to confusion and arguments, but there was never any problem. For strategy, I suppose you could put up the weakest player for a shot that is either easy or impossible, but in practice the person nearest the shot who hasn't shot yet probably takes the shot.

Scoring is a little different. Let's say you are playing for jelly beans. Each player on the losing team pays one jelly bean to each player on the winning team. If Heads wins with four players on the team and Tails has two players, each of the Tails puts four jelly beans on the table, and each Head picks up two jelly beans. If there is only one player on a team, he has a lot to win or lose while the players on the opposing team are only risking a single jelly bean. Before you flip, you should make sure that you have at least as many jelly beans in your pocket as there are other players in the game.

This form of ring 9-ball has several

advantages over the traditional style. First, you use the standard rules of nine ball. You can and should play safe as appropriate, and a good safe is rewarded with ball in hand for your team. Also, the teams are constantly rearranged, so you are not stuck in a bad position for long. It is easy to take a short break by just not flipping at the start of a game and getting back in when a later game is starting.

As with any ring game, whether a new player can get in is up to the majority in the game, but the usual advantage of a strong player is well diluted by the Scotch format. There is little reason to exclude a champion if the stakes are not excessive. Let Johnny, Shane or Efen play — coaching is allowed and you might learn something.

If you have any other ring game formats I haven't covered, please send them to me at Jewett@sfbilliards.com and they may appear in a future column. I've already received a couple of suggestions prompted by the first column in this series.