





One Pocket Theory by Bob Jewett

This is the second in a series of columns of the game of one pocket. Last time I covered most of the rules. This time let's look at some useful ideas for playing better and watching the game with a better understanding of what the players are doing.

One pocket is the chess of pool. Offense and defense are balanced, shots/moves benefit from deep analysis and experience, and the position of every piece/ball on the board is often important to the next move. Balls/pieces are developed and important ones are protected. And until a run starts at one pocket, there is a series of moves the goal of which is to improve your position and make your opponent as uncomfortable as possible.

What constitutes a good position at one pocket? As in chess, it's all in the positions of the individual pieces and how they interact. Let's look at some examples.

In Diagram One are four situations around the four corner pockets. Each pocket is yours in turn. For Pocket A, you have a ball in the jaws. This is the best possible position for a single ball, of course. If your opponent is shooting, he has to take care of the ball immediately if he has no sure shot to his pocket. If he starts a run, he will be worrying about it if he encounters a difficult shot. The standard play is a sacrifice; he will pocket the ball for you giving you a point and ending his turn.

If it is your turn, the ball will give a good start to the run. You can play a combination that is less risky since the hung ball is a big target. (I've had an opponent play three combinations in succession to his pocket leaving a hanger each time.) If you play the ball directly, controlling the cue ball is a little tricky as you might hit a jaw instead of the normal rail -- it's a good shot to practice including the rail-first option.

If the ball is a little farther out from the pocket, it becomes less valuable as your opponent may be able to "take it out" or knock it away from your pocket. Also, combinations to the ball are no longer automatic.

For Pocket B, you have a ball on the short rail close to your pocket. If there are few other balls on the table, your opponent must not leave the cue ball anywhere on his side of the table or you will have a shot. Also valuable is the fact that if your opponent is on a run, it will be very difficult for him to get position to play the ball directly to his pocket. His run is more likely to end by a take out of the ball. If the ball is farther from the end cushion, it becomes a possible bank shot to your opponent's pocket and so loses some of its value to you.

There is a ball similarly placed on the long rail by Pocket C. On a nearly empty table, your opponent is forced to either take it out or leave you near the foot cushion, which greatly restricts his shots. If the ball is frozen to the cushion it is more valuable because that makes it much more difficult for your opponent to bank it to his pocket.

For Pocket D you have a ball on each cushion by your pocket. There is almost nowhere your opponent can leave you that you don't have a shot, so he will likely have to play a take out. If the balls and cue ball are sitting just right he may be able to bank the ball on the long cushion to his pocket. He will want to do this in a way that leaves the cue ball on the long cushion on your side of the table unless he is sure of making the bank or he can somehow hide the ball on the short cushion or move it with a carom.

The main thing to learn from Diagram One is that balls within a diamond of your pocket are of great value. This fact often dictates that shots -- especially shots that have a good chance to miss -- are played just hard enough to get to the pocket.

In Diagram Two are some other situations showing the values of balls in various positions. For Player A, the 1 and 2 ball are positive since they are close to his pocket, but they are almost unplayable. (There are risky/tricky shots to pocket either ball.) From cue ball X, a thin hit on the 2 ball drives the 1 ball to the end rail to promote both balls.

The 3 ball is the only positive thing going for Player B. Usually balls on your side of the table are a good thing, but the 5 ball is almost impossible to play because of the side pocket. Similarly, the 4 ball is playable for Player A, but unbankable for Player B. Side pockets often play a large factor in the game.

The 6 ball is also unplayable for B but will be promoted if the blocker 3 is removed. Miracle position can make the 7 and 8 available for B but neither one has a one rail bank off the head rail due to blockers. Taken together, the 3, 5 and 6 are a huge negative for player B and he should be looking to rearrange the furniture as soon as possible.

By contrast, the 6, 7 and 8 are all bankable off the end rail towards pocket A. Also, the 4 is playable if the 1 and 2 are moved. The 3 and 5 are bankable. An example play from position Y for Player A would be to bank the 7 ball to the 1 and 2 just hard enough to get there and make them playable. It looks like it's possible to leave the cue ball behind the 8 ball at Z to prevent a take out. In this situation the most important part is to hide the cue ball even if that means reducing the accuracy of the bank. The 8 ball is also of value to A because of its potential blocker function.

Just as the balls on B's side of the table are bad for him in their current configuration, it also sometimes happens that a player will have lots of balls near his pocket but none of them is playable by a standard shot. If that happens to you, the first thing to look for is some way to move several balls while leaving the cue ball safe. If you can play to free up specific balls, that's fine but if nothing's obvious, just roll the dice.

I haven't stressed it so far but the position of the cue ball is the largest factor in the value of the position of balls on the table. Leaving the cue ball close to your opponent's pocket is usually effective. Freezing the cue ball to an object ball with the pair pointed more or less towards your pocket is a good way to end your inning, and it's often achieved by freezing the cue ball to the remainder of the rack in the early part of the game. When you are playing such safeties, consider each millimeter to be precious. A cue ball nearly frozen to a ball is going to block many possible responses by your opponent.

Especially during battles for the last few balls leaving the cue ball on the head rail is critical. If it's so close to the cushion that your opponent cannot use draw or much side spin he will be forced to play a sub-optimal shot. Small pockets make head-rail leaves worth a lot more.

The next time you have a chance to watch good one pocket players in action, try to pick out which balls are valuable to each player. Note how each shot improves the position for each player. See how players neutralize or reverse the balls that are positive for their opponents.