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Upward Mobility

Rate yourself as a winner.

One of our most entertaining habits is the ongoing search for quick and easy answers to provide a kind of one-stop shopping for the business of life. A cursory look at diet trends illustrates the humor nicely. Back in the seventies, carbohydrates were bad for us, then in the eighties, good for us. Now they're the enemy again as those in the know have zeroed in on protein. Man, it seems, does not live by pancakes alone. The insanity peaked about fifteen years ago when someone sold the masses on the notion that the egg, the literal source of life, must be avoided at all costs. Meanwhile, theaters across the land are installing wider seats to keep pace with our nutritional progress. But enough about trends, let's put down our Big Gulps and Oreos, or slimming shakes and power bars, for a minute to get busy with pool.

Pool players can fall into similar patterns and, from time to time, will buy into myths that sound good on the surface but can do more to hamper one's advancement than further it. Take for example the old and widely accepted, "Never hit the cue ball more than one-tip diameter from its center." Not seriously bad advice as a rule of thumb perhaps, but the word "never" has led a lot of players to believe that they have flawed strokes when they find that the cue ball does not move for them the way they know it can. So an idea that might have begun as a well-meaning suggestion to help beginners avoid miscues takes hold as gospel for some and turns out in application to hinder progress and, worse, cause feelings of inferiority. In case you have any doubts, do the math. A circle on the face of a cue ball 26 millimeters (twice the size of a standard tip) in diameter occupies about 20% of the available surface to hit. Ask yourself if you think that Efren Reyes confines himself to one-fifth of the cue ball, afraid to move his tip past the mandated limit.

Those of us who dedicate ourselves to pool know that the game is too vast and varied to learn with mere slogans. The shelves teem with books and videos, most of them excellent, with room for more to come along and unravel the mysteries for us. It takes practice, hard work and thousands of playing hours to become great. Where I play we refer to the standard education as the three-year, twelve-hour-a-day program. However, there is some very good news. You can take one easy step, make one simple change, to improve almost instantly—a quick fix if you will. You can resolve to show up, from now on, as a winner.

Probably the greatest advancement in pool since the jointed cue was the emergence of organized, handicapped, league and tournament play. It opened the doors of competitive pool to aspiring newcomers and put relative novices out there against seasoned veterans in a setting that gives them a fair chance. In almost biblical fashion though, the gift has come with a heavy price to pay. Since the participants want to win, many will campaign to elevate their opponents' handicaps while working hard to keep themselves underrated and their real talent disguised. How clever. And it only takes one

player seeking an unfair edge to poison an entire league. Since most pool players are too sharp to allow others to get over on them, the disease spreads like warm butter.

Maybe other sports have their handicap liars but pool is most vulnerable because of its hustling tradition. Everyone knows the story of the deceitful hustler going from town to town, getting rich off of hapless marks. The truth is that the legend is highly exaggerated and over romanticized, especially nowadays. Yet, many talented, young shooters reserve their seats on the train to Shortstop, U.S.A. by rehearsing their acts when they should be practicing long shots. Another big consideration with the hustling story is that a player first has to be world class before he can think about betting big money in a game where he will reveal just enough measured skill to get the dough without letting the cat out of the bag.

If you play in a league, your handicap describes your skill and the label defines who you are as a pool player. More important, that number or letter speaks directly to who you think you are as a player. A desire to be underrated is like wishing that, when people mentioned your name in conversation, they followed it with the sentiment, “yeah, he’s okay sometimes.” But we all want to be thought of as great people all of the time, yes? Winners do not underrate themselves; if anything they err on the high side and show up every time to play, not only their best, but the best pool ever played.

Spend a minute to evaluate why you play pool and what you really want from the game. When you made the decision to play competitively and bought your equipment, you made a promise to yourself to play and improve. Were you dreaming of average in that moment? Now think about the possible payoff for rating yourself down. Is it money? Even if your team went all the way to first place in Las Vegas, how would the money compare to what it cost to get there, the weekly dues and travel expenses? Is the difference enough to justify degrading yourself? The big guys win the big money. When Reyes won \$160,000 last fall in Tokyo, he did not gripe that his opponent was too good and then negotiate some weight before the final match.

If you want to be a better player, declare now that you are one. Tomorrow morning, treat yourself to a great breakfast (don’t forget the eggs) and a new outlook. Then call your league or tournament director to request a raise in your handicap so you can begin to play at a higher level right away. If you’re worried about letting down the team, explain your action to the other members and enroll them to follow your lead. As a team, you can take a stand that you are all winners and that the lower rating you have carried so far has caused some real setbacks. Watch the professional players that you admire and pay attention to their confidence. Then think about some winners from other sports, the ones who appear in TV ads and tell kids to hold on to their dreams and “Just do it.” You will not see Tiger Woods’ face on a billboard with the words, “Never show your true speed.”

