Looking Good

All it takes is a quick look around to see that we have a mess on our hands. If the guys on the popular TV shows aren't competing to see who can eat the most caterpillars, then they're appearing on talk shows with beer guts under dirty tee-shirts to face the music for sleeping with their nephews. Our man in the White House doesn't know the difference between Slovakia and Slovenia and refers to tariffs as terriers. If he ever gives the order to impose stricter terriers on Slovenia, look out. We're in the thick of it again, *somewhere* in Eastern Europe, not as peace keepers this time, but maybe as poop scoopers. And we're so smart as a nation that we almost elected him a few years ago. Elsewhere in our reality, we Americans have decided that we're not mammals but reptiles, who should continue growing until we die. The word "bulk," for the first time in my memory, now has a positive connotation. So what's our most commonly shared desire? Looking good of course

In almost everything we do, a big underlying concern is how we look while we're doing it. No one is immune to the lure of vanity, a complex temptation that goes far beneath the surface to spark every wire of self image. We're all familiar with the obvious cases of those who take the greatest pains with their physical appearance and dress, sometimes to the exclusion of all else. But what about someone like Michael Moore, who must be able to afford some decent clothes and a razor? His apparent disregard for the superficial is, I surmise, contrived to enhance our assessment of his character's depth somehow. It's pretty doubtful that Ann-Coulter-type barbs directed at his looks would raise his hackles, but attack his credibility and watch him react. Find what someone values most, his point of pride, and you will know that person's greatest weakness—the precise level at which none of us ever wants to look bad.

We pool players are no different, and we come to the table with a strong desire to look good. Some might look at our physical appearance as a group and argue, but that's not what matters to us. What's important is how we play, and for many of us, how easy we can make it look while we do it. We look our best when the performance appears to flow naturally, which makes sense since that's when we feel our best. If we consider how precise the game's demands are and the fact that even the simplest shots can be missed, it's frightening to wonder how anyone can manage to pull that off and turn in a calm, brilliant performance. But it happens, amazingly more often than it should perhaps.

Our ability to understand the desire to look good and respond to it positively can serve as a great asset. On those occasions when we face an exceedingly difficult shot with no option but to play it, the best response is to let go with a confident stroke and no thoughts for the consequences, perhaps imagining a favorite pro player right beforehand. As my friend, Tim Miller, has written, "A shot only comes with two possible outcomes. I'll either make it or miss it, but I'm going to look good shooting it." In those do-or-die situations, distilling the solution to such simple terms works to help us shed negative thoughts and answer the challenge.

Realistically however, such purely heroic challenges are relatively rare. In the commonly routine business of competitive pool, we're more likely to become too wrapped up in concerns for how we look. Among most intermediate players, those concerns become most prevalent in the presence of great players. Nothing makes most players more nervous than noticing that a couple of stars have just sat down to watch. Then, all priorities shift to questions about making the right choices and executing them flawlessly. That's when the performance takes on a new element of fear, not the usual fear of losing or missing a shot, but fear of looking like an idiot. On those occasions it works to remember that nobody has a greater appreciation for the game's difficulty than the best players and that most of us probably won't live long enough to miss as many shots as they have since they began. It may also help to remind ourselves we're out there playing while they are mere spectators.

About 10 years ago I saw Efren Reyes make the shot that I often refer to as the best pool shot I've ever seen in a TV match against Johnny Archer. Hooked on a 2 ball that lay out in open space, Reyes made a long, two-rail kick to hit the top of 2 perfectly, roll another four feet to a third rail, bounce a foot and then snuggle frozen to the 9 ball for a perfect safety. If Buddy Hall hadn't diagrammed those exact intentions on the screen before he shot, I would have thought that he made a nice hit on the 2 and got a good roll. Most remarkable about that shot was that, once he made the decision to play it, he didn't study it very carefully or appear to make any calculations. He more or less walked up to it and hit it.

A couple years later I learned a series of accurate kicking systems that my game badly needed. After practicing a few hours to learn the calculations and nail down the required strokes to make the systems work, I knew that I had learned them and couldn't wait for the next tournament to wipe some smug smiles off the faces of any opponents who might think they can hook me. The opportunity soon arose, but my systems let me down as I missed one kick after another. After some more practice and a little reflection I realized that the systems were fine and the fault was my own. When I first attempted them in competition I wanted to look like Efren and tried to walk up to the table to shoot amazing kicks without any apparent care or consideration. Then it dawned on me that I'm not Mr. Reyes and, if I want to make those shots in a match, I must let go any concerns for how I look preparing to shoot one. Once I decided that I don't care how dumb I may look measuring, calculating or counting on my fingers as I do in practice, I began making the shots.

Instead of pretending that we don't care about how we look we should embrace that reality of life and then determine what really looks best. Some players would rather lose than let it appear that the game occurs as something difficult. I understand that feeling since looking cool normally ranks high for me. But as I learned with kick shots, the willingness to look stupid holds great value too. And if a kick ever comes up with a diamond number 11 in the equation, I'll take off a shoe if I must to compute the answer.

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