

## Missing Out

The first time I found myself with a fly rod in my hand I knew I had discovered the perfect pastime. Facing endless technical demands and possibilities, I saw at once that the learning would never end—just like pool. But more significant, back then I was in the restaurant business, working long hours in a hot, hectic kitchen always fighting for control amid the chaos. So, I savored every moment in my new world, a calm, quiet one, far removed from the stress and brouhaha. Early on, catching fish barely mattered alongside the peaceful pleasure of idling through long, lazy days alone, exploring a mysterious, ancient order where I would never have control, even if I had been crazy enough to want that. But soon I began to feel pretty smart, and good at my new sport. Then poof, the bliss vanished. From then on, as I focused more on results, I saw less of the beauty surrounding me. I would have gone fishing in a warehouse if someone told me I could hit better numbers there.

No question, the best way to miss out on greatness is to feel smart in its presence, an old lesson I just learned again. While researching last month's column I ran across a piece of simple brilliance in Robert Byrne's *Advanced Techniques In Pool And Billiards* and confronted an embarrassing defect in my pool education. Now, there's no shame in learning something new, and, as we know, Byrne's pages teem with brilliance. But after seeing something utterly new to me on page 25 of a book that I had been through dozens of times, I realized that, because I think I know what I'm doing, I pass over knowledge in billiard books. Sometimes I pick one up and flip casually from cover to cover, but my favorite salute to ignorance usually takes me directly to the back pages for the advanced stuff, especially with Byrne since that's where he keeps the 3-cushion secrets.

Seeking redemption, I decided to go through my billiards library to see what else I've missed along the way. The good news is that, despite my weak study habits, I managed somehow to absorb most of what's out there. But not all of it and, as suspected, I have missed a few gems.

If you saw my copy of Byrne's *Standard Book Of Pool And Billiards* with page markers poking out everywhere and entire sections falling out of the overworked binding, you might expect me to recite the whole book, from start to finish. Though I know I can rattle off a few quotes, I still managed to miss something in the pool section. It's called Jewett's interference system, named of course for that fellow on the previous page, and it's a method for making caroms when the cue ball is frozen to the first ball. Previously I employed the old, elementary method of bisecting the angle between the line of centers and the target, a technique that offers a certain measure of success. After setting up shots and fiddling with the Jewett system, I now have a technique that works all the time—well, that is when the geometry doesn't confuse me. In Byrne's *New Standard Book Of Pool And Billiards*, I found a gorgeous piece of cruelty that he calls the Dirty Little Safety. It's positively filthy and it's been my "look at this" shot for the past two weeks. I can't wait to use it in a match.

If pool literature has a counterpart to Melville's "Call me Ishmael," it must be the opener to *Mastering Pool*—"I'm sorry, but I'll just bet you're hitting the balls too hard." By the time George Fels published this book in '77, I was hitting most of my shots softly enough, thanks to dad, but I wasn't hitting them wisely enough. With its easy yet ingenious system for classifying every ball in a rack of straight pool as an A,B,C or D ball, *Mastering Pool* arrived just in time to sharpen my awareness and augment my runs. Merely stopping to take a careful look at every ball in a freshly opened rack will improve anyone's game. But analyzing each ball, then naming it according to its place in the big picture unlocks the mystery of running racks. I've read this book many times and wouldn't say that I really missed anything—forgotten maybe, but not missed. These days I don't get to play enough straight pool and sometimes have trouble with certain break shots when I do. After a reviewing that section in *MP*, I see that I had forgotten the best approach to a couple of the less common ones and easily corrected the error. After brushing up on break shots I did find an item that, because of a stiff reluctance to fiddle with my fundamentals, I flatly ignored in the past. For thin cut shots, Fels advocates shifting one's weight slightly away from the direction of the cut. With more than a little apprehension I decided to give it a try and found I already do that in a very subtle way. Hmmm, did I forget the technique or where I learned it?

Another book that I had studied carefully is *The 99 Critical Shots In Pool*, where Ray Martin reveals all of the important principles concerning the way balls react to one another in kisses, caroms and clusters. Again, I did not expect any surprises and I encountered none—almost. Shot 57 shows a kiss shot that looks like it can't go because of an obstructing ball frozen to the target ball in a dead-kiss setup. Despite this principle's presence in many trick shots that I shoot, I know that I pass on it when it turns up in game situations. A little experimentation will change that.

Returning to the concept that started this project by leading me to the proof that Byrne fiendishly buried in the opening of his second book, we go to a book called, *Rack 'Em Daddy!*" a little cutie from 1993. Although geared toward children, this one's packed with great information and elegant explanations. In the last chapter, "The Big Secret—Cut Shot Throw" Jon Denn carefully and thoroughly describes the role that friction plays in a cut shot, complete with a chart that tells how much to compensate for throw based on the object ball's distance from the pocket. Since the book employs cartoons and funny characters to impart its wisdom, it's no big surprise that I had barely looked at it in fourteen years. But considering its whimsical appearance, I find it deliciously ironic that it correctly addresses a topic that fully escapes most pool authors, going back, in my library anyway, to Mosconi and his two books with shamefully erroneous photos.

In a game so deep and rich and varied, missing a little something here and there is inevitable and okay, as long as we don't get too caught up in ourselves and miss more than we should. The best piece of wisdom that I missed the first time around comes from Jeanette Lee's conclusion to *The Black Widow's Guide To Playing Killer Pool*. "If you focus only on the end result, you miss everything." Remember, the learning never ends. If that happens, the joy surely ends with it.

