

October 2008

## Square One

Knowing the quality of the pool movies we've seen in the last few years, when I first read about *Turn the River*, I anticipated its release with about the same enthusiasm I reserve for a trip to the dentist. That has nothing to do with pool necessarily; bad movies outnumber good ones across the board. Plus, *The Hustler* left some pretty big shoes to fill. But then, setting all prejudice aside, I still ran out to rent it on the day of its release. And to my surprise and delight, I thoroughly enjoyed it. However, because I know I watch a pool movie with a more critical eye than most viewers, I'm bound to spot flaws that may sneak past a general audience. Yet *Turn the River*, an overall fine picture, prompted only one notable complaint. In a nutshell, Famke Janssen simply does not stroke her cue as someone who plays for such high stakes would. Her acting is first class, but after watching her short, jerky pokes, I wished that I could have helped train her for the pool scenes.

Although it's reported that she made all of her own shots with nobody doubling for her, a movie is more about looking the part than the actual ability to perform the action we see. At least I hope so when I think about all the murders I've witnessed on the screen. To his credit on that note, John Juback, her pool coach for the film, did an excellent job with her stance and bridge. But when I saw her stroke I thought I would have asked her to practice stroking the cue and nothing else for a day or two before shooting at her first ball. I know that's a good place to start even though I had never asked someone to do it for any prolonged period of time before taking a shot. Little did I know at the time I would soon see my theory tested.

Over the past 16 years one of my favorite and most rewarding billiard endeavors has consistently been my free weekly pool clinic. The weekly clinic is an open forum of pool instruction where everyone is invited and almost anything can happen. On the best nights students become teachers and beginners get to work with the occasional visiting professional. Because I never know beforehand who will attend or what we will cover, I never prepare material. So, every week I have an opportunity, with the students' participation, to generate something from nothing. We have a good time and we always accomplish something positive on the table.

One element of the clinic that remains consistent is my commitment to spend as much time as necessary with newcomers and beginners to ensure that they start off on the right track with their fundamentals. Invariably I begin with the grip and, with no other considerations, get everyone moving the cue with relaxed, long, smooth, level strokes. We'll do that for up to ten minutes to lay the stroke into a reliable groove and to ingrain the necessary feeling of relaxation. Because I know how an anxious concern for results can overwhelm the students when the balls come out, I like to lay down a solid foundation before we shoot any shots.

Another notable element of the weekly clinic is the fact that I may have other simultaneous responsibilities with the poolroom, a multitasking challenge that can cause a few minor distractions but had never derailed an evening—that is until a few weeks ago. On this particular night we got off to our normal start with a group discussion and then an exercise for the more advanced players to work on while I would work uninterrupted with several beginners. We began as always with a relaxed grip and stroking the cue. Then, almost instantly, the room filled up with enough customers to take me away from the group and leave the students stuck at the most rudimentary level of instruction.

As more people kept coming it began to look less and less likely that I would get back to the clinic. The advanced group was fine, engaged with a productive exercise, but, with no further direction, the beginners remained fixed in stage one, practicing their strokes with no balls to shoot. Not surprisingly they began to lose interest, and before long all but one student, a woman with no prior pool experience, had quit.

Because I was too busy to watch I didn't know what she was doing, but I could see that she was still at the table. After quite a while I finally had a chance to get back with her and I saw that she had continued working on her stroke, without hitting a single ball in over an hour of practice. And then I noticed something I had never seen with someone at her level. She was moving the cue with a beautiful stroke, gliding it smoothly over a long range in a flawlessly straight line with professional rhythm and ease. With such an elegant stroke so well in hand it was time to move on to shooting, but not yet with a ball. Next, she learned to take a few practice strokes, stop the cue with the ferrule in her bridge, and then throw the cue forward through the imaginary ball. After she practiced that motion for another half hour I gave her a ball to hit. I put the ball on the table and asked her merely to hit it at the far rail instead of shooting it into a pocket as we normally do with the first real shots. With no aiming or other concerns to interfere with her movement, she maintained the beautiful motion while hitting every shot with a relaxed stroke and a follow through that drove through the ball every time. And so even though I never intended to keep someone trapped for so long at square one, I finally had the chance to see how effective that training is when someone has the commitment to stay with it.

A great way to develop an effective stroke, pool's most essential skill, is to isolate it from the game as a whole and apply focused practice to the motion itself. You can practice at home, far away from a pool table and the normal tension that tends to go with a concern for winning and other results. And while honing that silky stroke with hypnotic repetition you can apply some visualization skills to imagine long shots splitting the pockets, the cue ball rolling consistently into pinpoint position and maybe how natural you will look in pool's next great movie.

