The Opponent

As the young Mike Tyson raced toward his first heavyweight title, every successive bout marked a considerable jump in class while each older, more experienced fighter waiting to face the kid stood confidently in the spirit of, "He might win at that level, but watch what happens when he meets someone like me." On one occasion, during an ESPN interview before an upcoming fight, his next foe listed Tyson's flaws and shortcomings, then explained how he would exploit them to overcome the young fighter. When that same interviewer talked with Tyson, he discussed the other boxer's strategy—how he would use his reach advantage to avoid the big right hand and so forth. When asked for *his* thoughts on the matter, Tyson offered a somewhat more basic counter-strategy. "Everybody I fight has a plan. Then I hit him."

That sounds simple enough and has certainly worked to settle more than a few pool games. But apart from assault and battery, how do we handle our opponents on a pool table? It seems that advice regarding opponents falls into one of two schools of thought, one cliché and the other misinformation. The first popular piece of wisdom preaches that we must play with no regard at all for the opponent. They say, "Play the table, not the person," or something equally one-dimensional. Yet when I find myself facing continual, brutal safeties in a match, it soon dawns on me that the "table" I'm being allowed to "play" is one that somebody else is controlling very precisely. The other common guideline goes to the opposite extreme, advising us that when we know our opponents' strengths and weaknesses, we can enjoy the luxury of leaving certain shots for them without worry. Well, I can't count the number of times I lost a match to a spectacular shot, one I was positive I saw listed in the weakness column on the scouting report. In the real world we always have opponents with whom we must reckon, and every one of them comes with enough talent to execute a single, difficult shot.

The first adage for playing the table goes back as far as I can remember and is not completely without merit. In very simple terms when we do get to the table with a good shot and a chance to run out, thinking about the opponent and that person's possible greatness only distracts us and inspires fear. We must apply our focus to the task at hand and play pool. However, because of pool's interplay, the number of good opportunities we receive in a match results directly from the opponent's skill and tactical play. And we must consider that skill when we face layouts that are not simple run outs but instead require some thinking.

At the league or local-tournament level two players frequently come to the table with a talent gap. One player is better than the other, a fact often quantified with a handicap. Typically when two players of disparate skill levels arrive for a match, the better player feels more confident while the underdog feels more apprehensive. Both are natural responses, which commonly lead the more confident, relaxed player to shoot more freely and take more risks, while the weaker player, fearing the higher price of a mistake, is likely to tense up and fail to convert good opportunities. It's all those

uncharacteristic blunders we recall from matches with better players that reinforce and perpetuate the "play-the-table" philosophy. In those cases, had we managed to focus on the balls with no regard for the other person, we would have performed better.

So the conventional wisdom rings true, but only to a degree. A big part of a seasoned player's experience lies in the memories of all the ways there are to lose a pool match. And I believe that someone with enough of those memories learns to play the opponent to his advantage by turning the conventional approach around when appropriate. As I've said before, beyond a certain intermediate level, there's not much difference in shot-making skills from one player to the next. As we move higher through the ranks, the separating factors go beyond shot making into the game's subtler aspects: position knowledge for a greater variety of shots; broader vision to see more safeties with the cue-ball skills to execute them precisely; and a reliable set of precise kicking skills. So instead of freewheeling against the B player, a smart player will play a tighter game with more safeties to force mistakes. It's the reason that smart old timers, who may not run four balls at a time, have been robbing young sharpshooters in one pocket since the game was invented. Eventually, and especially in handicapped matches, we learn that B and C players will get out from the 6 ball given the chance. So why take unnecessary risks against a weaker player? On the other side of the coin, the weaker player's best approach against a considerably stronger opponent is to shoot more aggressively for two good reasons. Opportunities to shoot at something will arise more rarely, and the odds for a favorable outcome after a safety exchange are stacked high in the stronger player's favor.

Now we come to the idea that we can know someone's weaknesses well enough to leave certain shots for that person. Whenever I see that in print I want to ask the writer two questions: 1. Are you talking about playing against someone who plays as well as you? 2. What shots can I leave for you? Admittedly it sounds nice, kind of like an informed baseball coach knowing how well a certain, left-handed batter does historically against right-handed, fastball pitchers. But in pool, it borders on nonsense and merits little discussion. Everyone who's been playing for a few years has lost enough matches to great shots from weak players to learn something from the experience. When I look around a busy poolroom I'm invariably amazed by the number of heroic shots—off-angle banks and long, straight shots with speed—that I see coming from the hands of beginners with near-professional ease. Except in one pocket, where we sometimes take a calculated risk in leaving a decent bank that will sell out the game in the event of a miss, I cannot accept that an experienced player is ever thinking in terms of leaving any kind of shot for anybody.

It's amazing how advice for a game so complex comes so often in the form of clichés and simple-minded ideas. I've picked apart some other popular sayings here, not because they're necessarily untrue, but because they cannot possibly tell the whole story for a game so varied as pool. Of course we must play the balls instead of the person, but we can increase our winning percentage when we consider the other person. In the matter of leaving certain shots for certain players however, there's nothing to consider. Everybody would rather have some kind of shot than no shot.

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