

Steady As She Goes

If a picture can be worth a thousand words, here's one that may be worth a thousand wins. At October's WPBA U.S. Open, photographer Nissy Carter snapped this shot of Allison Fisher early in the competition and then showed it to me. When I saw the photo and thought about Allison's superiority through the years, I shook my head and remarked, "That says it all."

Sometimes, when I think about Allison's dominance, I also think about the WPBA on television and wonder how viewers who only see the final four from each event must imagine the tour. The typical Sunday taping might be called the Allison and Karen show with a couple of special guests. And of course, everyone knows Jeanette Lee. Beyond those luminaries though, how could the TV audience know the depth and range of talent through the entire field? TV does not show, for example, those players who virtually owned their respective regional tours before turning pro but find themselves floundering in the 20's or 30's of the WPBA rankings. That's in no way a knock at the players but a big salute to the tour's overall strength. In fact, the WPBA now resembles the PGA, where qualifying and then holding on to pro status are stellar achievements. And the most satisfying part of attending a tournament nowadays is the absolute guarantee of great pool from start to finish. With all of the world's best talent compacted into a field of only 64 players, the so-called easy match is a thing of the past. Yet, Allison Fisher maintains her perch above the rest.

Among professionals, one outstanding characteristic is a solid steadiness throughout the shot. After returning from a pro tournament to the hometown pool scene, an average player might look around and wonder why everyone has ants in his pants. But, while almost every professional player exhibits a much "quieter" stance than average players, careful observation will reveal some small movement among many. Now, look carefully at this time exposure of Allison Fisher and contrast the movement of her right hand with the rest of her body, particularly her head, on which we can see individual hairs. And in contrast to the motion of her cue's butt section, note how her shaft cuts a deadly straight line through the frame, without the slightest up-and-down movement. Compare the sharpness of that line to the line of the motionless cushion underneath it. Look in front of her tip, at the straight, blue line that describes its path. All these elements come together in definitive steadiness.

After seeing this photo I watched Allison's subsequent matches looking for a breakdown in her technique at the table. Instead of spotting a mechanical flaw with her shooting, I found myself tuned into the unwavering consistency of her tempo in preparation for every shot, her movement around the table, and even her time spent in the chair watching. During her semifinal match with Monica Webb, Allison faced a setup where she had to let the cue ball go on a thin cut shot. Then the cue ball, as it often does in those situations, kissed another ball that deflected it toward a slow scratch in the side. At that point most of us would jump up, yell at the cue ball and maybe add a St. Vitus dance to change its path, especially in front of spectators. Allison, however, held her

stance and watched stoically while the cue ball moseyed into the drink, then walked calmly to her chair. A little later in that same match she did let go with some uncharacteristic body english, maybe the biggest outburst I've ever seen from her—a slight twitch with the fingers of her left hand to direct the cue ball toward her intended position.

Such complete emotional control may be out of reach for most of us, but the importance of keeping still throughout the shot cannot be overstated since the slightest unnecessary movement during the stroke often finds its way to the tip. We must learn to remain still throughout the stroke and stay down until the shot is complete. An effective way to practice is to set up a shot at one end of the table with the cue ball and object ball about a foot apart. Aim the shot into a corner pocket at the far end of the table and play it with just enough speed to get the object ball to the pocket. As the shot unfolds over the next few seconds, follow the object ball to the pocket with your eyes while making certain not to move any part of the body until after the ball falls in. Practice moving your eyes to follow the ball instead of lifting your head, a movement that can occur simultaneously with the stroke and throw off the shot.

If remaining motionless feels difficult we can look for two prime causes, an unbalanced stance or inadequate preparation. Whenever our bodies are placed into an off-balance position, we will rush out of that position to regain stability. And the pool stance can feel awkward when one foot is placed as little as a half inch out of its normal position. Or, when we fail to prepare adequately by applying a consistent pre-shot routine, we can find ourselves facing a shot with anticipated failure, then rushing the stroke and jumping up to get it over with as soon as possible. Either problem can occur occasionally with any player. When one or the other persists however, it's time to visit an instructor. Another good option would be to find a partner, grab a camera and go to work on replicating the paradigm of steadiness in the photo.

Before the start of the U.S. Open final with Allison Fisher and Karen Corr, I overheard someone refer to them as a couple of robots. It didn't sound like it was meant as a compliment though I'd like to see a robot that can perform so elegantly. When I get lost in watching them play or look at this photo, I'm reminded more of a statue—a renaissance masterpiece perhaps.



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