

Misinformation

For a long time I've had an idea for a simple social experiment that, stated concisely, would involve two people bringing a child into the world and then feeding its mind with nothing but wrong information. That's it, and except for that one small adjustment, they would raise the youngster normally in a caring, loving environment. So, the baby would grow up secure, and of course unsuspecting, until the day came that he first found himself in the company of others without his parents. For maximum estrangement later on, the plan would call for a male baby since men tend to adhere so much more stubbornly than women to what they think is correct. And though I'm not sure exactly how to manage every specific component, I know that the project would be a lot more difficult to execute than one might initially think. Success would demand constant attention to every detail, perfect consistency and accurate record keeping. After pointing at a cow and telling Junior it's a shovel, the parents would have to note the episode to avoid using that word again to describe a tree.

Along with obvious entertainment value, the potential for severe damage is also pretty obvious, so it's doubtful that my little experiment will ever see the light of day. But we have micro versions to study since we've all received at least some measure of bad information from our parents. So I wonder if the level of trouble we experience later on in life correlates directly to the degree that we're misinformed as children. Or maybe there's an inverse correlation. Occasionally I encounter people who might pass for graduates of my proposed scheme, and they all skip along blithely, amazingly unimpressed by the magnitude of their ignorance.

Things are different in the pool world where ignorance is not bliss. For us, misinformation is dangerous and poses a serious concern in light of all the bad advice littering the typical pool education. Most of us can easily dismiss the wackiest tips like the stuff we get from weird uncles who are let out of their cages on holidays to share their wisdom. "If you want the cue ball to stop, hit it in the center." And when they're finished reminding you that they paid their way through college playing pool, they'll tell you the secret to powerful draw. "It's simple; just raise the back of your stick." Of course it's easy to ignore someone who was finger painting with his mashed potatoes just before the pool game, but how can students know when they're receiving bad advice from books and other published sources? I know for example that when I first read, "Never hit the cue ball more than one tip away from center," I thought it sounded pretty good and even tried to buy into it for a while.

One old and puzzling piece of conventional wisdom concerns the matter of where to grip the cue. The widely accepted formula involves finding the cue's balance point and then gripping it three to six inches behind that point. That's how I read it in the first two pool books I owned, and that's still how a staggering number of instructors continue to teach it. Has no one given this problem the slightest consideration? Even though the shooting hand will correctly find itself in that position for many shots, it's only coincidence and its placement bears no relation to the cue's balance point. In a nutshell,

the correct place to grip the cue is the spot where the rear forearm is perpendicular to the floor when the tip is about two inches from the cue ball. When the forearm is in the neutral, perpendicular position just prior to contact, the hand can move forward and pass the arm during contact to meet the cue ball with powerful acceleration. Further, it's important to know that, in order to maintain the necessary position for a properly timed stroke in any situation, the grip point can change from shot to shot according to bridge length. When we bridge close to the cue ball, say for a snip draw, the shooting hand should climb up the butt. When we want to employ a long bridge for more power, as on the break, the shooting hand may drop all the way to the bottom of the butt to ensure proper timing. In other words, with a consistent stance, the distance between our two hands remains the same from one shot to the next. Determining grip position in this fashion accommodates players of all sizes shooting all shots. And even though the balance-point myth still survives, almost every decent player rightly forgets about it. So ultimately there's not much harm done.

Unfortunately, bad advice is not always so innocuous as I observed recently with a student whom I found struggling with a shot when we last met. When he saw me he explained that he was having trouble incorporating a new technique he had just learned for better draw and then showed me something he had printed from a billiards website. According to the so-called instructor who can go nameless, advanced players enhance their draw shots by firmly tightening their grip at the moment of impact to produce greater backspin. The thought alone is frightening. And the reality of someone passing along such rubbish with authority is criminal.

More than any pool shot, effective draw demands rapid acceleration, and nothing holds back acceleration worse than a tight grip. A grip that remained consistently tight throughout the stroke would badly hinder acceleration. One that grasped the cue suddenly at impact would certainly kill it altogether. One of pool's most respected instructors, Jerry Briesath, describes the pool stroke as a beautiful throw, an action that we accomplish with a slight release of grip tension just before contact. For clarification on the effect of a tight grip, consider the following excerpt from *Mastering Pool*. Here George Fels describes a method for the only shot I know that properly employs a tight grip, a common straight-pool safety that kills the cue ball and leaves it glued to the rack. "You should grip your cue butt slightly tighter for this one, and jab rather than stroke the cue ball; we want to communicate nothing to it but rigor mortis." Remembering to associate a tight grip with rigor mortis will reliably dispel any boneheaded notions that attempt to relate grip tension with draw.

As we settle into a new era where anyone with a computer can pose as an expert, we must proceed cautiously and think critically when seeking help. The saddest byproduct of the information age is the new scarcity of reliable information. As for Mr. Internet Pool Instructor, I propose a deal. Since my student was able to get his stroke and draw shot back on track, I forgive you. And I won't reveal your identity if you'll agree to leave pool and apply yourself to a more suitable hobby like spreading chain letters. Or maybe you should get busy rewriting the Wikipedia entry for nuclear fusion.

