

Moving Forward

With the daunting array of possibilities we face in every match, it's critical that we equip ourselves with a set of guidelines to help us navigate the fickle seas of competitive pool. Since no two layouts that we encounter will ever be exactly the same, we rely on a library of principles that we assemble from experience and then apply to help make the strange seem familiar. Occasionally however we find ourselves in situations where even the most reliable and time-tested guidelines fall short of getting the job done.

When beginners start a rack of 8 ball they invariably lead off by playing the nearest open shot and then maybe pocketing one or two more before hitting a dead end, always failing to identify, let alone solve, any problems on the table. Eventually we learn that running out in 8 ball demands careful planning in order to negotiate a table occupied by an army of enemy soldiers that squeeze our options a little more tightly after every shot. The conventional method for assembling the necessary plan teaches us to look at the 8 ball first and then move backwards from there until arriving at the cue ball's current position and the rack's first shot. The backwards approach is a proven technique that works well to evince the rack's best key shot, or the last ball before the 8 ball. Sometimes however it can lead to trouble.

In Diagram 1 the player with stripes comes to the table for the easy run out that we see with all four shots in the clear. Looking first at the 8 ball and then moving backwards, we see that the 10 ball is an ideal key shot, perfectly positioned to serve up an easy game winner after a simple stop shot. Move backwards from the 10 however and things get tricky fast. That nearby 12 ball hanging in the side pocket could lead to a good shot on the 10 so it looks like the first shot must be the 11 ball at the other end of the table. But one look at that option should sound the alarm for a different plan. There are players who can make the 11 ball and draw back for a shot on the 12 in the side, but anyone that good would also be smart enough to know that there must be a better run out here.

It's always nice to finish with easy shots and the 10 continues to entice as the key ball. So, how about leading off with that easy 12 in the side and stunning the cue ball over to the dotted outlined ball to shoot the 11 next? That choice introduces two major problems. Because the stun requires a firm stroke, the cue ball can easily move too far, leaving a bank as the best possible shot on the 11 ball. Yet, even with perfect position for the 11, the 2 might appear as a beach ball on the table when the time comes to play position for the 10. So let's take the 2 ball out of the picture for a moment. Position from the 12 to the 11 still requires precise touch and then a good six feet of draw from there for straight-in position on the 10 ball.

There must be an easier alternative. Even though the usually reliable method of moving backwards insists on the 10 ball as the key shot, we see that other conditions make that choice too difficult. And since we've eliminated both the 11 and the 12 as lead-off men, the only ball left to consider as a starter is the 10, despite its ideal position as the rack's penultimate shot. Although beginning with the 10 ball contradicts the proven approach, for this layout it's clearly the best choice. A stop shot on the 10 ball allows the shooter to cut the 12 ball in the side next and then roll the cue ball off of the cushion for position on the 11 ball. And while it may not seem logical to save the farthest ball on the table from the 8 ball for the key shot, here it's a must. With an angle on the 11 that moves the cue ball toward the bottom side rail, getting back to the center of the table for the 8 ball is easily accomplished with a little draw and outside english. But even without that angle, position for at least a decent shot on the 8 ball is almost guaranteed. In fact, shooting the 10 ball first leads to all easy shots and almost guaranteed position for each one. Finally, if we examine the last two shots, we uncover another principle to remember. Two balls that relate to each other across the table's diagonal, like the 11 ball and 8 ball, generally connect for simple, reliable position through the table's center.

My aim here is not to trash a proven technique, but rather to expand it by illuminating the value of caution with an oversimplified example. While the conventional approach of planning backwards from the 8 ball remains a solid method that will lead to many run outs, it sometimes fails to reveal unnecessary difficulty. So, after mapping the plan backwards, it's wise to visualize the run out forward to confirm that it will work. And remember, if conventional wisdom were so great, maybe greatness would be conventional.

