

January 2009

Flying Blind

Ask a player in the throes of pool fever exactly what pulls that person so deeply into the game, and the reply may adduce anything from the game's inherent beauty to the adrenalin rush of a high-stakes match. Ours is a multifaceted game that appeals to its followers on many levels. And while we can find many ways to appreciate pool, there's one benefit that all but the smallest number of us share and enjoy — the community we forge with our passion for the game. It's a community so strong and so welcoming that many former players remain engaged well beyond their playing days, living out their last years with daily visits to their favorite poolrooms. The pool community transcends gender, race, wealth, language and all other common barriers to bring millions of us together from everywhere. And with today's Internet technology, many of us now routinely connect with fellow players from around the world.

Recently I received an e-mail addressing a past column of mine with some comments and then suggestions to take the main idea a couple steps further. The note came from Mark Rindal, a California player/instructor, who had a couple of his tips featured in the Quick Hits section in the July 2007 issue. Apart from his sharp insights, two things about his initial note caught my attention. First, though we have yet to meet, he writes with such an easy going and familiar tone that his e-mail read like a note from an old friend. The other attention-grabber was a quick mention that he's disabled right before signing off as Mark The Blind Player.

Fortunately, that note led to a correspondence where I later learned that his disability, while serious, is not tied to his nickname. Instead, he got that moniker from shooting regularly, sometimes competing in tournaments, closing his eyes just before pulling the trigger for every shot. His high run shooting that way is 30 balls. Because I've messed around a little shooting with eyes closed in the past and it's something I encourage every student to explore, I had to ask my new "blind" friend for his insights on this odd practice.

Most of my experience with eyes-closed shooting occurs with students who, after making a few shots that way, acquire a sharper understanding of the role that stance plays in shot making. Once the alignment is set, the ball will go where the body aims it, regardless of where we look, or whether we look at all. Eliminating the visual stimuli seems to give them a better feel for their bodies and how they're positioned. When I shoot with my eyes closed, I feel a layer of distraction dissolving as I find it easier to settle into the shot. My only problem is that I don't play enough that way and, thus, play an overall worse game when I try it. And because I've always suspected more value in it than I can articulate, I welcomed an opportunity to hear from an expert on the topic.

Mark soon answered my request with a detailed breakdown of the benefits that he derives from shooting blind on both the physical and mental sides of pool. Regarding fundamentals, shooting with eyes closed can contribute to one's game well beyond the benefits for stance that I've observed. Because he waits to hear the ball fall into the pocket, shooting blind cured his impulse to jump up too soon, and he now stays down for every shot. In addition, as the distractions dissolve after he closes his eyes, his self-awareness sharpens, giving him a more fluid stroke, something all of us at any level should pursue. Along with that fluid stroke, his sense of speed control gains acuity to improve his position play. For me it's the opposite, as speed is the first element I lose control over when shooting blind. Strangely, my shot-making remains while my feel for position slips away.

Mark's commentary on the mental side offers several powerful insights. He began shooting blind in the early '90s as an experiment to end a prolonged slump that he attributed to over-analysis. Because it was an experiment, he approached it with an open mind, not knowing exactly what to expect. Yet the progress he sought began almost immediately, as he found

himself able to disengage the left brain, allowing the creative mind to take over and execute what it knows in the absence of internal static. I consider the struggle to separate the thinking from the performing as pool's most formidable ongoing challenge, and one that all athletes confront in competition. It appears that he might have found the key to solving pool's toughest problem. He adds that turning off his sight also enhances his vision as he sees the patterns better in his mind's eye, a breakthrough right in line with all the sports talk we hear these days about the power of visualization.

Finally, quoting Mark directly, "Another symptom I noticed (though kind of silly) is that my greatest fear in pool is missing (like most of us). Closing my eyes before a shot takes away that fear, because if I do miss then it's ... 'What do you expect? I'm shooting blind.'" Funny as that may sound, I see more than humor there. In my work with beginners, we always begin with the grip and the importance of a relaxed one. While practicing the stroke without balls, everyone easily learns to move the cue smoothly with a relaxed grip. Almost invariably, however, the calmness gives way to tension at the mere sight of an object ball, a phenomenon I've witnessed with hundreds of students. It seems that all it takes is one look at a ball to spawn a crippling concern for results. So closing our eyes helps us transcend our concerns and shoot more freely. It's a fascinating tool that I am already exploring more deeply. I have no choice, since I promised the Blind Player that I'm going after his high run.

