

Stroke

Whenever I watch people playing pool I cannot help but break them down to various levels based on what they have learned so far. In a popular, mostly recreational room, the biggest group is made up of those who have learned close to nothing but continue to play and enjoy themselves anyway. That is not something to scoff at but should be regarded highly as confirmation of pool's inherent beauty; it's difficult to imagine someone continuing with tennis after trying for a year to get the ball over the net, and impossible to imagine that person enjoying the game. Next come the players who have learned something about the cue ball. I always envision their first lessons coming from an uncle who says, "If you want the cue ball to stop, hit it in the center—like this." The instruction takes hold because he never fails to mention that he paid his way through college playing pool. I've met a lot of those guys in my life and have spent some sleepless nights wondering: 1. Why every encounter with them takes place 100 miles from the nearest pool table, and 2. Where were they when I was in school?

It is not really important where someone first hears, "Hit it here and it will do this." What matters is that many players fail to move far enough beyond that wisdom to play the game much better than average. The probable reason is that a person can spend years experimenting with hitting the cue ball in different spots and observe enough varying results to stay dedicated to that tack. It seems that pool players fall into one of two groups, those who see a fantastic shot and ask, "Where did you hit the cue ball?" and the more enlightened, who ask "How?" The spot one chooses on the cue ball is only one of several variables that work together to produce a position result. The most operative variable, and the one that separates the men from the boys in pool, is stroke.

Mentioning the word "stroke" usually starts a conversation about someone like Mike Massey drawing the cue ball like a racecar on amphetamines. For now however, we shall set aside strengthening power in favor of a lesson on sharpening awareness. Although some players may not know it (I resisted the notion when I first read about it in *Point The Way*) we all have a set of different strokes that we use to play pool. For example, since merely hitting the cue ball low will not make it draw, we naturally develop a draw stroke that comes out for draw shots. The problem is that too much focus on the cue ball can cause us to use that stroke only for draw shots and severely limit our position possibilities.

In the diagram is an exercise that I designed a few years ago to help players get in touch with stroke. Mark spots for the cue ball and object ball one-ball width each from the short rail so that the line going through the centers of the two balls is parallel to the cushion and the shot is close to, but not quite, straight in. Leave out the two balls on the side rails for now. First, you will establish the limits on your range of cue ball tracks with your best follow and draw shots, hitting the respective long rails as close as possible to the corner pockets. Tracking the cue ball close to the line of the shot requires two

distinctly different strokes for follow and draw. The follow stroke must be very smooth and somewhat lazy while the draw stroke will feel sharp and explosive. For the draw shot that snaps back as straight as possible, try a short bridge and short follow through. Both shots require soft speed and maximizing the size of the pocket by shooting the object ball into the far facing. After hitting your best follow and draw shots a few times, move the cue ball away from the rail to make the shot straight and shoot some stop shots at about six various speeds, going from a firm shot hit just below center to a very soft hit at the bottom of the cue ball. Note how the stroke for stopping the cue ball feels; we call that stroke a punch stroke and it lives at every speed. Move the cue ball back to its mark and repeat the stop shots. Cutting the object ball with stop shots will track the cue ball consistently along the dotted line, commonly called the tangent line.

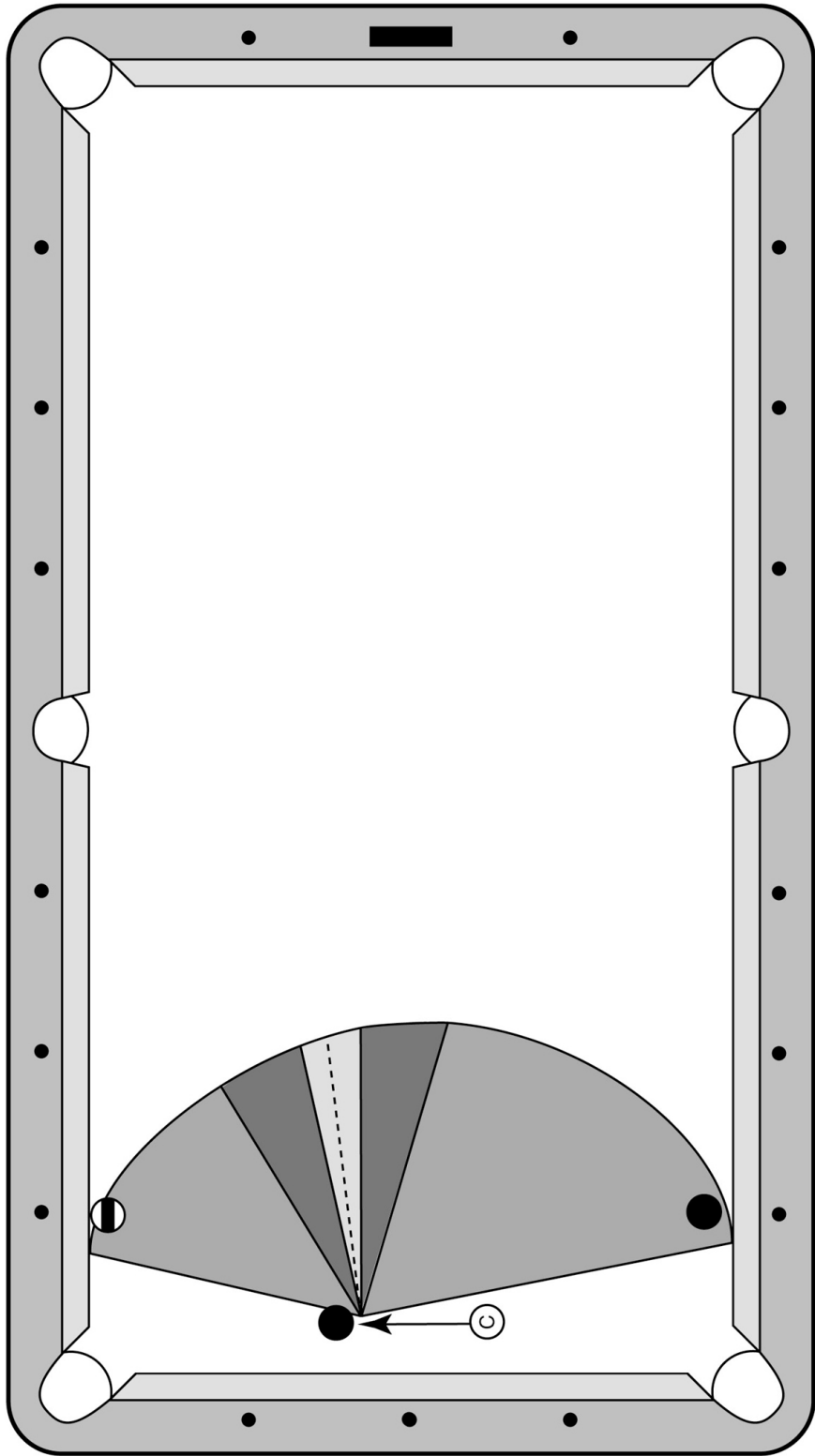
Now you have a very wide fan of cue-ball tracks with a definite dividing line and every conceivable track in the shaded area available to you. Something interesting to note is that, while a straight-in shot is the most limiting for position as it confines the cue ball to the line of the shot, one that is close to straight can offer the widest range of possibilities as shown by the range of the shaded fan. To simplify matters, let's call every track past the tangent line a follow shot and every track behind it a draw shot. Begin with a follow shot that gives you position for the striped ball on the rail. This one must track wider than your first follow shot to move out past that ball for good position. Hit the cue ball above center with some punch to widen its track. Move the striped ball farther away from the pocket a couple of inches at a time and practice widening the follow track with the amount of punch that you apply to your stroke to get good position for that ball in each new place. As you work at following the cue ball on widening tracks you will begin to lose interest in exactly where your tip hits the cue ball as you start hitting the desired tracks by altering your stroke and sharpening your feel for exactly how the acceleration of your tip goes through the cue ball.

Perform the same routine for draw shots beginning with the one that gives you position on the solid ball. As you move the solid ball farther from the corner pocket you can draw the cue ball on widening tracks by lengthening your bridge and follow through. In a fashion similar to the follow shots, your tip will move up and down a little near the bottom of the cue ball but you will find yourself hitting the widening tracks by leaving a certain amount of snappiness out of your stroke.

Now you can start hitting very specific tracks within the range by taking an object ball and placing it anywhere in the fan as a target. Then, pocket the shot and hit the target ball with the cue ball. In order to tune your stroke with speed, place the target ball in the same place repeatedly and practice hitting it at different speeds, from a light nudge to the kind of speed that will move it down to the other end of the table. As you place the target ball around the full range you may find that the areas immediately in front of and behind the tangent line, the darkly shaded wedges, are somewhat more challenging.

These are the areas of stun follow and stun draw and can be mastered by using the stroke you know you need for a stop shot and making a slight upward or downward adjustment on the cue ball to move it slightly past or slightly behind the tangent line. Making the stop shot and punch stroke your reference for the tracks near the tangent line works very reliably to hit them precisely.

As you work with this exercise and play the cue ball onto the numerous, possible tracks, do so in the context of using adjustments to your stroke to produce the desired results. To see how much you can do with stroke alone, play some shots with center ball and consistent speed, and observe the limits of your position range as you go from a smooth and constant follow stroke to a short, snappy draw stroke. You can mess around with right and left-hand english but will soon see that it has no bearing on the track that the cue ball takes off the object ball. As you proceed with a sharp focus on stroke, imagine yourself using the fingers in your relaxed shooting hand to measure the precise adjustments to acceleration as a singer varying pitch throughout a song. And, when you find yourself getting the desired position from shooting a follow shot with a draw stroke, or vice versa, a very liberating realm of cue-ball control will open up where you will experience the freedom of distinguishing position play in terms of stroke, shedding any impulse to combine specific strokes only with shots of the same name. You will experience growing confidence as you see that the real key to cue-ball control lives inside of you, not on a cold piece of white plastic. And anyone watching will see that you have learned what the great players know.



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