

Spin

“Any fool can go to the edge but only heroes return.” Who can forget that immortal quote? Better still, who can remember it since I’m pretty sure that I just made it up? But it has a certain literary tone and the ring of sage advice, albeit in a cheesy-war-movie kind of way. Mostly, it sounds like a principle that guides too many intermediate pool players who wonder why they can’t move the cue ball.

For as long as I can remember, the words, “Never hit the cue ball more than one tip away from center,” have peppered pool literature so pervasively that the directive lives as gospel for many players. It wouldn’t be a big shock to see that someone replaced “Never” with the words, “Thou shalt not,” and put an “11” in front of them. When I was young I took those words to heart and, for some time, considered myself fundamentally flawed because my tip often strayed beyond the mandated limit. I consoled myself with the idea that I was just a kid and that by the time I grew up, my stroke would mature enough to conform. “But right now,” I thought, “I need to draw that cue ball eight feet and I don’t care where I hit it.” I looked at what I needed to do, ignored what I knew I was *supposed* to do, and ran out. Sometimes it pays to be a reckless, 15-year-old scofflaw.

My stroke never did grow up enough to apply maximum spin within a tip of center but neither has anyone else’s. The real mystery about the one-tip rule is why so many players include it in their instructional material when they don’t play the game that way. As I’ve said before, doubling the standard 13 millimeter tip gives us a 26 millimeter circle around the cue ball’s center point. That’s roughly 20% of the total available area to hit. Would any great player, someone respected enough to get a book published, confine the tip to such narrow constraints for fear of what may lurk beyond? Would James Joyce tear out and throw away four-fifths of the dictionary?

There are several possible reasons for players/writers to perpetuate a rule that they don’t follow. One, everyone knows how much easier it is to make a shot without excessive spin on the cue ball. So they chant from an idealistic hope for a world where we can shoot at everything with center ball. Two, we’ve all heard the rule so many times that we accept it and, since we think we’re pretty good, we start to believe that we never do move our tips toward cue ball’s edge. In an otherwise excellent—and honest—video, one of my favorite instructors claims boldly that he can draw the cue ball the length of the table hitting it one tip below center. The video shows a close up of his tip hitting the ball, which I watched repeatedly in slow motion. Sure enough, in the last few inches of the final stroke, his tip dips down to the very bottom of the cue ball. Sometimes we will cue the ball for moderate right or left-hand english and, in the last moment of the stroke, swing the shooting hand in or out to hit the edge of the cue ball and spin it enough for the desired result, a technique that some top-level instructors endorse and teach. The third possibility is that the writers must fear that one of their readers will miscue some day

after buying a book and then trash their reputations. Why people fear the miscue so dreadfully is another mystery. Yes, it's tragic in a match but it costs nothing in practice. We're not sky divers; we can risk experiment.

World-champion, Tom Rossman, alias Dr. Cue, tells a nice story about the miscue. It seems that he went off once to an artistic-billiards workshop to broaden his knowledge and learn some shots on the carom table; pool players shoot trick shots whereas billiard players shoot artistic shots. Do they scoff at us over Port for drinking Sherry? During that workshop the instructor directed the class to spend a full day miscuing—high, low, right, left and everywhere. Imagine watching a roomful of players shooting nothing but miscues for a full day. But after “mastering the miscue,” as Tom words it, the students learned exactly where cue ball's edges are and how closely they could approach them. Once they found the limits and retreated toward center by a tiny measure, they had learned how to apply maximum spin to the cue ball. When I watch what Tom can do with a cue ball and consider the similarity between our names, I don't wonder why only one of us has a “man” on the end of his.

Tom also teaches how to define and apply one tip of english in a way that makes sense and works on the table. If you place the cue ball on the foot spot and shoot it, with no english, to the center diamond on the far rail to return through the center, bounce off the rail you're shooting over and stop on or near the foot spot, you are using what he calls lag speed, or the speed that moves the cue ball two table lengths. Now, from the foot spot with lag speed and no regard for tip size, one tip of english will make the cue ball rebound from the center of the far rail to hit the side rail a few inches past the side pocket. Once we nail down that exact result and relate it to one tip, should we fret over hitting a spot that may be 17 millimeters from center if the cue ball comes to rest where we want it? After we master one tip as a cue-ball path, we learn that the precise spot to hit on the cue ball changes from table to table and we now have a reference that helps us adjust quickly to strange equipment. We also learn that, as we increase speed, we must move the tip farther away from the cue ball's center to hit the one-tip path. So, one-tip changes on the cue ball as conditions and speeds vary, but always yields the same track, and gives us a foundation for judging two or three tips when the shot calls for more spin. Defining one tip in terms of result shifts our focus away from where we hit the cue ball, which means nothing, to where the cue balls goes, which means everything.

Perhaps the authors tell us to stay within a tip of center so we will learn to control our strokes and play position that will not force us to use a lot of spin. If they worded it that way, or said that we should never *want* to stray further, it would be useful advice because, in a perfect world, our games would resemble Mosconi's, where we stun the cue ball a few inches at a time to move through long strings of easy shots. But the word “never” throws a lot of fear into novices and stops many of them from exploring the cue

ball and its possibilities, while leading them to believe that they have inferior strokes as they watch their cue-balls limp when other players can zip theirs across the cloth. In nine ball, when we must move the cue ball long distances for heroic position, we have no choice but to spin the ball. Some of us have cool, fast cars that we mostly drive around town near the speed limit. But every once in a while, on a lone, straight stretch of road, we want to see what that baby can do and, at around 140, we remember that most of our thrills wait for us at the edge.

