

## Missing

On a few occasions I've used space here to take some spiteful shots at X-Game sports as a symbol of how silly our culture has come to look, and to mock them in sharp contrast to the dignified beauty of our game. Most of that spite emanates from envy and thinking about all their TV coverage and popularity. It irks me that girls know all the hot skater dudes but couldn't pick Johnny Archer out of a lineup. When I do pay attention to those kids however, I have to appreciate their outrageous skills and the crazy tricks that they perform with their skateboards, snowboards and motorcycles. Of course I would never ride a skateboard down a handrail or do a back flip on a motorcycle for one simple reason. Surely I would kill myself trying. I think I'll stay with pool where a near scratch provides all the excitement I need in a day. I also think that we can learn something from watching those daredevils.

People who jump out of airplanes with snowboards get exactly one chance to screw up and never get to go back to correct their mistakes. So we have to believe that they approach every jump with utmost care and preparation, fully aware that there is no allowance for error. It's very hard to imagine somebody making one of those jumps with casual concern for the outcome. And it's a good thing that we don't have to approach every pool shot as a life-or-death proposition. Or is it?

Recently, while watching an amateur tournament, I noticed that many intermediate players have not yet shed something we learn when we first start playing pool—the idea that it's okay to miss a shot. Back in the early, beginning stages we all played the same way where we made a shot or two, then missed and waited, knowing that we would get back to the table. In that context the game has no real meaning until it comes down to the last few balls. People who play that way sometimes get angry when they encounter someone in a bar who steps up and runs out, and may even berate that shooter for taking the “fun” out of the game. And when it's a girl that runs out, certain guys get extra angry, always an amusing sight.

Most of the people who play pool don't run balls for one of two reasons. Among recreational players, there are some with deadly shot-making skills and literally no idea that position play is an option. So they never get very far into a run, especially in 8 Ball, where the table gets tougher after each successful shot. The better players, the ones who answer the game's call and decide to learn it, find out quickly that pocketing balls is only one aspect of pool, then soon see that the essence of great pool is found in cue-ball control. Pretty soon they learn how to leave themselves some easy shots and, since they *are* easy, begin shooting balls in without much care, as if the luxury of shooting carelessly were the reward for good position play. Many players even remember themselves as recreational players who didn't know anything but making balls and feel stupid for not having seen any of the elegant possibilities on a pool table. And since they know that every dummy who plays pool understands pocketing balls, they demote shot making to secondary status, where it remains for too many players.

It makes sense that most players do not place enough value on the importance of shot making once they begin learning the game. As we go through the first educational phase we learn more about cue-ball control than anything else. Initially most runs end

with a position error and therefore no shot. So we logically direct our efforts toward sharpening our cue-ball skills and learning to play more precise and consistent position in a growing variety of situations. We manage each bit of that learning with our analytical minds where we store all of it as knowledge. When we see a problem with a recognizable solution, we retrieve the specific piece of required knowledge and apply it. After applying each solution enough times we remember it. When that set of knowledge becomes large enough to solve almost any problem we might face, we begin leaving ourselves enough easy shots to feel confident with our position play. Then we discover that more runs are ending with missed shots rather than position errors.

Most players acquire the necessary hand-eye coordination to become decent shot makers in a relatively short time and then more or less forget about it. And there's not much encouragement to do anything else coming from us experts. If we look through a magazine like this one or open a book on pool, we will not see columns or chapters devoted to the art of pocketing balls. What we will see are position drills or problems with solutions for run outs, safeties and other challenges from the knowledge side of the game. All of that is easy to share because we're talking about things we know. When it comes to sharing wisdom on shot making there's not a lot to say beyond, "Practice pocketing balls." And it would be hard to earn a living in this profession without offering more than that.

Shot making proceeds from the creative mind and is therefore difficult to discuss. For players with sound fundamentals and experience, a miss almost always results from a mental breakdown. We're not talking about a complete meltdown, but a subtle lapse in concentration or focus. We pocket balls when we can open a clearing on each shot for the creative mind to take over and facilitate its execution in a moment devoid of thinking. That comes from employing the same routine on every shot. Sometimes everything falls into place, and we start to move into the "zone," that elusive place where everything happens effortlessly and automatically. But then if we "zone" too well and become intoxicated, we stop paying attention and miss an easy shot because we stopped thinking altogether. We must consciously acknowledge each shot by itself with importance, and not as something that's okay to miss. Then we can proceed to the routine where thinking ends and execution begins.

A pool player's education is a long, complex process that never ends. Committed players typically spend about three years immersed in learning before emerging as respectable tournament competitors. Players good enough to compete at the top level in a decent-sized city have learned volumes about the cue ball, safety play, position choices and other subtleties of great pool. Eventually, the relative handful of players who reach that level arrive right back where they were before they learned anything, to the realization that the highest priority is pocketing the ball. Remember that, no matter how good you are or how much you know, if you miss the shot in front of you, it's your turn to sit down.

