

Take it Easy

Not long ago, my close friend, the incomparable Emilio, spotted a stack of phone books in a trash can, pulled one out and tore it in half while three of us watched in awe. A feat I had heard about throughout my life, always hearing also that there's a trick, this was the first time I had seen it done. And here was someone to teach us the method. We soon learned that, trick or no trick, one still has to tear a phone book, and all we got for our efforts was thumb blisters. My girlfriend came closest, managing somehow to get one almost started. A few weeks later Emilio told us that he had carefully examined the process out of disappointment for his inability to teach us and asked for another chance. Fingering my just-healed blisters, I declined a second semester of phone-book school. But he persisted and then taught me this time. Sure enough, it is not too difficult when done properly. The main thing, it turns out, is to relax. With that and a couple of other things in mind, the books seem to tear themselves. In fact, with everything in place and the presence of mind to stay relaxed, it's almost a challenge not to tear the book.

If relaxation is most important for something so strenuous, how vital must it be for something with such delicate touch and subtle variation as pool? Well, success in all sports turns on one's ability to stay relaxed while performing. When I hear relaxation's importance emphasized I typically recall one of two standout examples. One is from a baseball game where the camera zoomed in on the batter's hands to show his fingers moving along the grip, looking a bit like Louis Armstrong with his horn's valves. The ballplayer/color commentator pointed out that many players do that while waiting for the pitch to keep their hands relaxed so they can bring the bat around faster. Another time I watched a slow-motion replay of the gold-medal run in the Olympic 100 meter race. Here the expert commentator, another champion sprinter, stopped the replay here and there to draw on the screen and illustrate the winner's ability to stay relaxed throughout the race. So even in a case where an athlete is pushing every muscle to its limit, winning depends on the ability to stay relaxed.

It's doubtful that anyone would argue with relaxation's value as we all have numerous memories to contrast our stressful performances with our calmer ones. We always feel, and thus play, better when relaxed and tend to stay that way in familiar environments. Karen Corr and Allison Fisher always appear calmer and more comfortable on Sunday than any TV first-timers. Though there's no substitute for *that* experience we can learn to prepare ourselves and make the best from all experience along the way. When I start to feel tense in competition I employ some breathing exercises that I learned from a friend. Since I'm no expert in the field and he isn't either, I don't want to share my breathing technique here and offer instruction in a matter so important yet so far removed from my realm. Any serious competitor should consult an expert or at least read a book on the subject. For me however, the techniques I use help a great deal. Something else I like to do when the tension in a match becomes uncomfortable is go for a "tempo" walk. I will use my bathroom break to get away from the table and perform some mundane, unrelated actions, such as walking and washing my hands, at a pace in line with my tournament tempo. Since I don't like to hurry around the table, I take my time walking back and forth to the bathroom. Those few minutes spent in a consistent tempo doing something simple and unrelated to the game help a lot to calm me down and keep me in the match.

In pool, tension comes mainly from fear, and a big source of fear is surprise. The more familiar the situation the more likely we are to perform calmly and confidently. With that in mind we can prepare effectively for upcoming tournaments. First we should learn everything we can about the format and the rules for a tournament. If the format is races to 11 with alternate breaks, that's what we must play in our practice matches. It's always best to arrive at the tournament as early as possible and acclimate to all the elements of new surroundings beginning with the strange tables then reaching beyond to become familiar with new sounds, lighting, and people. Arriving a couple days early and becoming friendly with the tournament director will be more comforting on game day than arriving at the eleventh hour and meeting someone who is busy and under a lot of stress as well. The fastest way however to feel welcome and comfortable in a strange poolroom is to treat the servers well and tip them excessively. That's why they're there and there is no substitute. And, despite what they all believe, not one cheapskate has ever charmed a waitress. As a rule, pool players are notoriously bad tippers, so it's extremely easy to stand out as someone special for just a few extra bucks, an immeasurable benefit when you need something during a match. Also, since the staff will know most of the spectators, power tipping is, hands down, the most effective way to become an instant home team. And nothing feels better or more comforting than support from the fans.

In the matter of playing, relaxation centers around the shooting hand and the ability to keep it relaxed on all shots. Tensing up the back hand steers the cue off line to cause misses and decelerates the tip to derail position play. Try this exercise for keeping the hand relaxed. Set up a straight shot with the cue ball and object ball straddling a side pocket, two diamonds apart from each other. From there it should appear very simple to pocket the ball and draw the cue ball back to the bottom rail. After doing that successfully, move the two balls a diamond farther apart and repeat the shot. For most players the shot soon begins to look challenging, the precise time when they tense up and cause disaster. When you first sense the feeling of challenge, go back to the previous distance and capture the easy, relaxed feeling of looking at a shot you know you will execute. Take that confident feeling to the new distance and execute the same, calm stroke. Repeat that one-step-back process until you have the cue ball one diamond from the bottom rail with the object ball one diamond from the top rail, and you're drawing back the length of the table with a relaxed back hand, remembering to make it look easy.

Like any skill we must practice relaxation. During a tournament weekend spend quiet time away from the arena with eyes closed, visualizing great pool. See yourself at the table performing with calm confidence and splitting the pocket with every shot. And remember to make it look easy in your imagination, the first step toward a relaxed performance. When I occasionally get to enjoy some of my other favorite sports like ice skating or horseback riding, I invariably begin stiffly and must remind myself to relax and make it look easy. And then immediately, my skating or riding improves. I'll try to remember that wisdom if Emilio decides that it's time for me to blow up a hot water bottle.

