

# Composure

Pool teases us uniquely in its way of offering small servings of perfection very early. There are golfers on the pro tour who will never hit certain shots that live in Tiger's bag while every night in poolrooms around the world, relative beginners will make one or two shots that rival the most impressive ones that they saw on TV the night before. And it doesn't take long for the dedicated player to string together small runs where, for a few moments, that person handles a layout of balls as well as any top pro could. Those who recognize the game's beauty also see the euphoric possibility of touching it, thus planting the seed of desire to become great. But soon we learn that, along with managing the balls, we must manage ourselves to stay composed and avoid swimming in giddiness when greatness visits or drowning in despair when we see a victory at hand only to blunder and blow it.

Some players come completely unglued in the aftermath of a simple mistake and hurl cues and balls around the room. I once saw a guy punch himself in the mouth—hard. Such maniacs are always well known in their rooms since any regular within range of a decent javelin toss knows well the fear of impalement when a cue chucker is on the floor. And, to any spectators safely outside the line of fire, they serve up reliable entertainment. Many of us have toyed with the violent-reaction response to a miss once or twice and learned quickly that pool is challenging enough with normal blood pressure; the game is impossible with veins throbbing on our temples.

Although most of us are mature enough to avoid the cardiac ward on league night, how *do* we handle disappointments when they arise? It seems that there is implicit agreement among players to accept violence within a certain, allowable range. Nobody objects when players respond with any of the following, popular gestures: slamming the butt of one's cue on floor, slamming the chalk down on the rail, slamming a ball (usually the cue ball after a scratch) onto the slate, or a brief cursing jag (most of us do not play on TV). There's another gesture that I have noticed only recently but is catching on among players after a position error that yields a self safe, tapping one's tip lightly but audibly in the spot where the cue ball was supposed to come to rest. I always appreciate that one when I see it because I would never guess on my own that the person shooting wanted to continue.

It's hard to imagine that anyone is immune to some sort of visible reaction to an error, though many players do not respond violently at all. There is a whole library of quiet, inward responses that precede the inevitable sulking and slumping back to the chair. Whether one responds violently or quietly, any outward expression must raise a few questions about the purpose they serve and their effect on overall performance. Not long ago I caught myself dramatizing after a mistake in a tournament match and found some insight when I asked myself, "Who was that for? Would I have done that dance if I had made the same mistake in practice with no one around to see it? Why do I feel that it's necessary for me to make sure that anyone watching knows that I know that I'm smarter and better than that? And how will that little opera I just performed affect me when I get back to the table?"

However we respond to a mishap, any drama that reflects rage or despair lends the event greater acknowledgement, which magnifies the failure to live larger in our memories and stay with us. Many psychologists and counselors earn their livings by helping their clients free themselves from the grip of past events to help them move forward in their lives with some clarity and control. In everything that matters to us, our marriages, our careers, and our relationships with friends, we face a constant challenge to keep the slate clean and keep ourselves free from the burdens that proceed from unresolved but never-forgotten problems. Until we take responsibility to face our past misfortunes and mistakes they will continue to haunt us.

A few years ago, while watching Efren Reyes in a televised match, I saw him blow an easy shot and his response blew me away. He laughed. He looked up slightly and laughed as if, in the middle of a pool match, he had just cracked himself up with a joke. The laughter was short and private but I saw in it the key to composure. If the person that many regard as the world's best player can show up as a bonehead under tournament pressure on TV, and then laugh about it, who am I to throw a fit when I fall short of perfection? After watching him laugh at failure and then come back to perform flawlessly, I concluded that his jovial relationship with catastrophe might be worth checking out and could not wait to test Efren's "secret." Of course it took a while before, in the passion of the moment, I could apply such a radical shift to my usual response, but eventually I got it. Then it occurred to me that the same technology could be applied to handle hideously bad rolls that curse me from time to time, or the freakishly good ones that might bless my opponents. It turns out that in all cases of misfortune the laughter works.

In that moment of laughter everything occurs that the psychologists and, in my case, priests work so hard to teach us about handling the past and keeping it out of the future. We take responsibility for the mistake by owning up to it and, at the same time, tap into the power of forgiveness by letting ourselves off the hook for the brief letdown. It's as if we were saying, "I am a great player, so great in fact that when I screw up or when lady luck thumbs her nose at me, it's funny." Whatever words come out in the internal conversation, the Reyes approach works to leave the disaster in the past where it belongs and helps us to return to the table fresh and ready again to play in the present. It will always serve one well to remember that the key to consistent, overall performance lies in the ability to play each shot separately, in the present, as a shot that matters. How Mr. Reyes manages to keep his feet on the ground while performing his trademark magic remains to be seen. Maybe all of the heroic shots and elegant run outs tickle him a little too.

