

## Planning

It seems that for every meaningful step we take in our lives we're told that we need a plan: a financial plan, a health plan, a career plan, a family plan. In a campaign year we learn about tax plans, spending plans, education plans, war plans and peace plans so informed voters can elect those candidates with the best designs for our future. At least that's the way it works in theory. Nowadays a well-prepared candidate must also focus on a plan for his past, and show up ready to confront whatever smear tactics that his opponent may employ. A little seedy perhaps, but the whole process could be too dull without that juicy feature of campaigning which sometimes inspires me to run for office. I'm not sure I would want to win, but I think I might enjoy seeing some of my best memories dredged up and reenacted on TV to relive them with everybody.

Pool also calls on us to plan carefully but in a way that's somewhat different from other endeavors. In our lives, once we set a process in motion, a 401K for example, it no longer requires much attention as it more or less runs itself. In contrast, pool requires continuous planning, evaluation and reevaluation to move through a rack to its conclusion. Experienced 8-ball players will not take the first shot before studying the rack and mapping out the complete run to its finish. In most racks that plan will require an assessment after each shot to determine if everything is still on track or if a new plan is in order.

Beyond that we have 14.1, or straight pool, the game that challenges our planning skills above all others. Because the game allows us to shoot any ball into any pocket, it invites beginners to look at a table full of balls and then start shooting off the easiest ones without consideration for finishing the rack in a way that will continue the run. If we examine the layout in the diagram, we might attribute what's left to bad planning. The table has eight balls left on it, and four of them are problem balls, or at least difficult balls—the 1, 5 and, of course, the 2-9. The 11 is the only real break shot and getting to it will require some good shooting. Most players would identify the 1 ball on the head rail as something to address soon and might shoot the 10 and then the 4 softly for natural position on the 12 in the side to move toward the 1 ball. But then what? That leaves the 5 ball and those three balls near the rack, none of which goes into the closest corner. And the 5 ball is not an easy shot. Adding the heroic challenge of pocketing that ball and moving the cue ball into position for the 2 or 9 ball introduces the kind of difficulty that can cause an end to anybody's run out.

The best way to complete this rack is to shoot the 10 softly to keep the cue ball close to the foot rail for a good cut angle on the 4 ball. Now we should see that the only ball that can lead to position for the 2 or 9 into the bottom left corner is the 12. So we must use the 4 to get position on the 1 ball, rolling the cue ball through the center of the table to somewhere near the X for a cut angle on the 1 that leads to natural position on the 5. From the X we can roll straight toward the 5 to leave a slight cut angle that allows

bouncing the cue ball from the side cushion toward the 12 ball. The cut angle on the 12 is critical to move the cue ball toward the 2 and 9. Fortunately a stop shot on the 5, one that bounces the cue ball on a path perpendicular to the side cushion, leaves position on the 12 with a cut angle to the right that moves the cue ball left for the those two problem balls. The ideal shot on the 12 would roll the cue ball to the top side cushion and bounce a few inches to point Y. From there it's easy to roll forward to the Z for an easy shot on the 9 and natural one-rail position toward the center of the table, stopping about ten inches short for break-shot position on the 11 ball.

Pool is so easy on paper. Although the run out described above can be handled by any competent player, it still requires some high-class position play. That long trip from the 4 ball to the 1 demands precise speed to get an angle on the 1 that is not too straight or too thin. The final challenge of the rack, the shot on the 12, requires perfect touch, from a perfect angle to complete the run out. The most frightening aspect of this sequence however is the fact that the biggest problem on the table, the 2-9, is solved at the very end of the run. So the first question to ask when looking at this layout is, "After opening the rack, what six shots did this player shoot at the outset to leave so many problems for the end? Were they cherries that he picked off in hopes that clearing some traffic might open the table so the problems can solve themselves?"

Great players identify and attack problems early in the rack when they can find more options for solving them. They go after clusters, balls on the rails and any balls at the head end of the table right away, generally finishing with easy balls out in the clear between the rack area and the side pockets. Except for maybe chess, no game challenges our ability to look so far into the future and create a design for success. Unlike chess however, along with a precise plan for the future we must also execute each shot in the present. A chess player never aims a bishop at one square and hits another. Careful planning, more than anything, allows us to focus on executing each shot with a clear mind and the knowledge that we have solutions for the problems ahead. Such sharp planning skills for what lies in front of us might make most pool players good candidates for political office. Unfortunately most of us have too much fun behind us to survive a campaign.

