

Thinking

Quite a few years ago, *60 Minutes* aired a glowing profile of piano virtuoso, Vladimir Horowitz. At one point in the interview, Mike Wallace asked him to play a musical work that he had not played since performing it in the 1920's. Horowitz agreed to give it a shot and then played the piece flawlessly. It was quite remarkable. When Wallace asked him how he was able to play something that he had not touched in some 50 years and make it sound like he had rehearsed it that morning, Horowitz replied that he did so by not allowing himself to think about it. He said that if he had consciously tried to remember the music, he surely would have failed.

In all of its complexity pool is not very different from music. Like Horowitz in the story above, we perform our best when we move the game out of our heads and into our hands. And some of my favorite teaching experiences are with musicians, particularly those with little if any pool experience. Invariably they arrive believing that they do not possess the skills needed for a competitive game but soon learn how compatible their habits and attributes are with pool. Except for vocalists, all musicians use their hands to ply their craft and are therefore well acquainted with the value of a light touch. Musicians spend their lives in a world of rhythm and tempo and, when shown how vital those are to great pool, soon begin to move around the table with the grace of seasoned pros. They understand that the building blocks of performance do not always resemble the performance itself and are more willing than most to devote practice time to isolated elements of pool just as they sharpened their musical skills with scales and other exercises. And maybe most important, from repeated experience, they know the difference between learning and performing.

Already I miss Keir Graff's "Amateur Hour" column, which he finished two issues ago after spending three years with it. But when I first saw it I thought, "What a strange idea, how can a beginner help anyone?" Very soon though I began to appreciate the service he provided by sharing a complete chronicle of the learning process with us. Most months he discussed new things he had learned along with his performance. The usual windup was that, despite all the learning and work, he was not enjoying the improvement he had hoped for or reaching the goals he had set. That's because he was continually learning throughout the life of his column, and learning quite a lot.

Learning evokes thinking as we process new information and attempt to apply it. Keir Graff discovered that and sometimes wrote about how his head "spun" when he was shooting. But we must learn in order to improve. And pool, like music, is played best in the absence of thinking. Often someone will go to a pool instructor looking for secrets only to find out that there aren't any. Instead that instructor is more likely to advise the student to make a fundamental change, perhaps with the stance, and the student gives up because we miss shots when we think about our feet. There lies the main source of my admiration for Mr. Graff, who confessed that, before the amateur-hour project began, he

thought of himself as somewhat of a “natural” ready to blossom. When he realized that he was mistaken he continued and pressed on slowly with faith in his instructor, while honestly reporting his shortfalls and frustrations along with his progress.

Right now I’m in Lewiston, Maine, freezing my butt off halfway through a radical training project with Tim Miller, a.k.a. The Monk. He dubbed it The Maine Event and collected four, very-committed students, including two 16-year-old boys from New Zealand and Singapore, for a two-week, ten-hour-per-day, intensive training session to propel them toward their goals of championship-quality play. For my part I feel very fortunate that, from among the dozens of great instructors in our game, Tim invited me to co-lead this project with him.

These students are not beginners, here to learn how to draw the cue ball, but tournament winners poised to make the transition to the top rungs of the competitive ladder. Despite their abilities and experience however, nearly all of our work focuses on the most fundamental aspects of pool. Each day we hone a very specific, elemental skill, shot making or a particular stroke for example. And, each day, these talented shooters revert back to learning as they sharpen their awareness of things they already know. As I work with them and observe their progress I get to study the learning process.

It turns out that perfecting a certain skill is almost identical to learning a new one. The main difference lies in the time that it takes to make the change. With this small group of astute players I get to watch a time-compressed version of the learning process. Typically, we introduce a training shot and watch the group adopt a small change that may cause a struggle for a few minutes to a few hours when, without warning, something clicks for each person to make that change occur naturally, without thinking. So, their progress, though rapid, is not instantaneous. And, throughout the process in each case, the most prominent, observable result is missed shots. But, being so deeply committed to their goals, they accept the misses as a small price paid in practice now for a stronger performance in competition later.

One might think that a training program for top-level play would focus on the esoteric tricks that we sometimes see the pros pull out to escape trouble. In reality though, it’s solid, consistent fundamentals that win pool matches, the tedium of one easy shot after another in long strings of boring perfection that lull us into a trance when we watch pool at its best. Pocket ball; play position; repeat.

From his farewell installment I’m inferring that Keir Graff will continue playing pool. I really hope that he does and that he stalls the instruction for a while as his hands catch up to his brain. Before long, in the absence of his teachers and his obligation to report back to us, he will reap the benefits of all the knowledge and skills that his instructors imparted to him. In small, crystalline moments, he will break through to experience the joy of watching balls pocket themselves while the cue ball guides itself into position. If we’re lucky, maybe he’ll come back to share those moments with us in his humorous, insightful way. But if he’s smart, he’ll forget about us and leave the notebook at home for a while to play and enjoy himself in the land of the non thinking.

