

8 Ball

A lot of pool, maybe most and certainly more than we want to admit, is played in places where many of us wouldn't be caught dead, perhaps fearing that's precisely how we'd be found in some of them. Place a quarter on the rail, and then with mandatory machismo, wait to fight over whose turn it is. Then after the preliminaries comes the opportunity to demonstrate some of the game's finer points, maneuvering the cue ball over a cloth that's soaked with more beer than a small bachelor party. It's in these joints where the regulars take great pride in their "no-luck" rules, demanding a full account of every kiss, carom, bump and nudge. When I stupidly lose my patience with the philistines, I'll demand to know if I need to tell a big story about how that ball will get to the pocket or if we can just play by grownup rules. Even more stupid, I never wear a helmet. Nobody can predict what might happen in these places except for one thing. The game will be 8 Ball.

Not only is 8 Ball the game of choice for rubes everywhere, but beginners and the otherwise uninitiated love it as well. And because of such unattractive associations, it's a game that many of us begin to ignore as we learn and improve, as if it were something we should outgrow. I honestly cannot recall the last time I saw two good shooters match up for money and then play 8 Ball. But all that may be changing now with the emergence of the IPT where the world's best professionals are playing 8 Ball for more money than pool has ever seen. And it's about time, both for the money and for 8 Ball, which really is a fine pool game.

Every pool game challenges the player uniquely. A one-pocket player who goes on the road without deft banking skills may not get past the end of the block. 9 Ball, the popular game these days among those in the know, continually tests our mettle for hard shots in tandem with creative position choices. It's the game that teaches players to map out the table with the cue ball faster than any other, and so works nicely for the kids cutting school in favor of a different education. And, while no pool game is easy, shooters will respond to 9 Ball's demands most quickly, many soon performing in the same manner as the best players, simply not as well. The main challenge in 8 Ball, on the other hand, can elude a lot of players, even some very good ones.

To uncover 8 Ball's primary challenge we should begin with its most obvious feature. The greatest difference between 8 Ball and other pool games is that it is the only game where some of the balls on the table remain off limits to the shooter. With a full rack, the shooter has access to fewer than half the balls on the table, slightly less than 47%. Each ball pocketed reduces that percentage or increases the odds against the shooter until arriving at the last ball of the group, which comprises 11% of the balls on the table. If one thinks of the opponent's balls as the enemy, the shooter is always outnumbered, and the problem worsens with every successful shot. In other pool games every pocketed ball thins traffic and opens up the table. The mounting disadvantage to the shooter in 8 Ball becomes the opponent's advantage if that person gets to the table. When you miss the 8 after starting with a full rack, your opponent gets a table with 87.5% of the balls at his or her disposal. This was not intended as a math lesson, but we must acknowledge the numbers' relevance and consider how unlikely it is to win a game by merely shooting a shot and hoping for another.

Good players lose 8-Ball games mainly because of their failure to see that making shots can hurt them. The fact is that once you start pocketing balls, you must do one of two things, run out or play a good safety. But that safety becomes exceedingly more difficult as you move through the rack since you will have to hide more of your opponent's balls behind fewer of your own. Without enough space to discuss all the complexities of 8 Ball—a job Larry Schwartz already performs superbly—we can touch only one aspect, running out.

Many players possess the skill to run eight balls but consistently fail to convert opportunities when they arise. The challenge of 8 Ball is not running eight balls but running eight balls that are laid out among a growing army of obstacles. The answer is simple though perhaps not easy. You must have a plan. Every time you come to the table in a game of 8 Ball you must make a complete plan for the order of shots in your run out. If you see a ball that needs to be moved, plan to that breakout and then complete the rest of the plan from there. Although you often will not see a simple plan, you must make one regardless. Connect eight shots from beginning to end and evaluate the plan after each shot to determine whether you are following it or need to change it.

Here is a good practice routine to become a player with a plan. Scatter all of the balls around the table and take cue ball in hand. Now name your next five shots and begin shooting. At first, include all of the balls with no regard for stripes and solids. This routine works best with two or more players taking turns because the shooter gains more from declaring the plan openly to others. Keep shooting until you miss, but remember to evaluate the plan after each shot. If trouble arises and it looks as though you will not complete the original plan, make a new plan for five shots and announce that. After enough experience with planning shots, designing run outs will feel more routine. If looking at a rack of balls and planning sequences is new, try to overlook any discouragement that often accompanies this exercise at first.

When you feel comfortable with the exercise you can modify it for 8 Ball. Scatter a full rack around the table and, with cue ball in hand, make a plan for a run out of stripes or solids and the 8 Ball. When that becomes a piece of cake you can break a rack and shoot from there applying your plan in the context of a real game.

With 8 Ball in the limelight now, we should prepare ourselves to see more of it popping up in local tournaments as soon as the IPT hits television. I cannot wait to see those matches and the world's best pros playing a game so radically different from the usual 9 Ball. Of course I want to watch them run racks and make it look easy. But I also want to observe the players, who can routinely run a rack of 9 Ball in a couple minutes, to see how much time they take planning a rack before the first shot. And I want to see them respond to a plan gone awry to learn some tactical moves. Then I want to play more 8 Ball.

