

Speed

Anyone who knows me also knows my two favorite activities: fly fishing and rambling on, ad nauseam, about the complexity of pool. Regarding the former, I don't have a lot to say and probably will never grasp much beyond knowing that a hot day is best spent in a cold stream getting outsmarted by creatures with BB-sized brains. Pool however is another matter, and it's hard to shut me up once I get started on my pet theory that the game is so complex we can never know it fully. Instead, I believe we rely on a set of references that we employ to make our way through a rack of balls.

In **Diagram 1** you see a shot that, for best results, you should set up and shoot before reading past this paragraph. It's important that you see the shot as game ball (use the 9) and that you see no likely way to scratch with a normally rolling cue ball. Now, set it up, mark the balls, shoot it a few times into the bottom, left corner and observe the results.

When players face shots like this one, fairly difficult to pocket but absent of any cue-ball considerations, something invariably reveals itself—a reference that I call favorite speed. It seems that everyone has a favorite speed to use and, most experienced players find theirs inside of a fairly small range of choices. One observable difference is that bar-table players tend to shoot their shots a little harder than those of us who play on full-size tables.

Often, when top players are playing their best, it seems that they fall into a groove where they begin to hit every shot at the same speed, a remarkable feat considering the great variety of shots they encounter. In reality, nobody shoots every shot at precisely the same speed. Yet good players can go for long stretches with amazingly little variation. And, perhaps most important, they reliably avoid shots that require excessively hard or soft hits, and all the problems associated with them. In order to manage speed precisely and consistently, a player must understand how angles relate to speed and then determine the best angle for every next shot.

Diagram 2 offers a simple yet effective exercise for improving speed control. After establishing and capturing your favorite speed, place an object ball where you see the 11, about a half-inch away from the rail and half a ball width past the center diamond. In this exercise you will pocket the ball and move the cue ball to various places, while hitting every shot at the same speed—your favorite speed. For the first shot, A, you will pocket the 11, move straight across the table with the cue ball to hit the bottom, side cushion and rebound to the X. Adjust the angle until you are hitting the target consistently without adjusting speed. Why do we go two rails to hit the X instead of a simple one-rail path directly to it? Seasoned players usually play the cue ball to move away from the closest rail to the desired position since the best way to avoid leaving the

cue ball on a rail is to hit that rail. Note that the X lies between a half-diamond segment and one full diamond segment from the second rail. I call that small range of distance the magic bounce and regard it as another strong reference.

Now move the cue ball into the vicinity of B for the next shot. Since this is a thinner cut and you're shooting every shot at the same speed, the cue ball will travel farther. This time you want to go twice across the table to hit the top side rail a second time and rebound with another magic bounce to the Y. Again, keep the speed consistent and adjust the shot's angle until you are achieving repeated success. The third shot, C, is a simple, one-rail rebound to the Y.

Remember that, although A, B and C will relate to one another as they do in the diagram, chances are that they will not be positioned exactly as you see them here. And that's the point of the exercise, finding the precise angle for each distinct objective at your favorite speed. Also, the exercise shown is merely an introduction to the concept of matching angles with various position goals at one speed. You may set up as many shots as you can imagine and explore the entire table at your favorite speed. Then you can try the exercise on another table that plays faster or slower to observe how the angles that work best change from one table to another. Soon you will see how pinning down and mastering one reference speed will sharpen your ability to make necessary speed adjustments when needed and help simplify our complex game.

