

# Intimidation

In the final round of last year's Masters Tournament, Tiger Woods played some lackluster golf, for him anyway, but cruised through nonetheless to win. As the day wound down, every contender took his turn blundering and handing the tournament, gift wrapped, to Tiger, who only managed a one-over-par back nine. The U.S. Open finished much the same way except less entertaining. So, Rich Beem's performance to hold on and win the PGA Championship was stunning, first for his emergence from unknown status but more so for his beating the man who clearly has opponents shaking in their spikes on any given Sunday. Beem did much more than "hold on" but charged at Woods—who birdied the last four holes—with heroic golf, including an eagle on 11 and a 35-foot birdie putt on 16, to win by one stroke.

If a golfer can frighten competitors in a game with no interplay, where only his partner sees him while some of the field is a half-mile away, how can we pool players hope to go head-to-head against opponents who intimidate us?

From local bar leagues to world tours most players compete in a realm where they face the same opponents on a regular basis. In those closed environments the talent hierarchy is objective and well known to every player. So, it is okay sometimes to go into a match suspecting that the other player is better. Any track aficionado will tell us that even a racehorse knows when he's outclassed. However, as we know from experience and from watching others, the better player does not have to win—the *raison d'être* of televised sports.

Before two players with an acknowledged talent gap arrive at the table, both are already enmeshed in a phenomenon called "supposed to." One player is supposed to win, perhaps the worst trap in pool. Once we tell ourselves that we are *supposed* to win, we surrender our competitive mettle to the tenuous belief that we *will* win, regardless of how we play. As favorites we must discard that kind of thinking when it arises and learn to place the burden on our opponents when we are underdogs. Allowing other players to swim in the idea that they are supposed to beat us is exactly what we want as long as we maintain the pluck to resist any notions that we are supposed to lose. It opens a huge clearing for us to play while they sit wondering why they're not winning.

In a more technical vein, we should distinguish what accounts for differences in talent. Beyond a certain, intermediate level of competitive pool most players possess roughly the same shot-making skills. The top players are the ones who handle the cue ball and the game's tactical play with greater precision. So, when you feel outmatched, your best approach will be to take the game aggressively to your opponent. Because shot making will be the area where both of you are closest to even, you will want to shoot. I'm not advocating stupidity, but shyness in the face of difficult shots will not work against a stronger opponent. Opting out of a long shot or an easy bank in favor of a weak

safety gives an enormous edge to the better player because that person will out move you and beat you to the next shot. The same goes for pushing out to a stronger player in nine ball; you're only prolonging the agony. A semi-risky kick for a possible safety may work out better than giving the table back, with options, to a more-experienced player.

In order to move up in pool you must acquire the same skills that the great players possess. Learn to play ruthless safeties instead of namby-pamby ones that only position the balls so the other player has no good shot. You must practice moving the cue ball to a well-hidden pinpoint rather than leaving it on a part of the table that looks good because it is far away from the object ball. The reward for a jam-up safety, ball in hand, remains the game's most powerful offensive tool. And you must learn to kick with precision and confidence. Because you can expect brutal safeties from better players you cannot hope to compete with rudimentary, one-rail kicking skills. Learn and practice the two-and-three-rail systems that you need when you find yourself frozen to the obstructing ball instead of merely behind it. At the most-recent WPBA Nationals I watched Allison Fisher control an aggressive, sharp-shooting youngster with safeties that fell just shy of leaving the cue ball under the table. At the same time on another table I saw Megan Minerich, in a tenacious refusal to let her opponent out of the chair, shoot a three-rail kick to pocket the 3 ball and then run out from there to win the match.

We know who intimidates us. Some of us even know their cars and feel panic when we spot them in the parking lot on tournament night. But as sensible as it may seem, we cannot waste any time wishing that they had stayed home. The same homespun truth that worked in third grade when dad said, "Just make a fist and punch that bully in the nose," applies to pool. The more we hide from monsters the more fearsome they become. In Denver we have Danny Medina, someone who can get rolling and make any player in the world feel like a fly on a bus full of spiders. Playing him can be about as much fun as changing a tire in a blizzard. But over the past few years probably every good player in town has managed to beat him at least once, mostly in small events, and the exhilaration that follows a victory over him compares to any feeling of satisfaction that I know. And having savored that pleasure, I want to see him every time I show up for a tournament. I think that my upstairs neighbors are gunning for him also, looking to get the guy who took away their sleep a couple of times when I was on the roof at 2 AM shouting, "I BEAT DANNY TONIGHT."

Many players advise us to ignore the intimidation factor, play the game and pretend that the so-called champion is nothing special. Tell that to Phil Mickelson. Maybe that approach works for some but I believe that denying and pretending make us more vulnerable to surprise and less prepared to confront reality. If we pretend anything it should be that everyone we encounter can play like Earl Strickland to avoid regarding someone too lightly and then losing a match that we are supposed to win. We must invite the best players to the table and charge courageously at them to throw a little intimidation back in their direction. I know that a timid response is natural in the face of someone bigger and stronger but it's not prizefighting. If you go down swinging in a pool match today, you will not have to stay home from work tomorrow nursing cuts and bruises.

