

## Boredom

Wherever we look in this sexy, fast-paced world, we see enticements to inject our lives with the right measures of bold adventure that they presumably lack. From deep in our sofas we can watch soft-drink guzzlers skateboard across airplane wings, army-of-one commandos jumping into the sea from helicopters and white-collar clowns in SUV's zooming across the savannah to outrun herds of angry rhinos. In the real world I spend too much time on the road with those guys asking why they can't move their behemoths, which they bought to race up the north face of Denali, out of my way so that my 90-horsepower crate and I can get where we need to be—today.

Advertisers know that few of us are fighter pilots and that most people will buy those V-8 monsters to push them only slightly faster than their sofas. But they also know our secret desires and where we like to go in our fantasies. We rarely aspire to tedium. On the contrary, we have a natural desire, if not obligation, to change things a little, shake them up a bit to add some variety to our routines. So, with all that sexy, speedy, X-Games excitement for sale, I have to wonder why anyone would ever pick up a pool cue.

As I've said before, pool is not an exciting game. And when we ask why it's not more popular on TV, the answer is simple. It's B-O-R-I-N-G. Usually, when I share that idea with a pool player, I find myself on the receiving end of an incredulous stare, to which I respond with a Cuba-Gooding face of my own. Why the disbelief? How else can we describe a game that, when played at its very best, treats us to endless repetition of shots that most beginners can make with their eyes closed? The sooner that we catch on to the fact that great pool is boring and learn to like it, the more quickly we will improve.

When we play pool we must fight our propensity for change. For most of us, after only a few perfect shots, a little voice starts to tell us that it's time for something new. After all, we've been doing the same, boring thing now for two whole minutes. That's four commercials. We're trained to imagine ourselves shooting the next few balls while skiing 100 miles-an-hour, inches ahead of an avalanche. Since we can't do that, we make a small, semi-conscious change instead; maybe over-draw the cue ball two feet out of position. Now we're facing a bank shot and the excitement picks up a little.

Professionals resist those temptations and do not submit to the call for change. Top players know from experience that consistent pool springs from consistent behavior inside of an unwavering routine for every shot. They do not wait for difficult shots before applying themselves but bring the same, intense focus to every shot, especially the simple ones. It doesn't take much to get out of position for one shot, an error that typically grows with each successive shot until the situation is hopeless. Somehow they have found a way to push through and derive pleasure, real thrills perhaps, from the tedious repetition of great pool. On those occasions when they play bad position or come to the table with a difficult leave, they have the strength and courage to make the great shot and resume control. That strength builds in stretches of dull, flawless play, which charges the batteries for those times when something extra is needed. Too many tough shots can drain any player, and all shot makers eventually wear out.

Most of us do not experience long enough periods of great pool to know how it feels to break through the boredom barrier. But we can train ourselves. Just as a runner trains to go increasingly long distances, we can work on our mental stamina to stay at the table for longer runs without losing focus or seeking change. Our greatest foe is time and that little voice nagging us to give back the table as we approach our usual limit.

Now that straight pool, or 14.1, has virtually disappeared from competitive billiards we no longer play games that can keep us at the table for extended periods of time. Eight ball and nine ball limit us to a maximum of eight or nine shots before there's a break in the action and a new game begins, a sharp contrast to the continuous flow of straight pool, where the best players routinely stay at the table for an hour or more. Recently I spent about six hours over two days with a very simple exercise and experienced the breakthrough that I'm talking about. Its simplicity is what stopped me from trying it in the past. Instead of practicing normal straight pool as I sometimes do, I tried, at the suggestion of a friend, throwing fifteen balls on the table, shooting them off, throwing them out again, and repeating that until I missed. Although I do that fairly often with a couple of racks as a quick warm up, I had never thought about continuing until I missed, thinking maybe that with no break shots to play, I would never miss.

In my first few trials I found that, at around sixty balls, without the full challenge of straight-pool, I began to lose interest in the easy shots and my attention waned. Sure enough, that's when I missed. Then, something changed as I broke through to savor every easy shot and the beauty of watching each ball go in as a machine-like feeling overtook me. On the second day I pocketed 369 balls before a skid on a shot stroked too softly finally caused a miss. While that's hardly the same as a straight-pool run and not extremely impressive in this context, I did experience my longest time ever at the table without a miss, around two hours, and loved it. I also want to point out that I spread the balls evenly over the whole table for each rack in very friendly layouts with no clusters to break out and few balls near the rails. We don't challenge our ability to solve problems with this exercise but our discipline to stay alert in their absence. High runs in this vein cannot be compared to straight-pool runs but will move us toward higher runs in real games as we take greater control over our worst nemesis—ourselves. The point of the exercise is to spend long periods shooting, immersed in the routine of long strings of easy shots with easy position—every player's number-one goal.

Sometimes, when I look up at a TV and worry about pool's popularity, my worst fears predict that we will be playing on skateboards soon. I wonder how our boring game grabs any attention at all in an MTV world that bombards us with relentless noise and constantly-changing, video images. Maybe trends will shift toward an appreciation for quiet perfection as relief from the static and hubbub. And, maybe they won't. In the meantime I'm not asking how the word "adrenaline" finds its way into ads for paper clips or what we might possibly gain from having a million armies of one. My job is to keep shooting.

