

Commitment

For any pursuit that we go into fervently, the initial, romantic passion we feel drives us forward, usually without thinking, quickly enough to plunge us into a serious situation. We may, after a brief exposure to great pool, find ourselves hooked on the game and, within a couple weeks, on a pool team with a few hundred dollars worth of new equipment, and the new duty of meeting teammates' expectations. It's not too dissimilar from going out on a couple dates with someone and then, in the blink of an eye, waking up next to a live-in mate, someone a little more complex than a pleasant dinner companion. But soon, every endeavor moves through a transition where the initial passion wanes and we need something more to manage the inevitable challenges, as we face the task of sustaining the activity in the absence of blind devotion. Whether we watch a set of golf clubs gather dust or a spouse walk out the front door with a suitcase, we experience a breakdown and encounter the importance of commitment. Whenever someone takes on a responsibility and then begins to regard it casually, whether it's a pool player letting down his team, or a politician letting down his people, the ultimate failure can be distilled to a lack of commitment.

Because achievement depends on commitment we should, in all aspects of our lives, understand our commitments and their strength. The easiest way to distinguish a pure commitment to one purpose is when all the time needed to support it goes unnoticed. Those players committed to greatness, the ones who spend day and night in the poolroom, practicing or competing, do not gripe at the end of the day about the time they put in, but wonder instead why the room has to close after only 14 hours. Once a few years ago, someone sat down and watched me practice. After about a half-hour he asked me, "Is it worth it?" When I asked him to clarify, he asked me if all the hard work I put into learning the game was worth it. I honestly had never considered that question and, when I stopped to think it over for him, replied, "I don't remember it occurring as work." I learned the game as a teenager and, with no concerns besides school, was able to put in the necessary 12-hour days and still hungered for more time at the table. When my purpose shifted from becoming the best player to becoming the best teacher, a calling that remains rewarding and exhilarating after so many years, practice became something that required self persuasion.

It's not hard to find people who enjoyed the luxury of pure commitment to one pursuit during their teenage years, such as former Olympic hopefuls, and then as adults, opened themselves up to the world's full buffet of offerings. Of course in most cases, when the dream isn't realized, we're forced to move on to more realistic activities such as jobs. In all my experience with dozens of extraordinarily talented people, I know only two who maintain an unwavering commitment to one purpose, one a billiard player and the other a musician. Encountering someone who has every cell in his body pointed in one direction can be a weird and sometimes daunting experience. It's a little unnerving to spend time with a person to whom everything unrelated to a single purpose goes pretty much unnoticed. It's also tempting to envy someone who proceeds with no regard for the things that others value such as money or even success. They measure their own success against their own ideals and honestly do not care how they might occur to others.

While such singular devotion may be impressive, we should regard its rarity with a measure of gratitude. A world where everyone lived with such narrow focus might be a chaotically unproductive one since it's hard to imagine enough people who see their purpose as garbage man or drain roofer. And that's where most of us fit into the picture. As much passion as we may feel for the game, we probably have other responsibilities, most of them—I can't believe I'm saying this—more important than pool. Only a small handful of players will express the desire and then show the commitment required to reach the professional ranks. The rest of us will fit pool into “normal” lives where we must meet greater commitments to family and career. In that context it becomes more critical for us to distinguish our purposes in the game and the levels of commitment necessary to serve them. The person who wants to be the world's greatest player and then meets that desire with the necessary time commitment has nothing to think about. His or her list of things to do has exactly one item on it every day, “Play Pool.”

For most of the 40 million regular players in the U.S. however, pool exists as one of many activities and calls for a little honest consideration to determine where and how it can fit into a more complicated life. More important we must determine where we fit into the game so we can continue to fuel the passion that called upon us to play it. We need a sort of mini purpose/commitment checklist to keep us engaged and moving forward. Many beginners who start out with a burning desire to be great soon discover how difficult the game is and then abandon it. Sometimes I empathize since they might have seen professionals make it look easy on TV and thought, “That's for me,” a fantasy that grabs all of us at one time or another.

Those of us who stay in the game must ask ourselves what we want. Maybe we merely want to enjoy the game. Where is the source of enjoyment then? If one finds enjoyment in the weekly camaraderie of team play without much regard for winning, that person must find a team that shares the same regard for winning as secondary and then commit to the team. There's nothing wrong with that, and it would likely be unpleasant for that person to wind up on a team with fierce competitors. Some players can't enjoy the game unless they win. They must either do the necessary work to become very good or make sure to compete exclusively against players who are very bad. Most commonly, players enjoy pool when they continue to improve, and the committed ones apply themselves in practice, seek instruction and make sure to move themselves into higher levels of competition to progress upward.

Because pool does not completely consume most of our lives we must check in with our relationship to the game from time to time to see where we stand, where we honestly want to be and how we're going to get there. Such reflection can reveal a shift in purpose, which requires a commensurate commitment to serve it. Sometimes a casual player becomes a tenacious competitor while formerly aggressive tournament players can mellow to dwell at a more recreational level of enjoyment. Regardless of where each of us fits in, if it pleases us, that's where we should focus our commitment to enhance our relationship to the game and our personal enjoyment.

