

## The Cue-Line Reference

About three years ago, A.J. Jacobs, an editor at *Esquire* magazine, looked at himself alongside the people he admired and decided that his Ivy League education left him with too many gaps in his knowledge. Thus feeling inferior he took the logical next step and spent the following year reading the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from start to finish—32 volumes, 33,000 pages, 65,000 articles in 44 million words. On his journey from A to Z, or *a-ak* to *zywiec* to be exact, he packs his brain with all the world's knowledge and a host of astonishing facts, then shares his experience in *The Know It All*, his account of the adventure, published in 2004. Before finishing the jacket blurbs I realized that I too had wide gaps in my own knowledge. But that's changed after learning that dwarves tend to have prominent buttocks and that René Descartes had a penchant for cross-eyed women. Throughout *The Know it All*, Jacobs holds back none of his razor-sharp wit as he chronicles his march through the world's definitive collection of knowledge. Nor does he withhold the fact that he went a little nutty along the way while alienating his friends and family to boot.

Here I go glorifying our game again, but sometimes I'm reminded of old A.J. when I'm watching pool and I start thinking about how much knowledge a person must accumulate to play the game well. With so many possibilities on the table, so many potential outcomes for any shot, it's impossible really for one person to know everything, a fact that helps add extra appeal to those matches between two pros with contrasting styles or backgrounds. We also see the result of diverse billiard educations when two experts handle the commentary for a taped match and offer differing predictions for an upcoming shot. Sometimes the shooter replies with a third possibility, one that neither commentator had proposed, giving the viewers three-fold instruction.

Since we cannot truly *know* every distinct variation among the virtually infinite set of possibilities, I contend that experienced players operate mainly from a set of useful references. The stop shot and the table's center spot come to mind as two chief examples in the set of benchmarks we employ to manage the cue ball effectively. More often than we might guess, the reference shot in its original form gets the job done. And when the situation calls for something else, we simply tweak a shot we know instead of trying to pull a new one out of thin air.

In Diagram 1 we see a very common shot, one that can come up several times a rack, especially in 9 ball. Although I had played variations of this shot thousands of times through the years, it wasn't until fairly recently that I consciously filed it in my set of references. I begin to define a shot as a reference when I notice that my cue ball behaves consistently whenever I shoot it without applying any thought to the cue ball. For example, if I'm straight in on game ball, a shot where my only concern is pocketing the object ball, I invariably play a stop shot unconsciously. It's my default shot in that situation and anything different would require a conscious decision. For the shot in the diagram, my reference cue-ball track is the line that my cue describes while I'm shooting. In this case, that track works perfectly to hit the diamond just past the cue's butt end and then roll toward the 5 ball with the proper angle to play position for the 6 ball from there.

This type of shot not only comes up frequently but it is the shot we want, the one we would set up with ball in hand. Most intermediate players tend to play this shot too hard with a mighty effort to draw the cue ball back across the table's diagonal, an error that leads many to try even harder after each unsuccessful attempt. But the shot calls for a different approach and is my favorite example of a draw shot that's best played with a follow stroke. Instead of a sharp, snappy draw stroke, the shot requires a long, smooth stroke with gradual acceleration. Although we do draw the cue ball, it's the english—right in this case—that works more to move the cue ball to the other end of the table. And the smooth, languid follow stroke spins the cue ball best.

The ability to move the cue ball consistently on the same line that the cue describes will come with a little practice. Mark the setup for the shot and practice shooting until the cue ball tracks along the reference line repeatedly and effortlessly. Pay attention to the stroke and do not be afraid to apply a healthy dose of spin to the cue ball. After mastering the reference line you can practice making adjustments to it by aiming for targets on each side of it. To hit the diamond closer to the side pocket, cut back on the english. To go past the reference line on its right side, try a slower stroke with a longer follow through. Also, since tables vary from one to another, this is a good shot to nail down in preparation for a match on a strange table. A table with hard cushions, such as a bar table, will require more spin and a smoother stroke than a table with softer rubber. In any case, whenever I encounter this type of shot and see that the cue-line reference will work for position, I can shoot comfortably and confidently.

Just as it makes sense to master a manageable set of frequently occurring reference shots on the pool table, it's also more practical to forgo reading 30-plus volumes in favor of *The Know It All*, where, in under 400 pages, A.J. Jacobs presents enough fascinating tidbits to satisfy most people's hunger for knowledge, without threatening anyone's sanity. In just a few hours one can learn about the head-flattening rituals of some Pacific Northwest Indians and that scapulimancy is the art of predicting the future using the shoulder blades of animals. He even throws in a nod to Mosconi and the fact that the young Willie practiced pool with a broom and potatoes after his father forbade him from playing. That's enough knowledge to tide me over while giving me more time to study the effects of reverse english off the second rail—essential wisdom that Britannica no doubt lacks.

