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A Plan for 8 Ball

After a lot of initial skepticism, I finally came around about a year ago to join the crowd and invest my share of hope into the success of the IPT. Along with all the money and respectability that was going to rain on pool and its players came another promise that I anticipated most eagerly. I was certain that after watching the world's best players compete at 8 Ball for a couple years, the rest of us would learn the secrets of pool's most common game while the game itself would gain credibility among serious players. Now, with the tour's apparent demise in a vortex of chicanery and broken promises, 8 ball stands to get a black eye by association while we students are left out in the cold to try and unravel the game's mysteries on our own.

Despite 8 ball's popularity, few players have mastered the game, owing mostly to the challenge of shot selection, a feature that forces the shooter to design the best run out and then execute it. And nowadays, with straight pool all but gone, too many players go without the necessary exposure to shot-selection problems and solutions. Conventional wisdom tells us that a good straight-pool player should also play good 8-ball, a logical theory but, because of subtle differences between the two games, one that's not necessarily correct.

While it's true that a straight-pool player with the ability to appraise a rack and then map out a sequence to complete it has a tremendous advantage over someone who lacks that skill, 8 ball confronts us with unique challenges that can flummox the 14.1 player who fails to consider the differences between the two games. Because every ball on the table is available to the straight-pool shooter, 14.1 typically calls for a more gradual march through the battlefield, minimizing cue ball travel for most shots. In Diagram 1 we have an 8-ball setup that recently arose in competition and stumped an avid straight-pool player.

We pick up the action with the player at the table shooting stripes. Since the 3 ball blocks the 8 from going into the top-left corner I think we must agree that the 10 will be the key ball, or the last stripe before shooting the 8 into the bottom-left corner. And since the 9 is the only other ball to shoot from this position, the shooter must logically begin there. So, with four stripes left and the first and last shots decided, what could go wrong? Because straight-pool players like to take balls off in a manner that cleans off an entire section of the table before moving to another, they tend to shy away from shots that move the cue ball long distances. And so, following that principle, the shooter in this game opted to leave the cue ball where we see the dotted-outlined ball for position on the nearby 14 ball in the side pocket with a good angle to move toward that 13 ball lying on the head rail.

If the game had been straight pool, perhaps that would have been a solid choice since it would lead naturally to shots on the 2, 4 and 13 balls before returning to the business end of the table to finish up. In this rack of 8 ball however, that choice led to a

dead end and an eventual loss. The angle on the 14 ball introduces an unavoidable collision with the 2 ball, an occurrence that most experienced players like to avoid at all costs. In this case the cue ball grazed the 2 and wound up frozen to the side rail with the 2 ball blocking any shot on the 13. The ensuing, hopeless stab at the 10 ball resulted in a miss and an easy run out for the incoming shooter.

One might say that he did not have to wind up snookered on the 13 ball and that outcome was just a bit of bad luck. I'm sure the shooter thought so when that roll forced a change in plan and a premature shot at the 10 ball, the only logical key ball on the table. A little analysis however shows that it wasn't bad luck but bad planning that derailed the run out. If we imagine a favorable bounce off the 2 and position for the 13 with an ideal angle, the shot from the 13 to the 10 remains a frightening prospect. The 4 ball blocks the one-rail path while the 5 and 7 balls protect against routine two-rail position.

The correct choice here is clear and should occur to almost anyone after taking a minute to examine the table. An old and proven piece of 8-ball wisdom advises us to design the run out from the 8 and move backwards through the rack until it's complete. Here, we see a classic example of that wisdom's value. After nominating the 10 as the key ball, the obvious best shot before the 10 is a stop shot on the 14 in the side pocket, making the 13 ball the correct second shot. In contrast to that approach, a player proceeding forward from the 9 ball, as our player in question did, may not logically connect it with the 13 ball sitting way down at the other end of the table. However, a closer inspection reveals a wide path from the 9 to the 13 with a rebound from the bottom, side rail, through the center of the table and between the 2 and 4 balls for a shot on the 13 in the bottom-right corner. Even though that requires moving the cue ball farther than normally desired, it's simple, natural position. Moving from the 13 to the 14 is also simple, whether going one or two-rails, depending on the shot's angle.

Here we see a run-out solution that may only occur to an experienced 8-ball player and a fine example of one of the game's unique challenges. As unlikely as it may seem I sincerely hope that the IPT can solve its problems and keep its promises. The pros deserve the money and we deserve a chance to watch a lot more 8 ball played at its very best.

TOM ROSS POOL

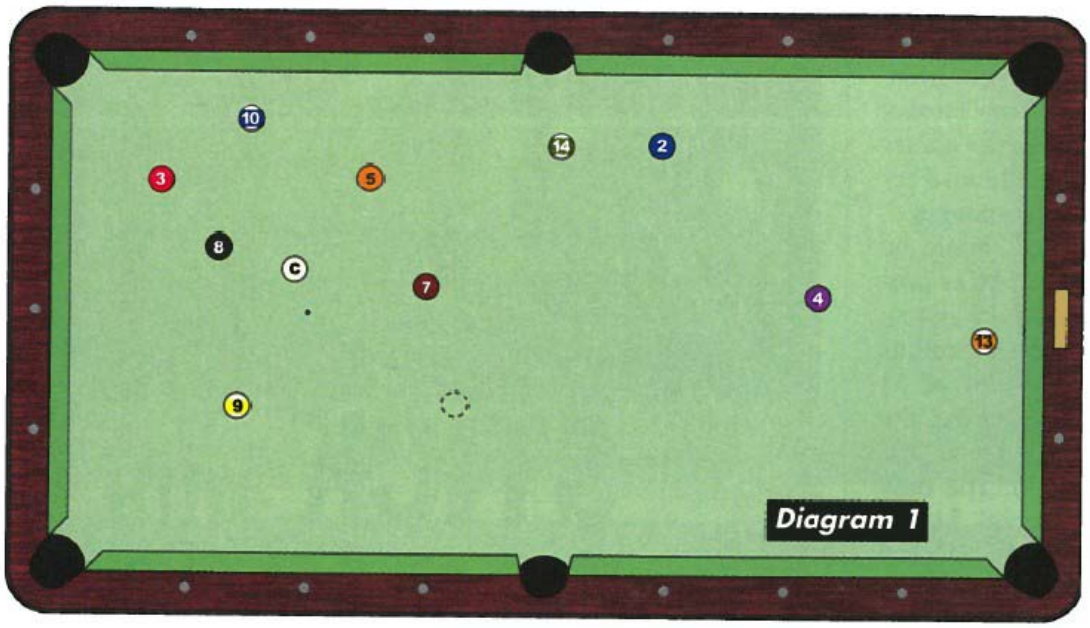
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Diagram 1