

## Looking Inward

Whenever experienced players begin teaching pool, they consistently report improvement in their own games. Focusing inward for the first time to articulate what we do invariably leads to new insights, sharper self-awareness and enhanced playing without additional work. The experience of suddenly seeing something familiar through the lens of examination can cause powerful breakthroughs that might not have arisen without that experience. Unfortunately only a relative handful of the millions of pool players will go on to teach the game and enjoy those breakthroughs.

While it's true that few players will become teachers, it turns out that those same benefits are available to everyone. Recently an occasional student and former teammate of mine, Rachel Herschel, sent me a blog that she wrote about a tournament she played in a few weeks ago. I know that tournament blogs are everywhere these days, but Rachel's stood out for several reasons. First, it's a well-written account peppered with sharp insights and honest introspection. More significant however is that such an astute appraisal came to me from an APA 3-handicapper playing in her very first singles tournament. And one other thing to note, she's also a concert violinist, currently playing second violin with the Denver Philharmonic Orchestra.

For years I've observed that musicians seem to have a special affinity for pool and have written briefly about that here. I suspect that affinity springs from qualities that musicians share with pool players. They're good with their hands; they must manage a similar challenge to coordinate the left and right brain; and they're used to long hours practicing elements of their craft that may not resemble the finished product. She and I discussed my suspicions, and then she wrote at length about her views on the subject. In the future we'll explore some of that here in *Billiards Digest*. Right now I want to share a few of her thoughts on the process of examining ourselves in writing to see what can be gained from doing it. Here's a brief excerpt from an interview with Rachel shortly after she sent me her blog.

*Your first tournament blog is impressively honest and insightful, and clearly not your first attempt at self-investigation. When did you begin writing about yourself?*

For almost twenty years I have been writing about the relationship I've had with my violin. In fact I have an entry from my third concert ever (when I was ten) that I still like to read occasionally because it reminds me of my pure love for playing the instrument. For most of my early years, I just did it because it felt good to write about frustrations, breakthroughs and the fact that I hated Kreutzer etudes and Mozart concertos, but was forced to play them anyway.

*You talk about how writing helps you focus better on those areas where you need work, but it was also nice to read about your victorious first match and the fact that you thought you played well.*

As you know, I can be pretty hard on myself for my shortcomings. Reading about my successes is a great way for me to keep things in perspective and to celebrate small victories. It keeps me motivated to keep working hard and striving to perform to my very best ability, without focusing as much on the things I didn't do well.

*You've been writing about your music since you were a small girl and now you're playing in pool tournaments and writing about that. Is it working?*

In the last couple of months, I've decided that I want to be a great pool player. I feel passionate about the game and I want very much to be able to compete with many of the great players I know. Though to others they may seem different, I often draw many parallels between music and pool, and it's because of this that I decided to try the writing method with my pool game. After writing about just one tournament, I have already realized a few small things that I think will benefit my game in the future. I know now that resting my left forearm on the slate helps keep my bridge in one place when my hands are shaking, that attitude is a huge part of playing the game and that I can play competitively against someone with a ranking twice mine when my pool chi is harnessed and I'm feeling confident and having fun. I expect that if I continue to write about my progress, I will experience similar successes in pool, just as I have with music.

A lot of instructors, me included, encourage students to keep a written record of practice sessions in order to track progress because doing so provides such tangible evidence of improvement. Until now however, I never considered that such a record should be much more than a statistical account of high runs or successful trials with various exercises. But after speaking with Rachel and reading some of her thoughts on the matter, I see that delving beyond the numbers to recall and describe every possible detail about a practice session or a tournament outing helps us gain a keener awareness of every factor that contributes to the overall performance. And it's important for us to grasp that the opportunity to examine our pool games in writing is available to everyone, not just professionals or so-called authorities. So, as we read books and gain knowledge from our favorite pool authors, at the same time, every player has the chance to assemble a unique history of development and write his or her own personal book.

