

March 2009

## Position Principles

If we dwell on the fact that it's nearly impossible for a pool player to see the same exact layout twice in one lifetime, the prospect of running a rack can become a daunting one. So, instead of fretting over the surprises that we can encounter after opening a rack, we serve ourselves better to focus on learning a set of principles or guidelines that work to make the strange seem familiar. As we're about to see with the opening shot on the 7 ball to begin the three-ball run in Diagram 1, a seemingly simple shot can reveal a number of important position principles that come to our aid recurrently to help us make our way through unfamiliar territory.

Before shooting the 7 ball the first important step is to walk over to the other end of the table to look at the 8 ball and decide exactly where you want the cue ball to land for the next shot. While making a pinpoint choice for position may sound difficult, doing so actually makes the shot easier. My experience shows that pool's most popular distraction is thinking about position for the next shot while shooting the current one, a disruption that interferes with the creative thinking we need to pocket a ball. Making an exact choice for position allows us to complete the analytical thinking and forget about the next shot to shoot the one in the present with a clear mind. Because of the 8 ball's position and its relationship to the 9, walking over to look at it before shooting the 7 is especially important here. Too often, when we look at a ball like the 8 from the other end of the table, we easily regard it as a ball on the rail and then unconsciously play position for it as such. Then we discover that a good angle for a ball on a rail can yield a straight-in shot for a ball an inch or two away from the rail, which in this case would demand a difficult position shot for that 9 ball lying a mere foot away. Walking to the next shot and choosing position serves another important purpose for all shots by helping to keep the tempo under control for a more consistent performance.

Because I think most experienced players would play the 7 ball with a naturally rolling cue ball and some right-hand english to reach the other end of the table, we see a second important element of position play that many players overlook. When our desired position requires hitting two or more rails, our position target is almost always the spot we need to hit on the second rail. For our shot on the 7 ball, a rolling cue ball will always hit the first rail in the same spot and can end up in countless places on the table depending on english and speed. It's the hit on the second rail that determines a unique track, a principle that all avid 3-cushion billiard players learn early. For this shot and others like it, the initial running english on the cue ball reverses on the second long rail to help kill the cue ball and open up a margin for error with its speed.

An old rule of thumb that the diagram appears to violate advises us to avoid adding complexity to a shot by hitting unnecessary rails. In other words if you can get somewhere with one rail, why hit two, or three if you can get somewhere with two? Well, I often follow a different rule to override that one. Mine says that the best way to avoid leaving the cue ball on a rail is hit that rail and rebound from it. So, for many shots, I like

to bounce the cue ball to its final destination from the closest cushion to that spot. And while it's possible to get the cue ball into good position for the 8 ball using one or two rails, I contend that it's easiest with the three-rail path that's diagrammed. It's doubtful that any experienced player would attempt to go one rail here unless absolutely forced to do so. A lot of players might elect to hit the second rail a little closer to the side pocket for two-rail position, certainly a viable option for this shot. That choice however ends with the cue ball rolling toward the right short rail, and I prefer to see it rolling away from a rail to its destination.

Finally we see one of pool's most powerful principles illustrated by the cue ball moving through the center of the table. Because there is no straight line from anywhere on a cushion that goes over the table's center spot to a pocket, a cue ball rebounding from a cushion over the center spot cannot scratch. Despite the wide variations in style and personality that we observe among professional players, every one of them comes to the match with a cue ball that will track through the center by default. I can almost promise that counting the number of times you see a cue ball going toward the center, to the center or through the center during a professional 9-ball match will yield an amazingly high number. The frequency with which they send the cue ball through the center on shots that do not require position, the game winner for example, testifies nicely to the fact that the center is where a pro's cue ball goes on autopilot. Practice rolling over the center spot consistently off of the first rail for the shot diagrammed. Applied practice to finding the center spot for all imaginable paths around the table will transform anyone's pool game in a month.

Because pool confronts us with a virtually infinite set of possible layouts and surprises there is no way for us to learn and memorize every subtle distinction we encounter. Instead, as we play more and gain experience, we employ a reliable set of guidelines to manage the game. The four principles illustrated in this one seemingly simple shot deserve attention and practice as they will resurface continually to help navigate countless run outs.



