

## CONCENTRATION

In conversations about competitive pool the most popular topic, with the possible exception of stroke, is concentration. From the time that we first enter the competitive scene we hear about the importance of good concentration. During post-match interviews professionals often sum up their performances, good or bad, with a few words about how sharply they were concentrating. Many will say that concentration is the key to consistency. But as much as we hear and talk about it can we identify concentration and then develop and strengthen it?

For our purpose let us define concentration as the ability to stay focused amid distraction to perform at the full potential of our skills. Distractions come from the external world in the sights and sounds of a busy poolroom and the internal world in the activity of the mind. Regardless of its source when we shift our attention to a distraction during a critical moment in the execution of a shot the result is usually unfavorable.

In most playing environments we face the ongoing possibility of external distraction such as someone walking in front of a shot. When a certain movement or sound draws the shooter's attention at the wrong time it can cause a miss. But even in an empty, quiet room we still must contend with the noise that comes from within our minds. Internal distractions can affect us more profoundly because of the broad scope of our mental capacity and because they can occur consistently as the result of bad thinking habits. The most common internal distraction is a concern for position play that may pop up in the player's mind when it is time to shoot or a position worry that lingers throughout the shot's preparation. Many players battle that phenomenon so frequently that they accept it as a normal part of the game and maybe hope that it will go away at some level of improvement. The truth is that until a player learns to manage his thinking the shotmaking/position conflict will endure as a struggle and hinder advancement to higher levels.

In order to understand why distractions affect us we must distinguish how we think while we play. Pool requires us to apply both analytical and creative thought to every shot and to combine the two disparate processes effectively for success. Position and tactical play come from analysis and decision-making. Pocketing a ball on the other hand is a creative expression. That is why as committed players we can learn continually to improve the former while the challenge of the latter remains rather consistent throughout our lives. When things are flowing well we may find ourselves making better decisions faster but the creative act of pocketing the ball is always vulnerable to distraction.

As it turns out good concentration is simply a state of readiness to shoot when it is time and occurs as a distinct moment of clarity just before pulling the trigger. To attain that clarity you must learn to complete your analytical thinking to provide a clearing for the creative process of pocketing the ball; you need a routine for managing both types of

thinking separately. First, while standing erect, analyze the present shot until you make a decision for the next shot's position and then watch a short, mental movie of the cue ball going there. If you like the way that movie ends leave the theater without regard for its correctness and proceed to the stance. The willingness to let go of being correct is necessary to prevent lingering thoughts. If you do not think that you made the best decision then you must stand up and apply further analysis to determine what is best. Remember though that most pool shots offer several options and analysis in the context of what works will produce better results than fretting over what is most correct.

Before making your stance you should stop and, from behind the cue ball, look at the object ball until you see it as one you will pocket. After making that connection with the object ball get into your stance to begin your warm up for the shot. The warm-up strokes serve as preparation for shooting and to verify the exact spot on the cue ball to hit. After the warm up move your eyes from the cue ball to the object ball and stop stroking. With your eyes fixed on the object ball and your stroke paused you will know whether you are ready to shoot. If any thoughts or concerns arise during that pause they should ring loudly as a warning for you to stand up and address them before making a new stance. Since we have no control over what goes on around us in the room, there is always the possibility of an external distraction during the pause. Experienced players know the futility of pretending not to be distracted and, when something catches their attention at the wrong moment, will stand up to clear their thinking and begin a new stance.

When you *are* ready to shoot, while you are paused with your eyes on the object ball, you will see the image of a ball certain to go into the pocket with no thinking whatsoever surrounding it. That is the feeling of sharp concentration and the time to take one stroke and shoot. Look for the pause, a complete stop before delivery, in the routine of professional pool players as well as other athletes about to execute creative action such as pro golfers and major-league pitchers.

You can develop and strengthen your concentration by practicing the complete routine with fairly simple shots. Spread out eight balls on one half of the table and run them with conscious awareness of the routine for every shot. Look at the shot; analyze it until you choose the next shot's position; let go of your thinking about that position; connect with the object ball; make your stance; warm up; pause and shoot. Pay attention to completing every step and look for ever-sharpening clarity during the pause. Though the analysis will move faster on easy shots with simple position solutions do not forgo conscious completion of each step. Reserving the effort for difficult shots only will reinforce their distinction as difficult. After this routine becomes habit you will complete the steps without effort. Think about the straight-pool champion shooting mostly easy shots for an hour or more without a miss and how firmly committed to routine that player must be to stay focused. That kind of discipline leads to what great players are describing when they talk about being "in the zone."

