

Luck

Several times in the movie *Rounders*, Matt Damon's character, Mike McDermott, attacks the common belief that success in poker depends on luck. In a scene where his girlfriend nags him about risking too much he asks her, "Why does it still seem like gambling to you? Why do you think that the same five guys make it to the final table at the World Series Of Poker every single year? What are they, the luckiest guys in Las Vegas?" In some games, the required skills are so arcane that casual participants cannot even see what good players are doing to win. So it's natural for dilettantes to believe that luck is the determining factor. Some people think that good fishing depends on luck and I wish they were right. That would make the world's trout so completely safe around me because I'm unlucky, not unskilled, and take the whole matter out of my hands. In a sport so technical and demanding I cannot even imagine how luck would help.

It's hard to say where pool falls in the luck spectrum, but it's somewhere between craps and chess. If we polled recreational players, would we find some who believe that they could beat a professional with a little luck? A survey of seasoned tournament players would definitely show a strong regard for the role that luck plays in pool. After winning January's Mid Atlantic 9-Ball Championship, Efen Reyes said nothing about his performance except that the gods smiled on him and he was very lucky. Maybe he is speaking modestly and he really believes that he won because he was extremely lucky. I have a feeling that he also played pretty well that week and sank at least a few balls in harmony with his intentions.

Although we may find it difficult to determine how strongly luck influences the outcome of a pool match—it varies from one to the next—when a world champion attributes a tournament victory to "the gods smiling," we cannot dismiss its relevance. At the same time however we must believe, above all, that we have control. I recently scolded someone after he missed a shot by six inches and wondered loudly why the pool gods hold him in such contempt. I snapped back, "There are no pool gods and you need to practice more." I hope that I'm correct because I would hate to threaten my own good fortune by denying their existence and forcing them to prove it at my expense. At least I know that Blaise Pascal, my favorite gambling theologian, was not thinking of a pool god when he cooked up his famous wager because the game had not yet been invented.

Whether we envision a panel of deities working the pool beat or that lady from a Frank Sinatra song, part of what happens on a pool table occurs beyond our control and we must acknowledge fortune's influence to some degree. Because great pool requires such precise control and the players who win most are the ones with the sharpest skills, it's common for adept players to convey a profound distaste for luck when the subject comes up. Naturally, those players that deride luck consider themselves unlucky and therefore, probably are.

We do not know how luck is distributed throughout the universe but some players do get more than their fair share. So I interviewed one of them. In Denver we have a guy

named Mike Hopkins, a dangerous player who is widely considered as a lucky one too, a reputation he accepts cheerfully. He offered some insight that makes a lot of sense. When he finds himself in a situation where he does not *know* what will happen, maybe because the cue ball will hit other balls with no way of predicting where it will go afterwards, he hits the shot with a firm, confident stroke. He said that he expects things to turn out well for him and they usually do. When we hit those shots with a fearful stroke we tend to wind up with the outcome that we fear.

We also discussed when we are most likely to be lucky and found ourselves in agreement. We get lucky when we feel confident. Ironically we feel most confident when we know that we have a distinct edge so it seems that luck comes when we need it least. On the flipside, when we feel outclassed or overmatched, those times when we want some luck to even things up, it rarely visits. But in those situations we are more likely to shoot timidly. Soft, cautious strokes are the ones that leave missed shots hanging in the pocket for our opponents or leave the cue ball a few inches short of its destination on safety attempts. Not only do we make more shots when we stroke the ball confidently and firmly but, when we do miss, that little bit of extra speed is often enough to move the object ball away from the pocket to a spot that leaves our opponents safe. Again, we see a correlation between luck and fear and old Mike brings very little fear to the table.

I know that I'm drawing conclusions from a sample of one, but since nobody really understands luck, it's enough for me. A lot of pool writers state very definitively that the rolls even out in the long run, but how do they know that? Has anyone ever kept a lifetime diary of rolls, lucky and unlucky, and then, some time between his last pool game and last breath, counted the check marks in each column? It's fear of bad luck and the embarrassment many players feel for too much good luck that encourages them to hope for even luck at best. It's very strange too because I cannot think of another area where people aspire to dead-even average. For my money I'm going with the guy who believes that he absolutely deserves luck and expects it.

Maybe Reyes was speaking from courteous modesty when he said that he won because he was very lucky. But I suspect that he courts lady luck and was acknowledging her acceptance of a clear invitation. A good research project would be to find a quote from him stating that he lost a tournament because he was unlucky. Maybe there is none, which would indicate that he only tips his hat one way. While it may be too unrealistic to believe that we will never experience any bad luck at all, we do not have to anticipate equal measures of it to balance the good. We have no definite knowledge of exactly how our pool luck has gone in the past and we are free to ask for as much good luck as we want from the future. We can emulate some of the best players by shooting with the bravado that generates good rolls and accepting them graciously, without guilt. I know that my own game is in tune when I feel cocky enough to expect luck and then receive it. If I felt better about my fishing game I might get lucky there too.

