

Shooting

One might say that we can trace the arc of a person's life as a long series of attachments. From that first moment when we attach ourselves to our parents we begin a progression that moves through friends, lovers and careers before winding up attached to life itself in a fight to hang on. People commonly look to some of the add-ons they accumulate, such as the status of a certain job or title, to define their lives. Sometimes though, our attachments are precisely what stop us from moving forward as in the case of reluctance to leave a harmful relationship or a dead-end job. But eventually, in the ultimate severance of such detriments, we find the clarity and strength to proceed and achieve. When it comes to shot making on a pool table, the typical, intermediate player carries an attachment that, until it is broken, muddies the art of pocketing balls.

Among the many games that we play with sticks and balls, like golf or tennis, pool distinguishes itself very sharply. It's the only game with more than one ball. Any experience with those other games and maybe the haunting voice of a little-league coach shouting, "Keep your eye on the ball!" can influence shooters to focus on the ball that they will hit with the stick—the cue ball. A few people come to pool with no experience from other games and logic directs their eyes to the cue ball. Under any circumstances, during our initial encounters with pool, our first, main concern is a fear of missing the cue ball with the tip. And since it makes sense to look at what we want the stick to hit, almost everyone who plays pool begins shooting with eyes focused on the cue ball, thus forming the first bonds of a lasting attachment to it.

Those bonds are so strong that many players, after years of experience, often have to ask the popular question, "Which ball should I be looking at when I shoot?" The answer of course is the object ball. And yes, that is my final answer. But it's only part of the complete answer, which lies in releasing our grip on the cue ball. Learning to look at the object ball last, which for some players is a lot trickier than it sounds, and may be a hell of a leap toward pocketing more balls, is only a small step toward the realm of pure shot making. To move into that realm we must break the cue-ball attachment completely.

First, to examine the cue ball's role in shot making we should forget about other games with sticks. Instead we should think about games where the players hurl objects at targets with their hands. Basketball and darts are good examples. It would be impossible to imagine those players looking at the ball or the dart instead of the target during the shot. We must regard the cue ball in that same way for pool, where, despite the use of a stick, and disregarding the most grossly uncoordinated beginners, nobody misses the cue ball. Once the stance is formed, the stick moves through the cue ball on the path of its alignment. And pocketing balls is simply a matter of matching the alignment of the stance to the line of the shot.

The key is found in the word "line" and what it takes to form one—two points. When we approach a shot with our eyes on the cue ball we do not see a line, but merely

one of its points. So we must look for the line after we're down as we prepare to shoot in the manner that we all learned as beginners. Get down and aim the shot. Great players learn to move on from there and reverse the process to aim the shot and then get down, which is accomplished by moving our focus past the cue ball to the real target, the object ball.

As in other areas where attachments stop us, we must believe that life will go on and get better after we leave that nasty part of it behind. Sometimes it takes a little faith. A good way to give up on the cue ball is to put it on the table and refuse to look at it. Stand straight up behind it, looking past it to a pocket. The cue ball will call out for your attention but don't give in; stay strong. You will see its presence in the foreground but resist any temptation to look directly at it. Look at the pocket instead and sharpen your focus onto a pinpoint in it until you make a connection with that small target. Now, as you make your stance, keep your eyes on that pinpoint in the pocket throughout the whole process. If the connection you made to the pinpoint is intact after you land in your stance, shoot at it without taking your eyes off of it. If you catch your eyes moving toward the cue ball at any moment, stand up and start over. Practice shooting one ball into a pocket repeatedly without looking directly at that ball. A good way to reinforce the idea is to close your eyes before the last stroke and listen for the ball hitting the pocket.

When you can shoot one ball into a pocket without looking at the ball, you are ready for some pool shots. Start with a straight-in shot to a corner pocket with the object ball about a foot-and-a-half from the pocket and the cue ball about a foot-and-a-half from the object ball. You will now pocket some balls without looking at the cue ball. And you will transfer the connection you made with the pocket on the previous shots to the object ball. Stand behind the cue ball and look at the object ball until you make that connection to it. Make your stance without moving your eyes from it. If the connection is intact after your stance is formed you can shoot the object ball into the pocket without taking a single look at the cue ball throughout the shot.

On most shots you must look at the cue ball to ensure that you will hit it properly for the spin you want. For shots with spin, think about how you will hit the cue ball as you are looking at the object ball. Make your stance with your eyes on the object ball; confirm your connection with it after you're down; then take your first look at the cue ball. Take a few practice strokes looking at the cue ball; stop; move your eyes back to the object ball and, if the connection is still there, take one stroke and shoot it in. The pool shot begins and ends with eyes on the object ball.

The above training, radical as it may seem, is necessary to eliminate undue emphasis on the cue ball, which, believe it or not, requires no attention for shot making. Learning to form the stance with eyes on the object ball causes a powerful breakthrough for most students when they experience, for the first time, landing dead perfect on the line of the shot and pocketing balls with no further aiming after they're down. It may seem a little unfair to Mr. Cue Ball at first, but he'll get over it.

