

Adjusting

Experienced players know that pool tables differ from brand to brand, room to room, table to table in the same room and even from day to day on the same table. When we venture into unfamiliar territory for tournament or league play, we must adjust as quickly as possible to new conditions in order to compete. Ideally we would visit the tournament site a day or two beforehand with enough time for practice to adjust to the table's speed, rebound angles and any peculiarities we may encounter. But such relaxed, careful study is a rare luxury. Instead we commonly find ourselves forced to gather the necessary intelligence in a short amount of time just prior to the start of competition.

Typically, a player with five or ten minutes to prepare for a match will spend that time shooting shots or running a couple racks, a useful warm-up on familiar ground perhaps, but one that doesn't reveal much about the table itself. Of course making shots is always good, but as tournament players, we arrive already knowing how to pocket balls. The knowledge we lack in a strange room concerns the tables and how they play. I have a routine for checking out an unfamiliar table in a few minutes to adjust as quickly as possible.

First comes speed and a few simple shots to adapt promptly. I begin with the cue ball about a half diamond behind the head string in the middle of the table. From there I shoot to the foot rail to rebound back to the head rail for a second rebound before landing on or near the spot from where I shot it. That's exactly two table lengths, otherwise known as lag speed, and a solid reference after only two or three successful shots. If I have only a few seconds before a match on a strange table, that is the one shot I shoot. With more time to mess around I'll place the cue ball on the center spot and shoot it three rails, then four rails back to the center spot. That helps me sharpen my speed further and find the table's center before proceeding to examine the table's rebounds in greater depth.

In the diagram we see a table with a mess of lines, and the black ones resembling the lines we see in books that teach us diamond systems. Cue ball A sits on the reference line for a three-rail kick using the corner-five system, a system so popular that it's almost invariably what a person is thinking about when referring to something called *the* diamond system. In the diagram, the solid, black lines show the cue ball's path for a table that plays on system. In reality however, many tables do not mimic the pretty pictures in the books and will require some adjustment to make the shots work.

To gauge how the table plays begin with the cue ball as shown for shot A. Then, using a smooth, level stroke, hit the cue ball above center with one tip of running english, or right in this case. A level stroke is critical since elevation can add draw and therefore alter the rebound tracks. Play the shot several times to guarantee a consistent stroke

while observing the cue ball's path around the table. Most pool tables play short, meaning that the cue ball will return on a path similar to the one represented by the orange arrow, which comes in one diamond shy of pocket A. To find pocket A on a short table, move the aiming point farther along the first rail. As the aiming point on the first rail moves to the right along the white, dotted line, the return on the third rail will generally move the same distance to the left until the cue ball finds the pocket. I would note where I must hit on the first rail to meet the corner and, with enough time, repeat the exercise from the other three corners on that table.

Shot B shows the reference track for the plus-two system, my favorite for two-rail kicks, and probably the second most popular system from three-cushion billiards. To dial this in on a strange table place the cue ball on the line that connects the third diamond on the long rail to the center diamond on the left, short rail as shown. Begin with the same hit from shot A, above-center and one-tip of right english, to shoot the cue ball two rails for pocket B with lag speed. If the table plays short, the cue ball is likely to return to the long rail in the vicinity of the X, meaning that an adjustment is required to find the pocket. Because connecting the diamonds is so critical to making this system work, we must adapt to the table differently from the way we tuned shot A, where we kept the stroke consistent and searched for the correct aiming point on the first rail. To tune this two-rail system, we shall continue aiming at the center diamond while adjusting the english until the cue ball finds pocket B. If the cue ball is returning short, or near the X, use less english. If it returns long, or near the Y, apply more right-hand english. After finding the pocket with the reference track, I would move the cue ball over to the red-arrow/red-diamond track to find the pocket from there. Most tables require slightly more english for that track. Generally, tables with harder rubber require the addition of more english than tables with softer cushions as the cue ball's origin moves toward pocket B.

Since all pool tables tend to look alike, many players are inclined to assume that all the world's green rectangles will behave alike. An important step in a pool education occurs when a player first realizes that weird results can come from the equipment itself and then learns how to eliminate surprises. Fortunately I've spent the last few years at Shakespeare's, where I've learned a little three-cushion billiards on tables that play dead on system. Having such benchmark tables at my disposal gives me hands-on experience with perfect equipment and a valuable reference when adjusting to other tables, a tool that helps win matches that might otherwise slip away.

