

The Break

Among top 9-ball players, the one shot widely considered as the game's most important is the break, often compared to the tee shot in golf or the serve in tennis. And I would bet that, if we scanned the wish lists of competitive amateur players, we would find "a more powerful break" at or near the top of most lists, trumped only perhaps by a yearning for greater consistency. Almost all of us would like to infuse our breaks with greater power, but for many of us, it's precisely that desire that leads to the most common downfalls with the break.

When the goal is to generate more power, we naturally increase force, a logical response maybe, but not necessarily an effective one. In fact, I would say that the number-one cause of a weak break is trying too hard to deliver a strong one. Excessive trying typically tenses the shooting hand, which slows down the cue and usually moves it off line. Along with that debilitating tension, many players, perhaps hoping to emulate their favorite professionals, try to throw their bodies into the break, a move that I see delivered counter productively in about 95 out of a hundred cases. Most commonly, the action is delivered with bad timing as the shooter moves his or her body too far ahead of the stroke to produce a weaker delivery than one with no body movement. Occasionally we see a shooter with proper timing, but compromised accuracy as the extra body movement misdirects the cue off line. So, while the pool stroke may appear simple compared to, say, a golf swing, a wild, jumping lunge into a break turns out to be a little too athletic for most players. Certainly, improvement lies within reach but we must begin working toward it at the level where we play before we can attempt to emulate the pros.

One of the world's strongest breaks belongs to Francisco Bustamante, who was featured almost four years ago in the May 2003, *Billiards Digest* cover story, "Break Like Bustamante." There we see his break presented in a series of photographs that capture ten separate steps in the process from start to finish. My first reaction to the story was panic as I imagined amateurs everywhere trying to reproduce an action that culminates with his right foot climbing up his spine to end in a pose more befitting a figure skater than a pool player. It's an impressive physical feat that obviously works for him but looks like it could easily injure those players who try it and maybe others nearby. The article's more instructive value comes in the brief commentary from fellow pros, Ralf Souquet and Charlie Williams, who point out that the most impressive elements of Bustamante's devastating break are his control and timing.

With control and timing in mind, step one toward developing a more powerful break is efficiency. A strong break results primarily from an efficient transfer of energy from the shooting hand to the rack, something best achieved with a dead cue ball and perfectly square contact with the 1 ball, two critical elements that Bustamante himself stresses. Any time that the cue ball sits spinning after hitting the 1 ball or makes partial contact and continues rolling, that spinning or rolling represents energy in the cue ball that did not transfer to the rack. A cue ball that moves slightly slower, but slides squarely

into the 1 ball always produces better results than a faster, spinning cue ball that makes glancing contact with the 1 ball. And a cue ball that nicks the 1 and goes rolling madly around the table too often has a nasty way of ending its journey in a pocket.

A great way to develop an accurate break stroke with a dead cue ball is with a practice shot that focuses your work on one goal. Place the 1 ball on the foot spot and the cue ball on the head spot to begin shooting a simple shot that isolates accuracy and control. Shoot straight at the 1 ball with a stop shot that keeps the cue ball in place while the 1 rebounds straight from the foot rail to come back and hit the cue ball waiting for it where they first made contact. That may look easy in print but you will see that it poses a formidable challenge in practice. A slightly off-center hit on the 1 ball or a mere whisper of english on the cue ball is enough to send either ball veering off the table's center line. In fact, chances are that you will have to slow your speed down to a crawl at first to find the precise control that this shot demands. When you can achieve that second collision with speed in your break range, you are hitting both balls with professional precision. When this shot is hit perfectly, the 1 ball rebounds from the foot rail and hits the stationary cue ball squarely enough to send it directly through the center of the table and back over the head spot. Along with serving to hone your accuracy, this shot allows you to practice a simulated break shot without the tedium of having to collect and reset a full rack of balls for each trial.

When you feel that you've sharpened your accuracy you can begin working to add power to the stroke by practicing with the following guidelines. First, adjust your stance for the break so that you're standing more erect, while you set up with a bridge that's a couple inches longer than your normal bridge length. Standing taller straightens the shooting arm to facilitate a long, free swing, while the longer bridge works to generate more power with your accelerating cue, without the need for more effort. Make certain that your shooting hand moves back on the cue's butt to maintain your stroke's timing with the new, longer bridge. During your warm-up strokes, focus your tip below center on the cue ball with no english. On your last stroke, your ferrule should come all the way back to your bridge hand where it will pause. Then, with a light grip, and your focus now on the 1 ball, deliver a long, smooth stroke straight at the rack's nose with extended follow through. When the timing is right, the final stroke will feel like a long and relaxed throw of your tip straight toward the exact spot on the 1 ball that you must hit to transfer all of the cue ball's energy to the rack.

Before we can attempt to imitate an explosive, professional break we need to assemble the necessary building blocks for power. On the golf course I want to hit my tee shots as far as Tiger's, but I find that swinging harder doesn't help. When I can muster the discipline to slow down and swing better however, I manage to point myself in the right direction. Learning to deliver an accurate stroke with precise timing works to generate more power without the need for more effort and helps us imitate a professional's most enviable trait—the ability to make a hard shot look easy.



