

April 2009

Imagination

Mention pool in a serious way to a civilian and get ready to hear something along the lines of, "I suck at math," or "I flunked geometry." Apparently, to the casual observer, pool summons horrible memories and awakens old fears related to numbers, angles and square roots. Of course pool is governed by math, but so is everything else in our universe including music, painting and sculpture. So why is it in those fields that bystanders can look past the numbers to appreciate the artist's creativity, and yet see nothing beyond lines and angles when watching pool. So far throughout my lifetime in pool I have heard a pool player describe a great match with equations exactly as often as I've heard a musician describe moving up a half step on the keyboard as a rise in pitch that's equal to first note's frequency times the twelfth root of two. We know that's precisely what's happening yet it's highly doubtful that the pianist has that on her mind when she's playing music.

So, while pool may appear as mathematics to the bystander, the best players rely on intuition and touch, not numbers, to manage the task at hand. Even complex kicking systems that call for highfalutin summin' only provide a basis from which to figure the shot. After the computations the shooter still has to feel the proper stroke, spin and speed while often making an instinctive adjustment for conditions. And, because the balls arrange themselves more or less randomly after a break, unlike the keys on a piano or the colors on a painter's palette, pool players must often reach to furthest corners of the imagination for creative solutions to some peculiar problems.

In Diagram 1 we see a challenge that one of my teammates, Chris McDaniel, faced in a recent league match while shooting solids with only the 1 ball and the 8 ball remaining to win the game. As we see, he has a good shot on the 1 ball but no apparent pocket for the 8 ball. The astute observer notices the 14 ball hanging in front of the side pocket, waiting there to facilitate an easy kiss shot into the side with the 8 ball from just about anywhere on the left half of the table. But getting the cue ball back to that half of the table appears almost impossible with 11 ball blocking a draw shot and the 10 looming large near the right short rail to block any attempt to move the cue ball around three rails with follow and left-hand english. With the near side as the only reasonable pocket for the 8 ball, how does one move the cue ball into position to shoot it there? As an unfailingly committed player, Chris studied the layout calmly before arriving at the solution we see in Diagram 2.

Calling on a commonly known but rarely used technique, he executed the shot that we see, going rail first to pocket the 1 ball while moving the cue ball straight across the table and then back across again to land smack dab between the 12 ball and the 8 ball on the lower long rail. From there the 8 ball was an easy tap off of the 14 ball into the side pocket for the game winner to cap one of the most beautifully executed shots I've ever seen. Although the execution demanded perfect aim, spin and speed, most impressive to me was his ability to visualize that cue ball path before nailing the shot with a skill so rarely employed in competition.

The technique in question is learned most quickly with an object ball that's frozen to a cushion. To play the shot, freeze a ball to a long rail about one diamond segment away from the corner pocket with the cue ball positioned to give yourself roughly a 30 degree cut angle. Pocket the object ball with draw and inside english along with a rail-first hit. For the shot in Diagram 2 Chris hit rail first with low, left-hand english. Because the inside english wants to make the cue ball move forward, good draw is necessary to keep it moving perpendicular to the opposite long rail. When the cue ball reaches the top cushion, the left english takes and swings it to the left as shown. It's an uncommon shot and may seem awkward initially, but it's more unfamiliar than difficult and will come fairly quickly with a little practice

Without question pool is clearly a game of angles and numbers, but so much more lurks beneath the surface and beyond the realm of the casual observer. When top players talk about Efren Reyes and what separates him from the pack, they don't go on about his aptitude for angles or calculation, though he no doubt excels in those areas. Instead his peers all point to his ability to see what others miss and his knack for performing what others can barely conceive. And so, like all endeavors, pool must conform to the laws of mathematics. But true genius on the green rectangle springs from uninhibited imagination.

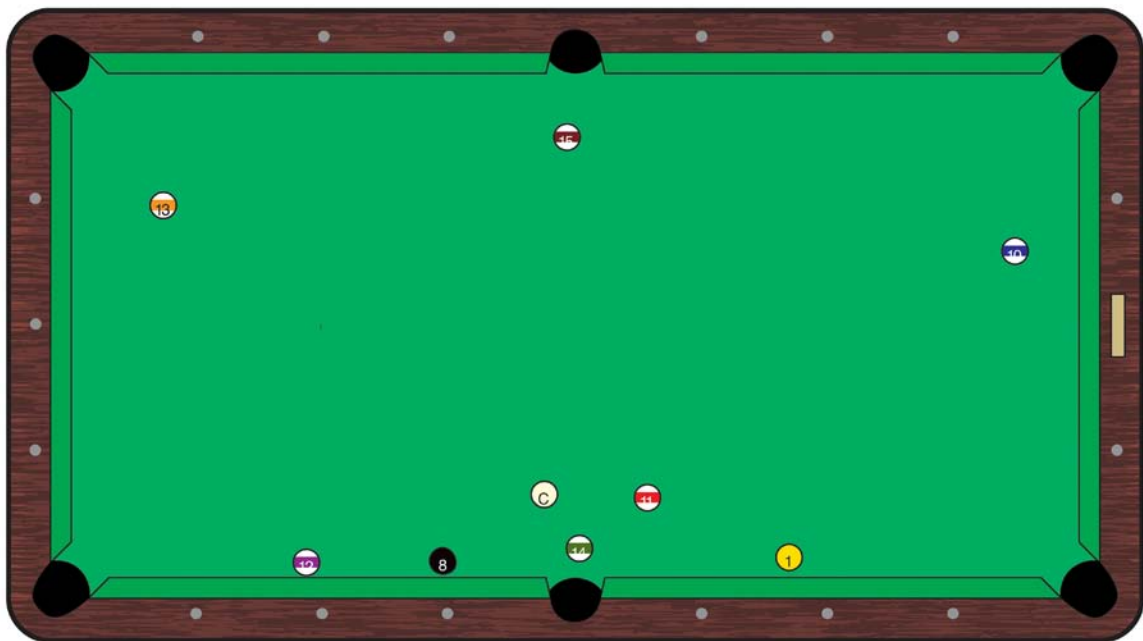


Diagram 1

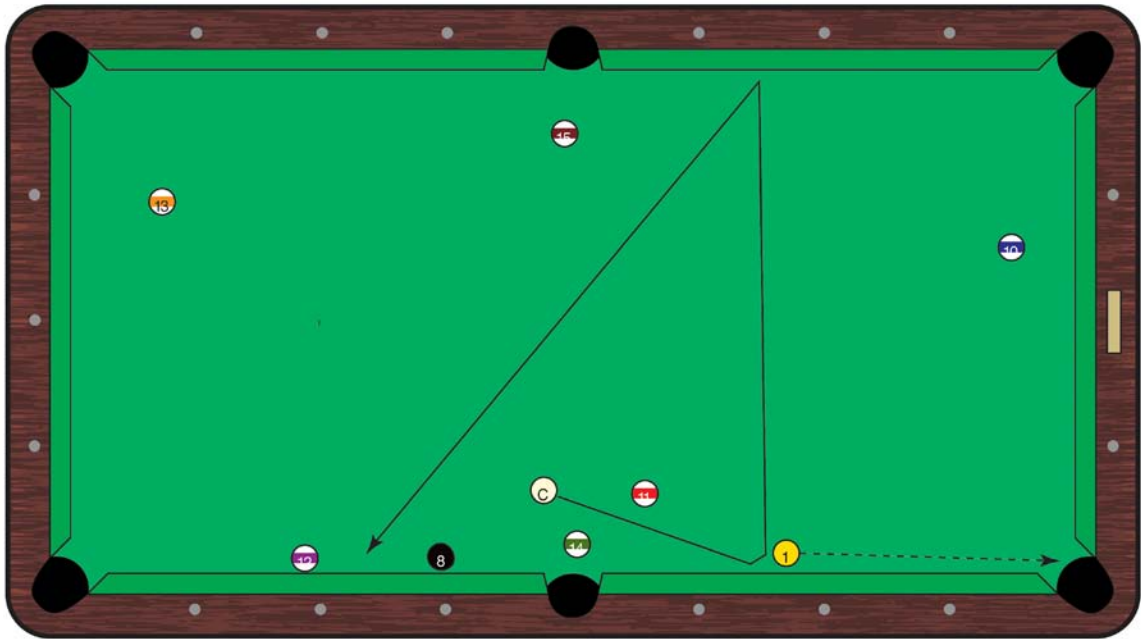


Diagram 2