

TEMPO

We all know how it feels to play pool as well as the game can be played. Whether such a period of virtuosity lasts for the span of a few racks or a few weeks, we awaken at its end to wonder why the visit was so brief and then look forward to our next fling with brilliance. We also know that there are factors in competitive pool beyond our control such as luck and the possibility of drawing a U.S.-Open contender in the Monday-night tournament. But we ignore those factors when we talk about ourselves and ask simply why we don't play our best game more often because we know that our best will steamroll anything in its path. Every one of us, regardless of skill level, faces the challenge of consistency.

When I watch the top professionals I study the players as closely as the table looking for ways to improve my own game. One observation comes as no surprise; they play a lot better than I do and, if I want to get to where they are, there's a good deal of work ahead to improve my skills and expand my knowledge. But I see something else in the comparison and make certain to share it with students. Although the skill gap may be vast there are elements present in the performance of professionals that all of us can emulate and execute as well as they, beginning now. These elements are found in the consistency of their conduct, which translates to consistency of play. Last month we discussed the importance of an unvaried routine for each single shot. We can expand now to connect the shots and flow smoothly from one to the next to take charge of tempo.

A few years ago, while working with a student who was struggling with consistency, we experimented to find a way to raise the level of her performance to match her skills. The result was an exercise that worked to uncover her natural tempo and distinguish it for her to identify and capture it. For me as an instructor the experiment caused a breakthrough as it provided a tool to offer help with a part of the game that I could barely discuss beforehand.

Set up a shot, one that you feel you should make but might miss under a little pressure, and mark the positions of the object ball and cue ball with chalk so you can play the exact shot repeatedly; for the exercise to work effectively the shot cannot be too difficult or too easy. Then line up nine balls on the rail that is farthest from where you will stand to shoot, making sure that they will not interfere with the path of the cue ball. There are some rules for the exercise and you should follow them closely. Begin with chalking your tip, an essential step in preparation for every shot. Now comes the routine set forth last month. Connect with the object ball; make your stance; warm up; move your eyes to the object ball; pause and shoot. After shooting make certain that your tip remains forward and that you stay down, no pulling back or jumping up allowed, and that you follow the object ball to the pocket with your eyes. Since your goal is to pocket all ten balls, if during the pause you are not certain that you will pocket the ball, stand up and begin the routine again starting with the chalk. After pocketing a ball you will walk around the table to pick up the next ball. Place it carefully on its spot and then pick up

the cue ball and place it on its spot to repeat the shot. If you do miss a shot you cannot grab a ball that is rolling nor will you slap any balls around the table with the shaft of your cue. Allowing all balls to stop rolling and walking around the table are critical since those elements are always present in real play. And if you do miss a shot, return all ten balls to the table to start again from the beginning.

The exercise has great latitude and numerous applications. If I feel a little harried, I use it as a warm up for tournament play. Sometimes I use it to work on a problem shot to master it in the context of playing. You can practice many different shots in this exercise and can progress with it to add a target for the cue ball in order to integrate position play into your routine. You can practice the exercise with a partner and compete for greater success with it. Once in a while I fool around with talking to someone while students work through it to test their composure amid distraction.

Working with this exercise will strengthen your hold on the key elements of shot making. One, it will enhance the feeling of certainty associated with pocketing a ball and sharpen the distinction between stroking with certainty and shooting at a ball with something else in mind. Two, it will cause you to make every shot matter and help eliminate the ruinous temptation to take a shot for granted because it looks easy. Finally, many students breeze through to the tenth ball before missing, a nice simulation of game-ball anxiety. Three, you will learn that every shot matters most because it is a pool shot rather than the last one between you and the victory parade. We all experience repeatedly that a shot holds enough challenge as it is and comes with little space for adding extra meaning to it.

Most beneficial is that the exercise will reveal your unique, natural tempo as you practice a drill that has you connecting a series of shots and walking around the table. Pool is repetitive and routine, and when played at its best, kind of tedious. When you find your natural tempo you will begin to lose yourself in it and learn that as you spend more time in your tempo you will spend more time at the table. And when you really hit your natural stride, your tempo will begin to dictate your behavior when you are not shooting as it brings the pace of your activity away from the table into harmony with the flow of your game.

Consistent play is the result of consistent behavior. Watch other players now, especially the best ones, with attention to tempo. Champions do not vary whether leading or trailing, playing well or playing poorly. While watching others with your new eye for tempo, observe how often a slight change in a player's routine tips off an upcoming miss. What about your own game? Do you speed up when you are playing well or drag a bit when things are not going your way? Do you ever allow a faster player to rev you up or a slower one to make you sluggish? When you distinguish your natural tempo and then commit to playing and practicing inside of it, regardless of circumstance, you will find it easier to resist outside influences. Then you will see the variations in your performance shrink as your best game comes out more often.

