

Running Out

Periodically throughout our lives we see a future that promises more than the present and look toward it with ideas, goals, plans and dreams. Nowadays, with a shaky economy and precarious job security, a lot of us are inspired to cook up schemes that will mitigate our dependence on jobs that may not be there tomorrow when we show up at the office. It seems that nearly everyone I know is working on a new website or invention to push mankind forward and produce a mountain of dough in the process. And somehow in our Sharper-Image world, a frightening number of “geniuses” manage to see their plans through to give us ionizing dog brushes, fax machines for the shower, and other breakthroughs that make me wonder how our species survived before the advent of radio-beacon golf balls. But the door is open for everyone and from time to time a true visionary steps through with a gadget that really does improve our quality of life. I always try and remember to light a candle for the men or women who gave us intermittent wipers, the pause-and-serve coffee maker, and that divinely-inspired, yet simple wonder from the pinnacle of innovation—the mute button—our rock-solid missile shield against car salesmen posing as TV stars.

Imagining a better future is more than a nice way to kill time; it’s required to cause the changes that make a difference. Every great act begins as a vision followed by a declaration. Pool continually summons our ability to convert a vision for the future into reality whenever we stand at a table filled with balls and imagine leaving an empty one behind. Unfortunately, in pool as in life, most of us are left with more unfulfilled desires than completed ones to show for ourselves at the end of the day.

Lately, a lot of players have been reporting to me that they are not running out given the chance and need help. When players tell me that they are not completing racks that began on track the first question I ask is what game they’re playing. Eight ball and nine ball challenge us differently, each game requiring different measures of our skills to play it well. Because every ball pocketed in a rack of eight ball leaves a tougher table with fewer options, running out requires very careful planning of the entire sequence before playing the first shot. Nine ball has no shot selection but calls for a broader range of shot-making and position skills to pocket balls and play position for others anywhere on the table.

Often our run outs are doomed before we shoot the first shot. In addition to planning a run out we must also envision ourselves executing it. Even in nine ball, where we do not have to design the shot sequence, we must take a focused look at the table before shooting and see each ball going into a chosen pocket. Sometimes, a layout that looks easy may turn out, halfway through, as more difficult than we first thought. Many intermediate players lose eight-ball or nine-ball games by committing to run outs that top players might not attempt after determining their difficulty. In those situations the best players look for the easiest, deadly safety to play and run the necessary balls to position for that.

Regardless of the game's format the greatest barrier to running out comes from within. Too often in either game we find ourselves with exactly what we wanted only to miss a simple shot and blow the game. Nine ball players tend more strongly toward such errors because of the game's makeup. Although each successive shot in nine ball makes the table easier, progress toward the only ball that matters, the nine, magnifies the tension and pressure. With each shot the fear of dogging it presses harder until we get to the end of the rack, sometimes completely wrapped up by then up in the terror of a miss. The common response to that fear is to move a little faster and get it over with. It's not our fear that causes us to miss however but the way that we manage it.

Every pool player has too many memories of recognizing a shot's meaning and then missing it for that reason. Because of those memories, when we sense such thoughts coming into our heads we want to hurry up and shoot before they get a chance to take hold, the number-one cause of missing a game winner. Our fear of becoming fearful takes over and alters the rhythm and tempo that worked for us to make the previous shots. It always amazes me to see how often players will run eight balls in one tempo and then jump quickly into shooting the nine ball without even chalking. But despite the rush, we cannot outrun the internal conversation we are trying to avoid. As soon as a thought, or even a hint of a thought, enters our minds while we are shooting, its presence is already strong enough to live there as a distraction until we address it. When we try to deny a thought's existence, it pushes harder to gain a foothold and the ensuing struggle draws too much of our mental energy. So when we sense the words, "This is the one that wins the game" entering our minds, the best approach is to acknowledge their presence and complete the conversation. We must step back for a moment to say to ourselves, "Yes, this is the game winner; and I'm going to prepare for it in my normal tempo and play it in the same manner that I shoot every ball I pocket."

Near the beginning of "The Hustler" Eddie brags to Bert that he played some great pool against Fats even though he lost. Bert says, "This isn't football; nobody pays you for yardage." And it's true. All the great shots and perfect position amount to nothing if we fail to sink the game winner. We need the planning skills of a chess master to assemble a complete vision for the future and the singularity of a bowler to manage each component of that vision in the present. So we must analyze every rack and visualize a series of shots, all connected with one another to the end before we can execute each shot separately from the others. In order to combine such disparate thinking effectively, our best approach is to see the whole rack disappear mentally and decide that the vision will work so we can forget about the big picture to proceed with the knowledge that each shot fits with the others because we already saw that it belongs. And when we get to the game-winning ball, we can shoot it more confidently since we already imagined it splitting the pocket. Someone once looked far out into the future and saw a very happy Spaniel awash in negative ions, and then went to work to make that dream a reality, one bristle at a time.