

Staying Centered

TV sure does bring out the ham in people, a point proved nicely during telecasts of the OJ trial when we occasionally caught Judge Ito more concerned with camera angles than a witness's testimony. That courtroom stuff can be so dry anyway. And throughout pool's evolution into what might be called the TV game, we have witnessed the emergence of something that was virtually absent from the old game—personality. Some years ago if we saw on the chart that Irving Crane was going to play Joe Balsis, we prepared ourselves for a pool match and nothing more. Nowadays though, if Alex Pagulayan is about to play Keith McCready, we know we'll be entertained so we line up early to see it. And with personality on display as prominently as skill, we can look for that critical element of drama called contrast. I'll bet that the boys at ESPN hope for a match-up between the exuberant Vivian Villareal and the methodical Karen Corr. The stark difference in their personalities can polarize the fans and maybe even give the commentators something to talk about.

Disregarding personality for a moment, we also notice an array of various playing styles. Some pros play aggressively, firing at long bank shots, while others wear down their opponents with relentless safety play. Most can apply either style depending on the situation, how they feel or whom they're playing. But despite all the differences, there is one thing that every professional shares and applies—an acute feel for moving the cue ball to the exact center of the table.

The center of the table is the most powerful spot on a pool table for two very important reasons. One, when the cue ball sits on or near the center spot, we have our best possible look at the surrounding balls into all six pockets with no long shots. That's why players work so hard to leave the cue ball there after a nine-ball or eight-ball break. Straight pool players also seek the center on break shots and will often send the cue ball there in difficult situations to regroup and form a plan from a position with options.

More important than the value of leaving the cue ball in the center of the table is the role that the center spot plays for a cue ball that's moving around the table. If we draw a straight line from any spot on any rail through the center spot, that line never connects to a pocket. So, a cue ball that rolls over the center spot after bouncing from a rail cannot scratch.

It's not enough however to look at the center spot before a shot and think of a way to make the cue ball move there. We must develop our feel for the center to the point where our cue ball tracks over that spot when we're not thinking at all. The best players move their cue balls over the center spot in an "auto-pilot" fashion. A strong indicator of that fact is how frequently it occurs on shots that require no position, such as game ball for example. I suspect that most top shooters develop their feel for the center without knowing it. And from my experience with teaching intermediate players and observing their common lack of feel for the center, it's not something that takes hold in a player's game overnight. If it emerges in someone's game without awareness, that process must

occur over several years of committed, daily play, with thousands of unnecessary scratches until that person unconsciously learns to retain the choices that work and discard those that do not. I know that is how it became a part of my own game and regret that I had no awareness of the center's importance as an object of practice during my formative years.

In the diagram we see a set of lines at one end of the table and a shot set up at the other end. The solid lines connect the center spot with the center diamond of each rail at that end of the table. Place the cue ball on the center spot and practice connecting those three diamonds to return the cue ball back to the center spot, the foundational shot from the Monk's famous 2-7-2 system. Most tables allow for the shot to work with an above-center hit and only a touch of running english. After mastering that shot we must note that a cue ball tracking on roughly parallel lines to the solid-line tracks, also goes through the center of the table. Most of the shots that we play to send the cue ball through the center of the table, regardless of the number of rails used, come out of the last corner, from short rail to long rail, on a track very similar to the shortest dotted line. And since we rarely play multi-rail position without some running english, the dotted line going to the center will probably not be parallel to the solid reference line. We should use the parallel-line idea as a guide without becoming attached to perfect lines that would mimic precise illustrations. In the real world every table plays differently and we need to make the necessary adjustments quickly to find the center of whatever table we're playing on now.

The shot on the three ball offers five possible paths to the center of the table: One rail directly to the center, two rails with follow and right-hand english, four rails with follow and right, two rails with draw and left, and four rails with draw and left. You may have move the cue ball closer to the short rail for the two-railer with draw. In fact, feel free to adjust the setup for any of the five paths to the center while keeping the shot basically the same. This shot is only one of countless shots we face but I like it because of its five different approaches toward the same outcome. The number of shots to set up and practice for finding the center of the table will be limited only by your imagination.

Despite the many differences among professionals, they all share a keen talent for finding the exact center of the table, the one element, above all others, that must be present to play at that level. For some, it might have matured through years of experience while other players might have sharpened their center skills with practice. A month of focused, center-table practice can knock years off of a pool education. For proof of the center's value we can watch a professional, nine-ball match and count how many times the cue ball moves over the center spot, toward it or to it. The resulting number may be somewhat staggering. It turns out to be precisely as astounding as the rarity of direct scratches among professionals.

