

## Fear of English

An old friend whom I see too rarely passed through town recently for a brief visit. For a whole night and into the next day, we talked non-stop, leaving no topic untouched, especially the forbidden pair of politics and religion. When the conversation turned serious and pool came up, my friend, who grew up with a table in his basement, confessed that he uses way too much english when he plays. Apparently he never managed to outgrow a childish fascination with a dancing cue ball to play a more controlled game. He enjoys himself though and I see no harm, especially given that he's not a pool player—far from one in fact. He's a missionary in Eastern Europe.

Because he already knows that such a wild game leads nowhere, I didn't bother to scold him, especially in light of his relationship with pool and the absence of any billiards aspirations in his profession. If he's having fun at the table, good for him. In more serious circles however, we've all seen the often annoying, and always young, player who over spins every shot and never fails to find a five-rail path to the next shot in situations where one would suffice. For a while as a youngster, I suffered from that disease and remember my older brother once reporting it to my dad. It's the only time I can recall him ratting me out, so he must have had my best interests in mind.

While the problem of over spinning the cue ball can run rampant among young players, there's another, more common problem with english. And although it poses a greater hindrance to improvement and turns up more frequently, I never hear anyone talk about it. On the other side of the coin we find an astounding number of competitive players who avoid english altogether, either from fear of missing or maybe because they've been advised to leave it alone. Whatever the reason, there are too many people carrying around two-piece cues and an irrational fear of english. When I think about my old friend and the last time we played, I know he's not exaggerating. He spins the cue ball way too much. But, he also handles it well enough to string short runs together. And more important, he can pocket balls with english.

The briefest discussion on the properties of deflection, curve and throw that english brings to a pool shot can be enough to scare anyone away from it. And then attempting to understand how we process those variables to pocket balls and play position at widely varied speeds, distances, and degrees of spin, introduces complexity beyond comprehension. Yet, while most great players may limit its use, all accomplished pool players manage those complexities to employ english confidently when it's needed. We cannot play pool without it.

Because we use english primarily to control the cue ball's rebounds from the cushions, different games call for different degrees of english. A good straight pool player often keeps the entire rack at the business end of the table and then works through it by stunning the cue ball a few inches at a time for most shots. And because unnecessary

cue-ball travel frequently leads to trouble, straight-pool players tend to measure their english with great care. At the other end of the spectrum, 9 ball, a game where the next shot can lie anywhere on the table, calls for a somewhat wilder approach. Entire racks with english on every shot are not uncommon. Delving beyond position play for a broader investigation may reveal that a majority of experienced players tend to “help” most of their cut shots to the pocket with a touch of outside english, just enough to offset the cut induced throw from friction. When we look further we find that every kicking system employing more than one rail calls for running english, which always yields more predictable rebounds than no english when moving the cue ball around the table.

Until we gain control over english, improvement stalls somewhere in a low-intermediate range. And as annoying as the spinner kids are, I suspect that many, if not most, great players spent some time in that phase before learning to cut back on the english and play a controlled game. Yesterday I asked one of Denver’s all-time best 9-ball players for his thoughts on the matter and he said, “I remember when spinning the cue ball was all I cared about.” By the time I met him his game had matured into a gorgeous brand of 9 ball that I’ve always envied. So, while it’s common for players to outgrow their addiction to excessive spin and graduate to the highest levels, it’s impossible to get near the top on a path of total english avoidance.

Since kids are more apt to experiment without the same concern for results that adults bring to the table, spinning disease is a lot like chicken pox. The younger one catches it, the less painful the experience. And because I know that few players would be willing to spend a season or two missing easy shots in league play, those who have been avoiding english will need to practice with it away from competition. One good way is to spread out racks and shoot every shot with english. Play through entire racks with right english on every shot then do the same with left. That exercise will offer shots at a wide variety of angles and distances while also forcing the use of inside and outside english, depending on cut direction. Another good way would be to find a friend at a similar level of experience with english and play 9 ball together with maximum english on every shot, expecting, at least at first, to miss many of them. Before too long however, a measure of comfort with english will set in on shots where its needed. Since the experience may be painful, at the outset anyway, it’s best to approach it as outrageously as possible and make it fun.

In contrast to most of our learning where we gradually add to our skills as we move toward mastery, the best way to learn english is to jump in early with both feet and suffer the consequences. Soon it becomes easy to regulate its use and control it. English is a little like vermouth. Almost everyone begins a career in martinis with too much before learning to curtail its use to make the drinks dryer and more sophisticated. But, just as pool is incomplete without english, a martini with no vermouth at all is nothing more than gin in a fancy glass.