

May 2009

## Precise Points

If we assembled a group of beginning and intermediate players and asked them what they found most remarkable about professionals after watching them play for the first time, it's a pretty good bet that the majority would point to the pros' position play and their ability to manage the cue ball with uncanny precision across the full range of shots. We learn to appreciate such pinpoint control the minute we first see it, since rudimentary position play is the skill that begins the pool education and the journey toward excellence. And it's the skill that we never stop honing.

In the March issue, I presented a relatively simple shot and discussed its value for illustrating a number of effective position principles. Since then, I've explored one of those principles in greater depth and want to bring it back and elaborate on it after observing rapid improvement in every player who has added it to the pre-shot routine. More than any other habit that we can adopt, it may be the one that moves us closer to professional position play in the shortest span of time.

A long time ago I concluded that players who consistently manage the cue ball with pinpoint accuracy do so because they make pinpoint choices. That may sound like an unnecessary assertion, but how many of us, when asked where the cue ball will land for the next shot, wave a hand over a section of the table to define an area? The answer is almost all of us and I think I know why. We humans hate to be wrong, and we hear that question as a challenge to be right. In fact, our hatred for being wrong can burn so intensely we will avoid the possibility when we're talking to ourselves. Although nobody asks us to declare a destination for the cue ball in competition, we must ask ourselves to do so on every shot. And most of us choose a broad area instead of an exact spot when answering the question internally. From there it follows logically that sloppy choices will lead to sloppy results.

Once we learn to look at choosing an exact spot for position and regarding it as nothing more or less than a choice, instead of viewing it as part of an internal game of right and wrong, we take our first steps on the path toward top level position play. I've discussed that here before. Now I want to add a step to the process of choosing, which is to walk over to look at the next shot from behind it, and then lay your tip on the table exactly where you want the cue ball to land for that shot. Take a moment to look at it and see it as exactly what you want with confidence that it will work.

The most prominent benefit that accrues to players who add this step to the routine is the feeling of greater ease with position play after making a conscious and precise choice. Though it sounds more difficult and demanding to choose an exact spot for position, in reality doing so makes playing position easier. Making that precise choice focuses the shooter's intention and frees the body to perform what it knows how to do.

After selecting an exact spot on the table and walking back to the current shot, we can approach it with sharper clarity. Making that choice completes the thinking about position because it defines the shot's conclusion and allows us to forget about position when it's time to pocket the present shot. The most popular cause of a missed shot among good players is a lingering thought about the next shot while attempting to shoot the current one. Vague thoughts about position are more likely to remain in our minds, sometimes planting the seed of doubt and disabling the shotmaking process altogether. All of that can add up to the internal static that makes concentrating so difficult amid that awful scattered feeling that likes to take hold when we need sharp focus.

Another reason that we play better shape after walking over and looking at the next ball is that, in many cases, the exact position that we need is too difficult to see from where we may be

standing. On many occasions, I've glanced up to the other end of the table and then achieved my chosen position only to arrive at the next shot and find myself in trouble because the choice I made from so far away was a bad one. Maybe seasoned pros can see all the angles from anywhere and are not likely to walk over to look at the next ball for every shot. However, I've seen Allison Fisher do so with a certain frequency and, although I've never discussed it with her, I'm pretty sure that she's choosing her position in much the way I describe the process because of the way that her cue ball tends to land exactly where she laid her tip a few moments prior.

Along with improved position play, walking to the next shot and choosing position also enhances consistency, because doing so works to maintain a steady tempo by eliminating the possibility of hurrying. Each of us has one tempo that works best to sustain consistency, and whenever that tempo changes, the performance is likely to suffer. Interestingly, while walking to get a clear look at the next shot eliminates the possibility of rushing, doing so does not necessarily have to slow us down because it fosters quicker decision- making and frees us to proceed more directly and confidently.

Spread out a few racks to run them with the added step of taking the time to walk to the next ball and choosing exact position for it. Although you are likely to miss your chosen spot more often than you hit it, you should observe sharper overall precision. Also, you will soon be amazing yourself with how often your cue ball lands smack dab on that spot. I will go out on a limb and promise improved consistency and cueball control for every player who commits to making an exact position choice for every shot. To steal a phrase from Joe Jackson, "You can't get what you want till you know what you want."

