

## Pressure

Last year before a televised, semi-final match from the BCA Tournament, the ESPN announcer summarized the match's importance and asked Cory Deuel if he thought that he would feel a lot of pressure during the match. Deuel's response was, "I hope so."

What? That's an odd thing for a pool player to say since every one of us who has competed, at any level, has horror stories to tell about matches lost to missed shots or bonehead mistakes that resulted from the pressure we felt at the time. Why then would a player declare that he is hoping for pressure when the game is so much easier to play without it?

Pressure springs directly from the meaning that we assign to a match and most of us need a little to perform. It is the reason we compete. Of all the games that people play, pool stands out as the most inherently complex and therefore the one game that should provide enough motivation for us to push forward on our own. A game so varied and beautiful should not require any additional adversity to get our attention. However, few players can excel in practice and many are not brave enough to try.

The major difference between pool and the games to which we usually compare it is the interplay between the competitors. Danny McGoorty said that he tried golf once but did not see the point since he had no way to snooker his opponent on the green. For most players pool seems pointless without an opponent and even inspires beginners to bet money on games despite the unlikelihood of their gambling elsewhere. The widespread desire to compete and risk money on the outcome would indicate that nearly all pool players should shoot comfortably under pressure and relate to it positively.

Most of us do not relate well with pressure though and, when we sense its presence, hate it and hate the things it makes us do. Our natural loathing for pressure goes so deep that it compels many players to perfect the art of avoiding it inside of a disguised courtship. Too many players measure success in terms of money won and devote their time to finding easy games where they can win a few bucks and maybe even cultivate reputations as "money players." Because skill is assessed more subjectively in pool than in other games, pool tempts us to evaluate our abilities in terms of winning; the more we win the better we are. A bowler on the other hand carries an average while a golfer has a handicap. A 25 handicapper in golf knows precisely where he stands in the big picture and is not likely to heap false praise on himself for beating the other guys in his foursome every Saturday. But the attachment to winning that comes out early in pool seduces most players to remain at a level of comfortable pressure where everything always feels just right. When they step beyond that level the pressure pushes too hard and the discomfort causes disaster.

Champions take a different approach however. Some get their seasoning on the road playing for high stakes, risking everything and taking on all comers, behavior that reflects devotion similar to that of the starving artist who ignores material comfort to follow his passion. High-stakes gambling is not compulsory for success though, a fact reflected by the great players who opted from the start to battle their way through tournaments, beginning with local events and fighting eventually to arrive at professional tournaments with the world's best players on hand. In either case those players set aside vanity to seek competitive environments with greater meaning and therefore, increasing pressure, like the athlete who spends a competitive life pushing ever harder and suffering the pain that comes from the training required to move forward.

Before telling your spouse that you need to empty the savings account to go on the road or quitting your job to play in every tournament, consider what I have found to be the essence of responding to pressure. Occasionally I have an opportunity to watch great players practice or compete in games with no wager or tournament victory on the line, games with no meaning or pressure. My invariable observation reveals a common thread among champions, the willingness to bring out the same focus and effort that they display in televised or high-stakes matches. Their commitment to pool transcends the match's outcome and exists at a level where their tenacious desire for greatness provides the pressure to make every shot matter. It would be very rare to find one of those players knocking balls around aimlessly and calling it practice or chasing a weaker opponent for a certain victory.

A popular approach to handling pressure teaches that one can learn to ignore it until the day comes when it disappears. We know the players who preach that wisdom and sometimes they look pretty good going through a tournament match with no apparent care. No doubt it looks cool to play without care but how often do we see those champions of apathy in the winner's circle? Those are the players that pressure catches by surprise and destroys because of their profound lack of experience with it. Still they manage to look pretty cool watching the end of the tournament from the sidelines, making me wonder how much time they have to wait for the pressure to go away. Mediocrity and failure flourish in the realm of casual concern. Pool is a great game, the greatest in my opinion, but it elevates only those players with the courage to invite the pressure of honoring its greatness to every shot, in practice and play. Of course Cory Deuel, who incidentally won that BCA tournament, wants pressure in a pool match; a player of his caliber would have it no other way. And his honesty with the television announcer places his short remark among the coolest quotes in sports history.