

References

“They say that choice is freedom. I’m so free it’s driving me insane.” Joe Jackson

About thirteen years ago, I tried cable TV when someone told me that it came with 60-plus channels. Back then I was completely wrapped up in trout fishing and, after wondering how they could fill so much programming space, made the logical assumption that there must be a rainbow channel, a brown-trout channel, a tail-water channel, a dry-fly channel and so on. After searching haplessly for three days, I learned that cable serves up the same crap as broadcast TV, except more diluted. I promptly cancelled the service and marked a disappointing foray into the world of choice.

I own four great pool cues and don’t know what to do with the three I’m not using. I don’t know why we need another cigarette besides a Camel, what purpose soft drinks serve, or the reason my local supermarket sells everything but food. I’ve used exactly one brand of bar soap my whole life and was pleased to learn recently that it’s been around since 1839 (it’s not Ivory by the way). If you stop by empty-handed to visit me, you can drink mineral water, red wine or coffee. And, if you’re in the business of perverting the finest natural flavor on earth, you’ll have to bring your own cinnamon, hazelnut, or pineapple-fudge syrup for that last beverage choice.

So why do I play pool? Sure, the game can lull us into a consistent, comforting routine; but that routine must exist alongside a relentless, dizzying array of choices. As if that weren’t unnerving enough, we must, after making a choice, remember how to execute it. No two layouts, and therefore no two run-outs, will ever be exactly the same. It’s enough to make someone like me go shopping for a bowling ball. With so many possibilities on a pool table, so many places for the cue ball to go after each shot, how do we manage to know enough and keep all of that information organized for easy retrieval when we need it?

One way to learn every possibility on a pool table would be to set up every possible shot, then note and master every possible, razor-line, cue-ball track for each shot. If you did that for 12 hours a day, you might complete the exercise in about 400 years. Another approach, and the one I believe great players apply, is to master a set of the most commonly effective cue-ball tracks and then file them as references.

In Diagram 1 we have a shot on the five ball into the corner and a natural, two-rail path through the center for three-or-four-rail position on the eight ball and the game. Last month we examined the center of the table and its importance for shots like this where we want to move the cue ball around the table for position without scratching. This setup deserves your attention and is very close to the way most experienced players would play the shot with ball in hand. In Diagram 1 however, the center is blocked by the eleven ball, so the shot will require something different to move the cue ball into position for the eight ball.

At first glance, one might say that the track through the center of the table is merely one of a nearly infinite set of possibilities and only works when the center's clear. A player still must master every track surrounding the center for situations like this one where it's blocked. I wouldn't dispute the truth in that statement but I might see it as an invitation to discouragement and a great way to get started on the 400-year program. And I would restate last month's assertion that every great player will move the cue ball over the center spot without thinking. When faced with a shot like this one, accomplished players do not rack their brains, searching for the file containing the solid-line path. Instead they identify an obstruction on the automatic, unconscious track through the center and make a small adjustment to avoid it.

To master this shot, set it up at first without the eleven ball on the table. Shoot the five ball repeatedly until the cue ball is tracking consistently over the center spot to reach good position for the eight ball as if it were following that path with a mind of its own. You should find that a stop shot will send the cue ball to the center diamond on the first short rail. Adding a small touch of left-hand english will move it naturally off that first rail to connect with the center diamond on the bottom long rail and then over the center spot.

After your cue ball is tracking consistently through dead center, set up the shot again with the eleven ball blocking that option. Without thinking about finding a precise track, think only about moving the cue ball to the short side of the track you've just mastered. So, do everything the same except, this time, lower your tip slightly to add a little draw and move the cue ball just past the center diamond on the first short rail. A touch of added draw will move cue ball past the eleven on the same side as the solid line. To hit that line precisely, experiment in the context of adjustment to your now-ingrained, center track. To move the cue ball around the long side of the eleven ball, look at the shot once more with center in mind and add a touch of follow. But be careful on the long side since that's where the two-rail scratch in the corner resides.

Although pool continually challenges us with a daunting variety of choices for position play and rewards precise results, we do not have to pluck cue-ball paths out of thin air to run racks. My students are equipped with a powerful set of references that, when learned, serve as benchmarks to use for position play. Very often the reference itself solves the problem, but in cases such as this month's shot where it does not, all that's required is a small adjustment to one type of shot that was mastered in practice. The best choice we can make is to shrink the number of choices that we must confront.

