

## Focus

You're playing 8 ball and facing the shot in the Diagram 1 where all you need to do is pocket the 3 ball and get position for the 8 ball. Immediately we see that it's no piece of cake since the shot requires threading the cue ball between those two stripes to emerge in the clear for that easy game winner in the side pocket. If you are near a pool table, set up the shot as shown and shoot it before reading any further. If you are not near a pool table, turn the page for some Dr. Dave and wait until you can try the shot before finishing this column. And if you're falling asleep, remember to shoot first and read later when you wake up.

Setting up the shot and playing it before reading about it will provide some honest feedback regarding the presence or absence of a common error that we see in situations like this. While the shot on the 3 ball is not terribly difficult, it's no hanger either, and the added worry of moving the cue ball between those two stripes can easily cause a miss. But more insidious than any concern creeping into our minds during shots like this one is a common physical error that often arises when separate demands can divide our attention. Because moving the cue ball through that narrow gap appears more difficult than making the shot, many players will shift their eyes from the 3 ball to that space between the stripes while shooting to make sure that the cue ball sails smoothly between the obstacles. Where were your eyes when your tip hit the cue ball?

For this particular setup a little analysis will show that the shot does not really demand surgical precision. An astute player will see that the solid line between the two stripes is perpendicular to the 3 ball's path to the pocket, always good news since a simple stop shot will reliably move the cue ball along that perpendicular line. Further examination reveals that the obstructions do not have to cause disaster even if the cue ball hits one of them. Of course, it's never a good idea to disturb balls that don't need to be moved, but I believe the shooter would wind up with a shot on most attempts that might glance off one of those stripes. And even in the worst case, I would rather sink the 3 and find myself kicking at the 8 ball than sitting down to watch my opponent clean off an easy table.

This setup is one of my favorites for students to see the importance of staying with the shot regardless of what surrounds it. When they see the two stripes I'm sure they believe that I'm testing their ability to move the cue ball on that precise track between them. And because that's where their attention and their eyes tend to go, almost everyone misses on the first attempt. After seeing the result of diverting the eyes and a little discussion about staying with the object ball, everyone soon begins pocketing the object ball consistently as if those stripes weren't there. In fact, for all shots, after deciding what the cue ball will do, we must place our focus on the object ball and keep it there with no regard for any added challenge. Moving your eyes to that narrow window will not help to send the cue ball through. But averting your eyes from the object ball almost invariably causes a miss. Though not as dangerous, it's similar to turning your head while driving and then noticing that your hands turned the car with it.

Although all pool shots demand precision, this particular type of shot arises infrequently enough to change the shooting routine and rhythm. We find a similar example in a shot that requires us to pocket an object ball and break up a cluster with the cue ball. In any case we must not allow perceived, extra difficulty to divert our attention from the shot itself. Since I prefer to experience the game in action rather than language I like to minimize internal dialogue when competing. However, when I can identify a shot like this that may redirect my eyes, I remind myself that I will watch the object ball go into the pocket. That simple reminder keeps my attention where it belongs and helps me pocket a lot of balls that I would likely miss with my focus diverted. Practice the shot in the diagram with intent focus on the 3 ball all the way to the pocket, and remind yourself to see the empty pocket for a second or two after the ball falls in. When we continue looking at the pocket after making the shot we learn to stay down and focus throughout the shot at any speed or distance.

Occasionally every player commits one of the common mistakes that we all seem to share, and I wonder if we're not somehow conditioned to do so. I believe most pool players learn early that misses and other errors are okay since, in the beginning stages, we get so many chances at the table, and the blunders never hurt. A boxer learns quickly to correct mistakes or spends a lot of time in great pain; a skydiver gets to err exactly once. Maybe I consider myself an authority on this specific shot because of the painful way that I learned my lesson. Once, in an exhibition game of 8 Ball with a big crowd watching, I stepped up and blew the easiest important shot I've ever missed. The 1 ball was about four inches from the side pocket and the cue ball about eight inches from the 1 with a perfect angle. But I also needed to move the cue ball between two nearby stripes to complete the run out. I remember my disbelief when I realized that the 1 ball was still on the table. And everyone watching saw the miss before I did while I remained with my focus fixed firmly, and stupidly, on the space between those stripes. I didn't wind up with a black eye or broken jaw but, even in memory, the humiliation still smarts.

