

Cheating

Let's talk about English for a minute—not the cue-ball kind this time but our language and one of my pet quirks, the process of a proper noun becoming a common noun, such as China becoming china to describe certain ceramics. Occasionally a person's name takes on a new life in the same way when it's used commonly to describe a certain trait or action, like saying that someone who hasn't been seen in a while has done a Houdini. Or, when someone causes thousands of innocent people to die in order to divert a trillion dollars, we might say he pulled a Cheney.

In Denver just about anyone with a two-piece cue knows a certain local player whose name is synonymous with cheating, particularly in the area of racking. A rack of balls that won't spread after impact has consistently come to be known around town by his first name, and it's heard in poolrooms throughout the city whenever someone gets a bad rack. One of my favorite pool stories features him in a 9-ball tournament where the rules called for the players to rack their own balls. Now facing, for the first time, the task of making a good rack, he labored over the balls intently, perplexed by the new challenge. After repeatedly inspecting, rejecting, then re racking for his first break under the bizarre and sadistic rules, he finally put up a rack that he liked, then went around to other end of the table to break. When he sent the cue ball solidly into the 1 ball with good speed and the balls spread like butter at the South Pole, a spectator shouted from the crowd, "He can't help himself!"

Through the years I've played him dozens of times in tournaments and collected some good stories along the way. Once, early in one of our matches, I faced a tricky backwards cut on a 2 ball along the side rail while bridging over the 7 ball, roughly six inches behind the cue ball. As I cued the shot, my shaft barely brushed the 7, and I stood up to announce that I had touched an object ball. From there he had the option to leave the 7 ball where it lay or return it to its original position, an almost meaningless choice in that case since I don't think it had moved more than an eighth of an inch. But, without saying a word, he walked to the table, grabbed the 7 ball and then froze it to the back of the cue ball in the most egregious display of cheating that I had ever encountered. When my laughter finally subsided, I returned to the shot knowing with absolute certainty that I would pocket the ball and win the match. I did both.

In a subsequent match about a year later he kicked things off against me with a masterpiece of a bad rack, from which the 1 and 9 balls crept about four inches to the left to line up in a combo for him. He went for it and missed, but I had to wonder if anyone could know enough about racking to cause that shot to materialize. More laughter on my part, but that soon ended when he completely missed a ball in the same rack yet insisted he had hit it as I went to pick up the cue ball. Finally, a couple racks later, when he calmly denied that he had three fouled just seconds after I warned him on two, I lost it. All the crap he had dealt out over the years flooded my hot head and I let him have it with a vicious outburst for all to hear. Although concise, it was vulgar and the embarrassment only added to my troubles. And so, allowing emotion to get the best of me, I lost a match that I wanted so badly to win, blowing a good chance in the hill-hill game.

Among tournament players, sportsmanship is the norm, and cheating is rare. Still, in those cases where we might encounter a little dishonesty, we need a way to manage the situation and then manage ourselves in order to compete effectively. In the matter of racking, because I believe, naively perhaps, that players want to compete as fairly as possible, I also believe that most bad racks are unintentional. A simple safeguard therefore is to inspect each rack before breaking. If a rack opens poorly after I've inspected it, I only have myself to blame for failing to detect its flaws. Also, it's always a good idea to get a referee or another impartial third party to watch close hits. It's easy to miss exactly what happened from a bad angle or far away. And a person's desire for a certain outcome can influence perception in the heat of competition. Inspecting racks and calling others in to observe shots may sometimes appear a little excessive, but taking those precautions can keep the game moving along without dispute. And doing so also works to avert suspicion and any unneeded stress that comes with it.

Beyond overseeing certain elements of the match, we need the presence of mind to keep ourselves on track when we sense impending treachery. When we allow opponents' behavior, no matter how outrageous, to affect our emotions, we play right into their hands. So, difficult as it may seem sometimes, we must avoid anger, the response that cheaters seek and feed on. When we can put a suspect move into the past and accept that nothing can be done now, it's easier to maintain the composure we need to continue and perform. I insist that the most effective response is a hearty laugh, which short circuits negative emotions while sending a clear message to the cheater that I can insulate my own game from his antics. Further, we must resist any temptation toward resentment or blaming the opponent, a choice that subtly shifts responsibility for the match's outcome to that person and creates a reliable excuse for losing. Even under the most extraordinary circumstances, one can never allow one's main focus to shift from the table to the other player.

Of all the many things beyond our control that we face during a pool match, cheating has to be the most galling. However, no matter how infuriating it can seem, we should regard it as something separate from the contest, like bad music or unruly spectators, in order to remain cool when it arises. Remember that real cheaters know what they're doing and work to manipulate their opponents as much as the game itself. And since it's too difficult to prevent a persistent cheater from getting away with the occasional bad rack or bad hit, we must stay focused to protect ourselves from the more potentially insidious effects of their tactics or personalities. The guy I talk about here puts on a show that everyone should see and I would love to out him for all to know. But that wouldn't even slow him down, and why would I want to pull a Scooter Libby?

