

Pushing The Envelope

After years of observation I've determined that all top players share one characteristic—an unwavering desire to play the best possible pool under any conditions. Whether it's a U.S. Open match, a high-stakes road session or a friendly but competitive game with nothing at stake, great players invariably apply themselves with the same intense focus across the board of competitive settings. That intensity reflects a commitment to pool in its purest form wrapped up in the ongoing pursuit of greatness. And when we find ourselves striving to make the best choices and play our best pool in casual settings, the pressure that used to catch us off guard in tournaments no longer feels so foreign.

So when an avid newcomer to the game told me recently that she likes to experiment in casual games I jumped up to inform her, with the full force of my authority, that committed players always make the best choices and strive to play the best possible pool under any circumstances. Then, after patiently allowing me to rant a little longer, she said, "How else will I learn?"

How indeed? I'm always amused when I catch myself clinging so rigidly to one idea that I close myself off to others. Though I hold strongly to my belief that great players pursue greatness always, it only took a moment of thought to get what she was saying. And when I think about my own formative years, when there was almost always a good player around for me to spar with, I spent relatively little time practicing alone. While I honed some skills in practice I expanded my knowledge in play. And 12 years ago, when I first went to work at the famous Shakespeare's, an invitation to a game of one pocket would elicit the same response from me that one might expect after offering Bush an algebra test. "I'll take a shot at it but don't expect much."

Fortunately however I found myself working under one of the city's best and most experienced one-pocket players, a gentleman named Mike Hopkins, who was gracious enough to teach me the game and play with me at every opportunity. After about six months in his tutelage I improved enough to play relatively even with him. From then on, for most of the next ten years, we played against each other almost nightly, and together we investigated the game's myriad possibilities through experimentation. Certain creative shots that would be outrageously risky in other games arise repeatedly in one pocket, where an informed player can learn to play the shot and minimize the risk. So through repeated trial and error with careful observation in our casual yet competitive games, we learned enough about the risk associated with some of the game's oddball shots to know their proper place in subsequent money games against other players. And although we both always strove to play our best and win every game, we also took crazy chances with some strange opportunities to expand our knowledge and enhance our skills.

Even the best players will encounter setups where they may suspect an outcome of which they're not absolutely certain. And when the price is right, they will succumb to the lure of investigation. One day back in the 90's I had the distinct pleasure of playing straight pool with Mike Massey for an entire afternoon. As one of the game's all-time greats he plays the same brand of straight pool one would expect from a famous champion, methodically moving through racks, making one easy shot after another while holding the cue ball on a short leash. But, with nothing at stake, every time he faced a cluster with no open shot, he called a ball out of the pack. I'm not talking about typical dead combinations, but rather shots where he called balls from the middle of the stack, sometimes ones completely surrounded by other balls on all sides. While he only made a couple of those shots, all but one of them moved toward the intended pocket. And before he pulled the trigger on each one I stood wondering how the shot would work. So while I was doing my best to play a game of straight pool, he was doing the same and also enhancing some of the skills he employs as the trick-shot king.

Making the best choices for victory in all circumstances doubtlessly works to hone our competitive mettle. However, we can balance such dogged determination with a measure of curious investigation whenever appropriate. Such whimsy may be more than useful; it may be necessary for a couple of reasons. If we only experiment during practice we limit our experience since there's no way to imagine and set up all of the possible challenges we encounter during play. And with many setups, especially those involving clusters, it's often impossible to restore the balls' positions in precisely the same way that they arranged themselves. If it's a friendly game perhaps a little discussion with the opponent before shooting can foster a deeper understanding for both players. So, whenever you see a setup where you suspect an uncertain possibility, make a prediction and observe the results. Another effective way to explore uncharted territory is to play different games. A regular sprinkling of bank pool and one pocket in casual sessions will offer continual challenges that only turn up occasionally in other games.

Over the course of a little more than a decade one band recorded more number one hits than the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley and the Beach Boys combined. They were the group of Detroit jazz stars that Berry Gordy assembled to become the Motown house band, also known as the Funk Brothers, and they supplied the music behind every Motown act from the label's Detroit era. According to them their unique sound kept evolving as the improvised jazz changes from their club shows wove their way through the studio sessions to add new color to one hit record after another. Now knowing that the greatest hit machine in music history continually shaped their sound through ongoing experimentation, I see some necessary detours on the road to greatness.

