

Winning

For any contest, the competitors will always enter with one primary goal—to win. A contest where one of the players has another objective becomes, by definition, something other than a contest. There are games, such as golf, that two players of disparate skill levels can enjoy together with no regard for the scorecard and winning secondary. Pool, which is played head to head, is not one of those games and every match winds up with a winner and a loser. We play pool to win.

The winning-as-ultimate yardstick in pool grabs us early and leads some of us into a very curious relationship with the game. Most players form an early attachment to winning that affects their overall growth and performance for the rest of their lives. Forty million Americans play pool regularly but only a relative handful step out to learn the game; some guys play their whole lives and never learn that there may be something to learn. I work in a poolroom and cannot count the times that a regular customer, someone who plays five nights a week, has interrupted my reading with, “There’s a book about how to play pool?” Can one imagine such a question from an avid player in any other game?

Pool stands out as a game that someone can fool with for a lifetime without ever learning the most rudimentary skills; and some of us wonder why that is. Well, pool is deeper and more complex than any leisure game and possibly, any game on earth. When viewers who have never held a golf club see a pro on TV whack a ball 200 yards to stop it three feet from the target, they know that they have witnessed a remarkable feat. Great pool on the other hand, with all of its subtlety, is somewhat more difficult to apprehend. But while the game may be complicated, the primary objective—winning—could not be simpler. As long as some players keep winning they see no cause for change. At some point in every player’s progress it becomes very appealing to stay put and keep winning. That can occur at the frat house where one finds ways to avoid the deadly den mother or out in the city where one makes very clear choices about which tournaments to enter.

When we view winning as all that matters we tend to overlook something very important that occurs between the coin toss and the outcome, namely playing. The reality is that, in every game, the one thing we must do is play. Playing lives in a series of connected moments, each one separate and independent of the others, where we make the best choices and execute them. Playing is not the shot from a minute ago nor is it the shot that comes next. It is very simply the shot right now, the one in the present. When we immerse ourselves in playing each shot, we can free ourselves from the burden of winning, which really is not something we do but merely a name we have for the favorable result of playing. How many times have we missed the simple but critical shot because we were so caught up in winning that we forgot to play?

The way to immerse yourself in playing is to honor your pool game by playing whenever you find yourself at a table. Does that sound ridiculous as in, “What else would I be doing?” Consider though the difference between the way you feel when you are knocking balls around with a friend and the way you feel at the table in a league or tournament match. We all want that easy, fast-and-loose feeling from the casual game to accompany us to the tournament match but it will never happen. So try this on. Begin now to play every game with the same intent and purpose that you call up for the tournament match. It may take some discipline at first to stop and consider the consequences of certain shots and then play a safety instead of a two-rail bank in a game with nothing on the line. When you train yourself to play every shot in the present as a shot that contributes to your overall game, you will find yourself in the tournament match with a new focus on the balls rather than what surrounds them, winning.

A few years ago the importance of playing crystallized for me as I watched Allen Gilbert, seven-time U.S. Champion, one of our era’s great three-cushion players, and one of *Billiards Digest’s* fifty greatest cueists of all time, win a tournament final against a considerably younger, former U.S. Champion. As I observed him throughout the 40-point game and its various stages from trailing by 15 points, to catching, passing, and ultimately defeating his opponent, I noticed that his behavior and attitude, both at the table and in the chair, were perfectly consistent throughout the match. He embodied unwavering focus inside of a calm enthusiasm as he scored the points he needed, greeting every shot one at a time. Then it dawned on me that this is precisely how he looks when he plays with me in games where I offer no challenge and winning is a foregone conclusion. I learned that he simply always plays billiards, committed to playing instead of the match’s meaning. On another occasion I asked him to play the game that some of us fool around with, often when there’s alcohol around, and pass up shooting naturals. He looked at me and said, “No naturals? Are you nuts?” I thought he might enjoy a half hour of showing off his stroke and the many oddball shots that he must know. Sorry, wrong number kid, that’s not *playing*. Apparently he is still playing and was recently crowned World Seniors Champion averaging over one throughout the tournament—in his seventies. At the risk of sounding political, I cannot comprehend his absence from the Hall of Fame.

Playing is our access to winning. When we perceive every shot, regardless of the setting, as important for what it is rather than what its execution might cause, we approach the point where we can play with the same freedom in every situation. The pressure to perform will not catch us off guard when we feel it in the “big match” because we will bring most of it to the table ourselves. From there it’s a small step to the pinnacle of competitive performance to capture the one quality shared by all winners and champions—the courage to lose.

