

## Finding the Line

Professional athletes sure do have it made. Along with hideously disproportionate wealth and fame, they bask in the extravagant luxury of constant coaching. Imagine every one of us, in every line of work, getting the job done with the same military precision that's been hammered into ballplayers since little league. At every step throughout the day someone would be there, looking out for us, making sure that we handle each challenge with professional ease and then working extra hard with us on our weaknesses. And what if it didn't stop at work? Suppose that when he saw the fascination fading from a romance, the coach stepped in and called the old, buy-some-flowers-for-no-occasion play. If we men had mentors running us through daily drills on looking away from the TV and noticing the hair, Dr. Phil would be out of work and our relationships would bring us a lot more lasting pleasure. Every game boils down to the fundamentals.

Stress on the value of sound fundamentals runs consistently throughout almost every endeavor. Musicians forever practice their scales while golfers never stop working on the swing. In fact, apart from learning a few shots, golfers practice little else. Most pool players, on the other hand, learn to hit the ball right away and then shift their focus to the nuances of the game. So among avid amateurs, with all their cockeyed variations, we usually see a regard for fundamentals residing on a secondary tier at best. A close look at professionals however shows amazingly consistent form, this despite the broad range of shapes and sizes that pool players come in and the fact that even professionals tend to begin recreationally with no instruction. The main reason that top players tend to show a stronger interest in fundamentals is that, after learning enough of the game's subtleties to compete at the highest levels, players tend to develop a new appreciation for the degree of precision that a pool shot requires.

Because we often lose sight of the importance of shot making in our quest to learn all of pool's complexities, I'd like to revisit with some of the basics that often go unmentioned in magazines and books, which tend to dwell on the game's more advanced elements. On a few occasions I've attended pro tournaments with friends who were seeing the world's best players for the first time. Paying close attention, as dedicated students should, the first thing they invariably notice is how much more quietly most top players shoot. I'm not talking about literal noise, though that's always at a refreshingly low level around a big tournament, but the lack of movement throughout the completion of the shot and for a short time afterward. We've all heard about the value of staying down after hitting the ball but most of us need to see someone like Karen Corr to comprehend that advice fully. A disciplined pool player moves the shooting hand and nothing else, keeping the rest of the body as still as granite, at least until the object ball reaches the pocket. The quickest and easiest way to learn and practice that basic element of shooting is to set up a shot with the cue ball and object ball close to each other at one end of the table aimed straight for a far corner pocket. Play the shot slowly with your eyes fixed on the object ball along its entire trip to the pocket while making certain to remain perfectly still until the ball drops and you find yourself looking at an empty

pocket. When we practice seeing the pocket after the ball drops in, we train ourselves to stay down for all shots at any speed. Ask a friend to watch for any movement. Often, we think we're remaining still when there's some head movement in the shot.

After we've played long enough to set the stroke into a groove, shot making proceeds from alignment and our ability to place our own alignment onto to the line of the shot. So let's review the important elements of alignment as described for a right-handed shooter. Because we all begin playing pool the same way, that is by getting down and then aiming the shot, many of us need little reminders to make the final switch to the far more effective method of aiming the shot and then getting down. And, from proceeding in *that* order, we place our alignment onto to the line of the shot. The best way to hone alignment is to practice making the stance repeatedly in a mirror. It's not necessary for that mirror to be near a pool table, and may work better if it isn't in order to isolate the elements of alignment separate from the pressure of trying to pocket balls.

With your cue on the line of the shot, look down at your right foot to see if its toes are under the cue to set up proper alignment, which begins with the front part of the rear foot on the line of the shot. When stepping forward with the left foot, be sure that it does not go toward the cue but moves instead slightly left to land shoulder width away from the cue, under the left armpit and pointing on a line parallel to the cue. Look for that setup, which keeps us behind the shot rather than alongside it, among pros. Now make the stance and look in the mirror to check the remaining elements of perfect alignment. The right hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder should fall into place on one line with the cue, which is over the front part of the right foot. The right hand should be close to the body, almost touching. Many players will leave the right hand out, away from the body, and then unconsciously pull it in close on the final stroke, thus moving the cue off the line of the shot. If that's happening, adjust your stance by placing the cue onto the line of the shot and then moving the right hip toward the right hand until they're close together. Now, look at your eyes in the mirror. I don't think it matters whether the cue is centered under the chin, or under the left eye or the right eye. But it's critical that it winds up in the same place every time with the line that goes through both eyes parallel to the table; it's nearly impossible to see properly when the head is tilted. Finally, to ensure that we land with the shot already aimed, we should make the stance with our eyes focused on the object ball. Imagine an object ball a few feet out and repeat the process of making the stance with eyes fixed on that object ball throughout. Then after the stance is in place check all of the preceding elements in the mirror.

Because of the critical role that stance plays in shot making, I always wonder how anyone can recommend, "whatever's comfortable." In anything we do, what we've always done will be most comfortable regardless of its effectiveness. Considering that pool welcomes players in all shapes and sizes, I'm impressed by the consistency in stance that I observe among top players. When we do see some peculiar fundamentals among the occasional pro, we should ask how much time that person put into playing and compare it to the time we want to spend on improvement. Then we'll do what's necessary to keep the romance alive.