

When Things Aren't Working

When Ray Martin published *The 99 Critical Shots in Pool*, his timing couldn't have been better for me. After slaving over a hot pool table for three years and devouring all the good instructional material available, I stood poised, waiting for something to move me forward. Then *The 99 Critical Shots* arrived to answer my questions and solve the mysteries of how balls relate to one another and react in seemingly random collisions. It's a classic piece that continues to sell. And nowadays, when I occasionally exploit an opportunity to make a ball pop magically out of a cluster and into a pocket, I still remember the book, sometimes the page. At other times when things aren't going so well and my game seems headed for the dumpster, I like to remind people that I'm working on the sequel—*The 99 Critical Excuses in Pool*.

In a game so multifaceted, excuses are strangely universal, jumping all cultural, gender and skill barriers to turn up anywhere pool is played. No one is exempt and a lot of us have favorites, perhaps even favorite families of excuses, that we trot out when our games start to derail. I tend toward blaming the opponent by pointing out an etiquette breach, maybe dramatically asking any spectators how I'm supposed to concentrate and play pool against someone who leaves the chalk on the rail sideways. Most players however like to cut out the middleman and go directly after the equipment. I know a guy who's been carping about a certain bar-table cue ball ever since its debut a few years ago. Truth is, that ball fools me too, but I try to stay mum since someone with a column in a national glossy should be able to adjust. My favorite excuse story concerns a 3-Cushion player in his first tournament on blue cloth when it was introduced to enhance TV resolution. After a near miss he stood up and, with a straight face, informed the onlookers, "That shot would have gone on green cloth."

All absurdity aside, sometimes the problem does lie with the equipment and it's important to know when that is the case. At a certain point, all players reach a stage where they become more consistent than the equipment they use. And for most players, that moment comes a lot sooner than they realize, owing mostly to the equipment's apparent uniformity. A person who's never held a golf club can easily discern differences from one hole to another. Yet, most pool players reach a pretty high skill level before they begin to make similar distinctions. By the time most of us come to pool, we've already seen dozens of tables and hundreds of colored balls that appear identical. Later on, after we begin learning the game, those images of uniformity linger into our development. The truth of course is that we can find wide variations among all pieces of equipment, and the better we are at spotting those differences, the faster we can improve.

The first piece of equipment to examine, and the most important one that we can control, is the tip. Despite its critical role and the fact that a little piece of leather is our only connection to the balls, tip maintenance goes largely ignored by an astonishingly high number of competitive players. A few weeks ago one player informed me that he was having trouble drawing the cue ball. When I inspected his tip and applied some upward pressure to it with my thumb, a portion of it crumbled and fell off the stick in a

sprinkling of leather dust, and the only case of dry rot that I can recall at the end of a pool cue. The far more common tip problem is bad adhesion and tips that sit loosely with air circulating under them, precluding solid contact with the cue ball. If you think you can pop your tip off with your thumb, do it now and have it replaced by someone who does it professionally since it's nearly impossible to glue a tip on solidly without proper tools. Or even better, purchase the necessary tools and learn all you can about tips so you can keep the most important part of your cue maintained properly. Every serious player should know how to tip his own cue, and I have little patience for one who can't.

It's a big day in a pool player's life when the realization hits that all those seemingly identical, green rectangles can play radically different from one another. It's not until then that a player can take the controls with the precision that great pool demands. The May issue of *Billiards Digest* features a superb story on this topic with top pros sharing their methods for adjusting to strange equipment. In the very first segment, U.S. Open champ, John Schmidt informs us that a table can play short when the cue ball is dirty. I had never heard that but it makes sense and I'll remember to check that from now on whenever the rebounds look funny. Last year I ran into him in Las Vegas and had a chance to ask him about his famous 400-ball run. Twice during the conversation he stressed the fact that he had a freshly cleaned rack of balls to use. Thinking about all the places pool is played and typical conditions, I realize that, across the board, clean balls are far from a priority. But every top player's greatest fear when a cut shot must be played softly is the dreaded skid that results from a spot of dirt, chalk or cosmic debris on the ball's contact point. And, when someone who runs balls four hundred at a time emphasizes the importance of keeping them clean, I'm going to pay attention. The rest of the story features a series of shots that various pros use to gauge the state of a table and then adjust to it as quickly as possible. Any player who takes that issue to the poolroom and follows the routine will experience instant, overall improvement.

In any endeavor, experience enhances sensitivity in ways that the uninitiated can't imagine. Sometimes I hear guitar players discussing their craft with words like "intonation" and other borrowings from the Martian language while I'm looking at their gear and thinking, "I'll bet I could hit a baseball a lot farther with that electric one." As our sensitivity sharpens in pool we continue to perceive finer distinctions among the various pieces of equipment we use. On the surface, directing focus away from one's self and toward the equipment may appear as a mere excuse and a way to shift blame and shirk responsibility. But in a very positive way, a keen awareness of conditions helps us to make the necessary adjustments quickly and accurately. Nobody likes a whiner or wants to be one, but we should pay attention when we hear someone talking about the equipment. Like my revelation concerning a dirty cue ball, it may be an opportunity to learn something new. Who knows, maybe the blue-cloth guy is a spectra physicist and managed to get his game back on track after consulting the refractive-index chart he keeps in his case.

