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Easy 8 Ball

When I heard about my forthcoming economic stimulus check I did my patriotic duty and ran out to buy the fly rod I'd been eying for three years. And, channeling Patrick Henry right there in the store, I picked up a new reel too. Later when I discovered that neither item was made in America I realized that I had just stimulated someone else's economy and the shame was overwhelming. Since I wasn't about to return such splendid gear I tried to assuage the guilt by reminding myself that Koreans have babies to feed too, but that didn't change the fact that I had let my country down. Later, in a mass email of all places, I learned about a guy named Kenevan McConnan who had the good sense to check where the things he coveted were made, and to his dismay, could not find anything made in America. Then he remembered the greatest American product of all, our constitution, and sent his $600 to the American Civil Liberties Union to help protect one of the world's finest documents and maybe return some of its original products to its shelves. If I hadn't ignored that email for a week I would have been able to follow his lead. It's important to remember that great ideas are everywhere if we're open to receive them.

Back in April I learned a new game that has to be the most effective improvement tool I've seen in game form since Target Pool. But because the brilliance comes wrapped in such a simple package it almost had to come from someone outside the pool world. My introduction came from Ethan Benatan, an education information technology specialist from Oregon, who visits me for instruction whenever his business takes him to Colorado. He calls the game Easy 8 Ball and credits its invention to a colleague of his at Reed University, philosophy professor Paul Hovda.

While looking for a reliable way to speed up the process of learning to run a rack of 8 Ball in the past, I've attempted to isolate running balls from the game's other elements but always stumbled over the complexity of my efforts. Easy 8 Ball gets right to the heart of the matter by eliminating a complete set of balls. In other words the game is racked with the 8 ball and either the stripes or the solids arranged like a rack of 9 Ball without the bottom ball. I like to use the stripes since the 8 is solid.

There are two distinct ways to play the game and I recommend starting with the most straightforward, which has both players sharing the stripes and the goal of being the first to run them out and then pocket the 8 to win the game. That may sound crazy and it is for players who can run a rack of conventional 8 Ball with regularity. But for beginning to intermediate players who are waiting for their first run outs or those who experience a complete run too infrequently, Easy 8 Ball works to generate longer and more frequent runs.

As the only game where traffic tightens for the shooter with each pocketed ball, regular 8 Ball stands apart from other pool games in a prominent way. And there lies the

game's appeal for players who possess the vision to plan a complete run out and the skill to execute that plan on a table populated with a full array of opposing balls. But the feature that great players appreciate most is also the challenge that makes learning 8 Ball so slow and painful for beginners. Easy 8 Ball on the other hand immediately inspires players to do the necessary planning and then rewards them with longer runs. Planning a sequence and then running eight balls on a clear table may seem trivial to advanced players, but it's a formidable challenge to newcomers. Depending on the players' experience, complete run outs may be elusive at first, but three-and-four-ball plans and runs will mature into 8-ball run outs in a fraction of the time that it takes players to achieve that goal with standard 8 Ball. And then players who enjoy the repeated experience of running eight balls on a clear table will learn to do the same much sooner with a full rack. The greatest obstacle confronting someone who has yet to run eight balls is running eight balls. And the sooner that's accomplished comfortably, the easier it is to manage additional complexity when it's introduced. Also, because the game is essentially a learning tool, it's a good idea to share plans and discuss methods of execution while playing.

Another way to play the game is to take opposing sides with one player shooting stripes and the other shooting at the 8 ball. When played in this format, a beginner with stripes learns quickly about the power of safety when there are seven balls to use for defense against someone who has only one ball to shoot. Unless the 8 is hanging in a pocket the player with stripes rarely has to allow a decent shot at it. If you have stripes, it's wise to remember that your job is to win the game, and that does not mean you have to win on this shot. With that in mind, you're free to play as many safeties as you wish. Eventually you will have to pocket your balls to win so you will learn to play a combination of simultaneous offense and defense as you move through the rack. Since it's no fun to be the player shooting at the 8, it's a good idea to trade positions after each rack.

Because I'm sure that the advanced players are already way ahead of me on this I won't feel bad for sharing the game's gambling appeal. With a wide-open table full of balls begging to be run along with almost guaranteed safety options, it's nearly impossible for a decent player to lose with stripes. Though I rarely see it these days, the proposition of offering a game of 8 Ball and then removing all of the opponent's balls from the table before the first shot has to be one of pool's oldest sucker bets. Easy 8 Ball streamlines that trap for the predator by eliminating the awkwardness of physically removing balls from the table. It's a sinister way to take someone's money but deliciously enjoyable when the right loudmouth comes around and takes the bait.

Because pool is so complex it's always productive to isolate its elements and work on them individually before reassembling them into a complete game. Now we have Easy 8 Ball, a game that serves that role perfectly and comes as a gift to us from a philosophy professor. Maybe something so elegantly simple could only come from the mind of a deep thinker.

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