

Trying

How we manage to accomplish anything in a world so filled with crazy ideas accepted as truth lives as one of the great mysteries. Remember what a coup it was the first time you took a swim without waiting a full hour after eating a hot dog at the beach? And what persuades us to believe and repeat such silly notions as, “There’s no such thing as a dumb question”? My guess is that somewhere in our past there lived a very dumb but influential guy, the type who might approach a group of people standing around a bench craning their necks at the oncoming traffic to inquire, “Is this where the bus stops?”

Throughout our lives we are conditioned to believe in a positive correlation between success and trying. We all know the adage, “If at first you don’t succeed...” but does it help? Perhaps if the saying went, “If at first you don’t succeed, keep working to improve,” it would inspire some progress. And maybe the conventional wisdom works for a weightlifter who, with the strain of a mighty effort, gets the bar off the floor; but for a pool player, nothing could be less productive.

When someone is very good at something, especially pool, onlookers are apt to say, “He makes look so easy.” We can learn a lot from that. In fact, think for a minute to remember a match or tournament where you played your best and everything moved along beautifully. See if you recall trying hard or straining yourself. What you will recall are the results of your actions rather than the actions themselves and maybe a feeling of virtuosity flowing directly from your hands. Now remember a competition where afterwards, you might have said, “Well, I tried my hardest.” Does that memory match up with success? Trying invariably comes out in attempts that fall short of a goal.

Whenever we are faced with a challenge that dwells near our perceived limits, our usual answer, out of fear, is to apply extra effort. The challenge may show up as defeating a certain opponent, winning a high-pressure match, or most commonly, executing a difficult shot. A great example of a difficult shot is drawing the cue ball the length of the table on a long shot. Here is when a player is likely to crank up the horsepower and hit the shot about three times too hard. The typical outcome is a miss, a cue ball that limps back three inches, both, or a shift in energy toward chasing a cue ball that’s rolling away along the floor. Fear in pool causes tension in one’s shooting hand and leads to grabbing, which decelerates the cue and steers it off line. Trying is the major cause of miscuing on a draw shot when a last-second grasp raises the butt of the cue and lowers the tip to dig under the cue ball. Although it takes discipline and confidence, the most effective approach to the long draw shot is to stay relaxed and resist the impulse to shoot with too much force.

You can test the correlation between trying and succeeding with a short but illustrative exercise. Take the chalk and mark a spot for the object ball in front of a

corner pocket one diamond in from both the short and long rail. For the cue ball, go to the corner pocket across the table and mark the spot equidistant from the short and long rails at one-and-a-half diamonds to set up a shot with a moderate cut angle and a broad range of possible cue-ball tracks. Play the shot a few times with light-to-medium speed and your best follow and draw strokes to observe the limits on your range of cue ball tracks.

After you establish the extreme draw and follow tracks you should see that any track between the two is available to you. From there you will mark a dot on the table at least four feet away from the object ball on a track inside your range and play to make the cue ball land there; a one-rail position shot to a spot one diamond past the side pockets works nicely. The observation period is over now and it is time to go after your target with strong focus on it. You should imagine a competitive situation and convince yourself that you need your intended position to win a final match. Get into your stance and prepare to shoot with all of your focus, intent and concentration on making the cue ball go to the dot on the table that you must hit to win the match. Play the shot five times and then take a short break to think about the exercise.

Now, get ready for some more trials with the same shot keeping everything intact including the pretend pressure, but with a slight change in preparation. With each shot this time through, look at the spot where you want the cue ball to land and, since you won't be able to ignore it, revisit with the importance of precision for this particular shot. Then, during one last look at the position target, confirm that you have made the best choice and forget about it. Make your stance this time with your focus on the object ball and, before you take your final stroke, remind yourself that your shooting hand feels relaxed and that you will watch the object ball go into the pocket. When you shift your focus from playing position to pocketing the object ball, you will stop trying to play position and should experience greater success.

Next month we shall move forward on this path to nail down an effective and precise method for position play. For now compare your position accuracy from two approaches to the same problem. The defining moment in the second approach occurs in confirming your decision and letting go of your concerns about it. In most pool matches you will face a critical shot, one that determines the outcome of the match and may easily frighten you if you dwell on the consequences long enough to doubt yourself. But when, after careful consideration of the options, you can declare that you will move ahead with your choice regardless of the cost, you will begin shooting with the courage to trust yourself and make it look easy.

