

Coachability

The movie “Karate Kid” has a charming scene that everyone who has seen the film remembers as “wax on, wax off.” When the Ralph Macchio character, young Daniel, first goes to Mr. Miyagi to begin his martial-arts training he soon finds himself waxing the sensei’s car. Mr. Miyagi gives him the materials he needs and shows him the proper technique for applying the wax—wax on, and buffing it—wax off. Naturally the boy feels cheated since he thinks he’s there to learn a skill and ends up doing menial work for the teacher instead. But he continues with the job and finishes the car. Then the master reveals the purpose of the assignment as those wax-on, wax-off motions turn out to be fundamental karate moves, ones that the student learned without knowing it. It’s a memorable scene that nicely depicts the old man’s wisdom. I first saw it shown at the beginning of an education I took to illustrate the importance of opening one’s self up to coaching.

Anyone with the aspiration to play great pool nowadays is very fortunate to live in a time with so much quality instruction available from the broad range of books and videos to the hundreds of committed teachers sprinkled throughout the pool world. Some of us remember when Mosconi’s “Red Book” was the only affordable source of information as the players who held the knowledge were not in the habit of sharing generously. Mike Geffner’s recent story on James Evans in the *Billiards Digest* June issue recounts the typical, old-time, pool education with a description of the early relationship between Evans and Cisero Murphy. In that story Murphy recalls how Evans responded to his requests for teaching. “Son, you want to learn something. You have to gamble to get my knowledge.” And they gambled. Evans must have taught him quite a lot though since Murphy went on to become the first black man to win a world title and the only player ever to win a world championship in his first tournament appearance. So I’m not knocking that form of tutelage, which still exists today; it’s just a little harder to explain its value to our mothers.

The great majority of the people I see playing pool regularly are recreational players with no desire to learn the game. As I’ve said before, that is not something to scoff at or resent. Rather, we should feel lucky to love a game so inherently beautiful that participants of all skill levels, including the no-skill level, can enjoy themselves playing it. But with so many thousands competing in pool leagues and small tournaments now, we must also have an army of players who want to improve. While comparing the best players from different eras serves no useful purpose, I don’t think anyone would argue that the sheer number of great players worldwide is far higher now than ever in history. Moving down the ladder a couple of rungs we also have more players than ever poised to make the transition to elite status. And with so many deeply engaged players I often wonder why the game’s instructors are not buried in work.

The reason is two-fold. Most of us are resistant to coaching and few of us can visualize what the game holds beyond what we already know; it’s hard to seek answers

when we do not know the questions. The foundation of my own game comes from playing twelve hours a day over three years with a lot of help from my father and then some gracious players I encountered after him. During that period I managed, without knowing it, to absorb one of pool's most essential principles, one that all accomplished players share regardless of any other differences among them—a cue ball that tracks over the center spot when moving around the table. By the time someone explained the importance of navigating the table in that fashion and I went to work on it, I saw that my cue ball already moved that way. My initial satisfaction changed quickly to regret when I realized that if I had had the vision to distinguish that principle, or a teacher directing me with specific exercises to learn it, I could have eliminated two years of aimless scratches from my formative experience. As a teenager with only school and pool on my schedule, I happened to have a couple thousand spare hours to learn a piece of the puzzle that can be mastered in a month with some guidance. How many of us have that kind of time to waste now?

Last year a young woman named Jackie Broadhurst came to my weekly clinic to enroll in an upcoming workshop with Tim Miller, better known as The Monk. Already a superb player, she had decided that she wanted more and was ready to go after it. We went to work on her game that first night. A week later, she wound up with Tim and me taking a serious interest in her success. On the first day that Tim met her, he spotted something extraordinary and boldly declared that Jackie would win the 2003 BCA tournament. The possibility caught fire and with little discussion the three of us made an agreement to cause that victory. Sure enough, one year later, Jackie won the 2003 BCA tournament in May, marching through a field of 497 players without losing a match.

Although Tim and I did some work with Jackie that we can brag about, the truth is that we were lucky to be standing in her way when she made the decision to pursue greatness. For Jackie, great pool is her purpose and the object of an unwavering commitment that moves her full steam ahead every moment of every day. Once that commitment formed and Jackie recognized it, she knew that she wanted someone standing with her for direction. If she lived in another city I'm sure that she would have found another instructor to fill the role. As it is she ended up with me. But she had the discipline to practice alone for eight hours a day with the focus to work on one, single shot for a week at a time. And throughout the changes she experienced during her learning she maintained the courage to perform badly in some tournaments without giving up on her training and reverting to old habits that had worked to some degree in the past. The title itself does not mean much to her beyond inspiration to work harder. We will see more of her in the future.

Our world can be broken down to masters and servants, a concept that meets with resistance in a country where most people see themselves as some form of a Michael Jordan and the word "servant" connotes something bad. But the last time I checked, the Olympic podium still had only three steps and the handful of masters standing on it arrived there after years of hard work with teams of servants underneath them. I'm proud to serve the game that has rewarded me continually throughout my life. Pool is too complex for anyone to learn alone and if you desire mastery, find one of the many dedicated instructors with the experience to help you attain it. In these modern times you won't even have to bet money or wax cars to get the knowledge you seek.

