

Mistakes

If we pay attention on those occasions when we're telling others how to run their lives, we should notice that we're often speaking to the very qualities that our own lives lack. Recently a friend graciously offered me the secret for attracting and holding a girl's interest. Of course I was all ears and, though it sounded like strange advice, gave it some consideration until I realized that, in the ten years I've known him, he's never shown up with a girl. That same phenomenon takes many forms such as fathers pushing to mold sons into the sports stars they never were, or older, married siblings taking an occasional break from fighting with their mates to extol the wonders of settling down. What is it about our shortcomings and mistakes that compels us to wrap them in a package called "advice" and then spread them so generously among our friends and family?

Since we all make mistakes and, according to the popular adage, we can learn from our mistakes, the difference between allowing them to germinate dangerous advice and using them to gain knowledge must lie in the way that we relate to them. Sometimes we cling so strongly to unconscious, habitual behavior that we never experience what we're doing; we only see the results. And when they're unfavorable, we then attribute those outcomes to bizarre, cosmic causes instead of distinguishing the real causes and maybe changing our behavior. An expert in that area might be someone who goes through life repeating statements like, "That's just the way I do things," and believing perhaps that the clerks at divorce court greet everyone like Norm walking into the bar on *Cheers*. Yet he'd be happy to tell his friends how to "handle" women.

Another way to relate to our mistakes is to focus first on our actions, observe the results they produce and then, how the two connect. With that approach, in cases where we seek one, specific result and fail to achieve it repeatedly, we do not have to discard the things we tried as wrong but can file them for possible use in different settings. A sharper awareness of exactly what we're doing also helps prevent us from applying an inappropriate technique over and over to the same problem. When we allow ourselves to experience everything we do and how it connects to an outcome, we can build a cause-and-effect library to draw from in the face of new challenges. On a pool table, where we must always confront new problems, such a library can serve to eliminate a lot of guesswork and frustration from our games.

Whenever I watch players practice I invariably see something that almost everyone who plays with any dedication will do while working on a specific shot. It occurs most frequently during practice on a position shot. Let's imagine a shot that requires moving the cue ball three rails to a spot on the table after cutting an object ball into the corner pocket. The only result that they are willing to watch is the one they seek. On any attempts that produce something different, most players will grab the cue ball or reach out and stop it with their cues in the instant that they can identify what's happening as wrong. Then they quickly reset the shot and repeat the process. Such practice often generates a frenzy of activity that soon begins to look more like hockey than pool. How can such "practice" ever help to prepare us for performance? Most instructors adhere to

the belief that improvement comes from hitting thousands of balls and will send their students off to do it. I'm one of those instructors, but I will step in and object whenever I see someone attempting to finish the assignment in under a minute.

It's very rare to see players in practice who are willing to shoot and then stand in calm observation of any possible outcome that may occur with the shot. But that's what we must do in a match, where we never get to grab the cue ball and shoot again. When I'm working with someone on a shot, I discourage the habit of stopping the balls after a failed attempt just so the next attempt can come sooner. Instead I encourage the student to experience every shot by itself and observe the results. When we watch the cue ball complete its trip, we can compare where it stopped to where we wanted it and then determine what kind of speed, spin or stroke adjustment is needed to get it there. Sometimes, when the cue ball scratches, I'll ask a student to repeat the scratch. Learning how it feels to shoot the cue ball into a pocket on a certain shot goes a long way toward knowing how to avoid doing it. And, if an identical shot came up in a match with the 9 ball hanging in the same pocket, that memory would be decidedly useful.

Learning to experience every shot in practice primes us for the reality of competition and moves us toward a higher plane of performance regarding our relationship to mistakes. Even top pros rarely play flawlessly and will typically get out of position at least a few times in their best matches. When that happens we should notice that they do not get wrapped up in disappointment and come unglued. Instead they let go of the error in the immediate past and focus on the less desirable shot in the present. The very best players, the ones who are most accustomed to handling the cue ball with the sharpest precision, are also best prepared to respond in the times when that precision leaves them momentarily.

Precise position play comes directly from precise choices for position play, selecting a pinpoint on the table for the cue ball when looking at the next shot. Most players resist doing that because they view it as too demanding and therefore an invitation to more mistakes. In reality, it makes the game easier as it focuses our effort and allows us to complete the position conversation so we may proceed to the shot with a clear mind. When we know what we want, we can get it. In those cases where we get something else, it works much better to assess what we have as another possibility rather than a crippling mistake.

We can transcend the kind of thinking that allows occasional blunders to take hold and stay with us past the moments when they occur. The game is too demanding for us to believe that we can play it perfectly always. What we can do is immerse ourselves in playing with awareness for what we're doing and how it relates to what we want. That is our access to accepting mistakes when they occur and learning from them so we do not repeat them. Once I got a call from someone who said that he was ready to start playing great pool and thought he should learn from someone who's been around long enough to have made all the mistakes. All I could say was, "You certainly dialed the right number. Let's get started."

