

Eyesight

From a simple show of hands at a lodge meeting to the complexities of rush-hour driving, where one rebel can snarl traffic for miles, everything we accomplish in groups depends on some measure of agreement. And while it's hard to imagine making it through the chaos of a day where everyone might decide to think independently, there are times when acting from agreement alone can stop us from moving forward, times when a little careful consideration might reveal truths that live beyond widely held beliefs. One likely myth accepted as truth on a pool table is the overwhelming value placed on sharp eyesight.

A couple months back I asserted here that creative vision, a quality that separates the legends from the mere greats, is rarely encouraged among competitors in the early stages of skills training. From our years of experience most of us instructors and coaches learn to cling stubbornly to what we know works best and are likely to pooh pooh any variance or experimentation as wrong. It's too bad since creativity can be awakened and nurtured in anyone. Good eyesight, on the other hand, is frequently overemphasized in pool, another misfortune since that only serves to discourage those players who do not possess razor sharp vision.

That discouragement tends to show up most often in aging players when they first notice that the edge of a distant ball is starting to look a little fuzzier than it did at age 16. After observing a change in their visual acuity many players will panic in the fear of never making another shot. But those players who've worn glasses since childhood don't complain much about their "handicap" since they've been dealing with it throughout their lives. Good players who never have had sharp vision must know that it's not all that critical to pocketing balls.

If we consider the margin for error on shots where the object ball lies a few feet from the pocket we are looking at differences of a few hundredths of an inch, margins that decrease with added speed and distance. How many of us, the sharpest possible eyesight notwithstanding, will perceive such miniscule differences while standing six or seven feet away from a ball? And if we could detect such small measures, how would we sight them on the plain, black face of an 8 ball under less-than-ideal lighting?

The discussion goes deeper to reveal considerable flaws in traditional aiming instruction and what most of us believe regarding the relationship between the cue ball and object ball at contact. The typical diagram will draw a line from the center of the pocket out through the center of the object ball to establish a contact or aiming point on the object ball. We can also describe it as the farthest point on the object ball from the center of the pocket. There are even some gadgets available to help us find that point on the ball. One huge problem with using that point lies in the fact that it will not work for a cut shot with no english on the cue ball. Because of friction between the two balls on shots played with no outside english, we must over cut balls to pocket them, the primary reason that cut shots near rails cause fits for beginners. So an object ball will have at least three different contact points, one for a left cut, one for a right cut and one for a

straight-in shot. Yet most players, myself included, continue to use the mental picture that we learned early on from a book or maybe another person and then hit the ball somewhere else to pocket it based on angle, speed and spin. Only a few enlightened instructors such as Robert Byrne discuss this phenomenon in their literature to share the truth with us. So, if the actual contact point on a ball changes according to various operative factors while most of us continue with an attachment to a fictional point, what are we doing if we are really hitting a point different from the one we think we see?

A few years ago Allen Gilbert, already in his 70's, demonstrated to me that precise aiming does not depend on sharp vision. As he consistently hit a ball at the other end of a billiard table thin enough to move it an inch or two at most, he explained that precision comes more from body alignment than sharp eyesight and then asked me how good I thought his eyes could be at his age with no glasses. My own father, who never had decent eyesight in my lifetime, played fine pool until he was virtually blinded and then irretrievably frustrated by cataracts.

The process of pocketing balls proceeds most effectively from the non-thinking or creative part of the mind. The act therefore allows for wide variation in the way we perceive what's happening. And despite all the thought and consideration I've applied to the question, I cannot say for certain what is happening when we perform. However, I believe that we relate to a more impressionistic view of a ball that we can identify from our use of memory as a ball we will pocket according to the set of variables we choose for the shot. For that reason it's critical that we make all necessary position decisions while standing up and looking at the ball. From there we can make a stance that works with the determined stroke, speed, and english for the specific shot. When that is managed effectively we can close our eyes and pocket balls after the stance is made, something I encourage among all students to help transcend the idea that eyesight pockets balls.

Surely if offered a choice I would take perfect vision over blurry vision and would always want to see a crisp edge on balls at the far end of the table. And perhaps I'm searching for a way to rationalize a new relationship to my own weakening eyesight and the prospect of playing with eyeglasses someday soon. In that case I want to recall an experience from a few years ago when I was given the opportunity to teach pool to a blind person, an amazing individual named Gary Lemberg. Since I had never given the possibility any thought we proceeded with a completely experimental program, learning to measure speed with sound and map out the table with our hands. In the matter of shot making, Gary learned to lay his cue on a line that I described and then make his stance on that line and pocket balls. In less than two months he competed in a tournament where we only asked his opponents to allow my coaching. Though he did not win a match he won several games, one of them with a 9 on the break. And though I don't know if he's still playing, I want to thank him for such a rewarding and enjoyable experience and for the rare chance to see the game in a new and unimagined way.

