

Trouble

Of all the possibilities that we confront on a pool table, the most frightening to consider are the numerous ways to slip up and turn an easy run out into a nightmare. Any time we have to let the cue ball go, we face a chance that it will kiss, carom, bounce, bump or nudge its way into some sort of trouble. And it seems that the more meaningful the match, the more likely we are to find ourselves in impossible situations that we neither predicted nor imagined. For me the weirdest and least predictable disaster is a cue ball that comes to rest within the jaws of a side pocket, deeply enough for the pocket point to hide the next ball lying on the same rail. Fortunately, I don't find myself in that mess too often—only in tournament matches.

While a complete list of all the ways to find trouble on a pool table might fill volumes, there is some good news. It turns out that the most popular way to screw the pooch is also easy to identify. To state the principle briefly: Except in precisely controlled situations, when the cue ball is the closest ball on the table to a short rail, you're usually in trouble.

In **Diagram 1** we see shot A and a common example of a situation where we want the cue ball closest to the short rail. Here the shooter would play a soft stop shot on the 3 ball to leave the cue ball close to the cushion for a natural angle on the 1 to follow out for position on the 8. Because the shot on the 3 ball is straight and short, controlling the cue ball for the exact angle on the 1 ball is easy. If the shot before the 1 ball were farther away in another pocket, achieving that same position might be too difficult and the shooter would look for a cut angle from the other side of the 1 ball to bounce the cue ball off of the short rail for position.

Shot B in **Diagram 1** illustrates one of countless set ups that can lead to problems with a cue ball heading for a short rail. Here, the inexperienced shooter sees the 10 ball in front of the corner pocket and will hit the 13 softly to hold the cue ball for that easy shot. The 13 ball is not hanging in the pocket however and will require a little energy to get it there, just enough energy perhaps to send the cue ball past the 10 to where we see the dotted-outlined ball. Now what? It's either the 15 all the way down or the 11 across side—typical options when we find the cue ball too close to a short rail. The experienced player would identify the danger here and then play position for another shot, something that's accomplished with more speed rather than less. When good players see the cue ball moving toward a rail, instead of trying to hit the shot artificially soft to stop it from getting there, they add speed to let it go to the rail and bounce off. In a situation like shot B's, the best option is to let the cue ball roll naturally to the short rail and rebound back out, ideally far enough for a shot on the 15 ball to complete the run most easily.

Sometimes the threat is not always so obvious. In **Diagram 2** we see our principle at work but in a somewhat different way. Here the same danger lurks even with

everything sitting far from the short rail. With only the 4, 1 and 8 balls left, once again the run out appears routine. Pocket the 4 and roll the cue ball over to the dotted-outlined ball for a straight, follow shot across the table to the game winner. With only the 1 and 8 on the table and ball in hand on the 1, I would probably choose the follow shot just described. However, if I found myself in the position shown here, I would hope to have the presence of mind to identify the potential trouble with that choice. From the 4 ball, the cue ball is moving across the one spot that yields good position on the 1, and thus demands perfect speed to leave it there. If the shot were struck just a hair too hard, the cue ball would continue a few inches past that spot to the X and, once again, trouble. From the X the shooter must cut the 1 into the lower side pocket or play it into the lower right-hand corner, both tricky shots with the added headache of difficult position for the 8 ball. A player might anticipate that problem and then hit the shot too softly to leave the cue ball near the Y. From there the 1 ball is easy, but again, position on the 8 is not. The best option would be to play the 4 with follow and some left-hand english to move it around three rails to come out near the foot spot for a shot on the 1 ball in the same side pocket. The cue ball in that case would land closest to the short rail but in a controlled way for the easiest possible run out.

The shots discussed are only two of countless possibilities where we can easily leave the cue ball too close to a short rail. On any shot, whenever the angle sends the cue ball toward a short rail, it's wise to think about speed and whether to hold the cue ball above the other balls, or add some speed to ensure a rebound from the short rail and back out into the clear. Eventually experience teaches all of us that, when the cue ball is the closest ball on the table to a short rail, we're often shooting a long shot to a far corner or an awkwardly angled shot into a side pocket. But "eventually" is a long time. Learn to identify this consistently obvious problem and stay out of trouble.

