

## Position Play

Why do most competitive pool players peak at a certain, middle-to-high level of performance where they settle in, bunched with the majority, on a plateau of stalled improvement, while some break through to detach themselves from the herd and move toward elite status on a fast track? Since nearly every player first learns pool in much the same way, I believe that the ones who separate themselves from the pack are those who learn to relearn a few major elements of playing, and then improve quickly and continually. Take shot making for example. Except for someone fortunate enough to shoot that very first ball with professional coaching, everyone learns to get down and then aim the shot. Sharp players discover that a simple reversal of those steps works much better; aim the shot and then get down. For confirmation, consider Cory Deuel's account of the missed nine ball that kept him out the finals at this year's BCA. To paraphrase, he said that he knew he landed thick on the shot and then tried to adjust his aim while he was down instead of standing up and starting over. It's doubtful that any player has ever reached a state of complete immunity to that problem, and possible that many cannot distinguish it so clearly. Regarding position play we shall examine a similar, more radical shift in execution.

For beginners, the first big leap occurs at the level where they learn about position play. From that epiphany comes the process of learning how to control the cue ball by altering its spin and an introduction to the myriad possibilities that surround the concept of working whitey. In fact, the learning never ends, as demonstrated by great players when they gather around a table to share fantastic position shots. But the natural, and necessary, initial stages of learning cue-ball control can set a lifelong position trap from which many players never free themselves to handle the cue ball with the kind of precision that they desire.

After learning the fundamentals of working the cue ball, many players get stuck in a "how-do-I-do-this?" cycle and condition themselves to wonder how they will solve each position problem as it arises in competition. That approach unleashes the question, "Can I?" while it fosters a constraining belief in one correct solution for every shot and, especially with spectators around, a crippling fear of playing the shot incorrectly—a big reason that most great players began at a young age. Kids tend to explore a lot with no worries about looking bad.

If you can hit draw, stop and follow shots, and are aware that left-hand english makes the cue ball bounce left off of a rail, I'm saying that you know *how* to play position. Go ahead and declare that fact aloud; most kids would if the question arose. We can confirm my assertion with an exercise. Place the seven ball on a short rail, one diamond from a corner and about a half-inch or so from the rail. Place the cue ball about a foot away from it and slightly less than one diamond segment from the short rail. You should be looking at a shot with a cut angle of almost 45 degrees. Now place the eight and nine ball on the other end of the table, clustered so they must be broken to run out, one-half ball's width from the long rail that you are leaning over to shoot, next to the

diamond midway between the side pocket and corner pocket. The two-ball cluster is your cue-ball target and you will shoot to hit it along various tracks.

Before proceeding, look at the shot and visualize the possible paths for the cue ball to hit the eight or nine ball for the breakout. Imagining the shot, I see four possible tracks immediately: 1. A direct rebound from the short rail back to the cluster with a below-center hit, maybe some outside english 2. Two rails—short, short—to hit the target from underneath, probably a below-center hit also 3. Two rails—short, long—to the target with high, inside english 4. Three rails—short, long, short—hitting the target again from underneath with high and less inside english.

Begin with the simplest track (#1) to the target balls and look at the shot. Take a good look at the target balls until you know that the cue ball will simply go and hit them. In fact, visualize the cue ball hitting the eight ball full. Then forget the whole matter to get with pocketing the ball. Make your stance with your focus on the object ball and shoot the shot when you feel ready to pocket the seven ball. Work with this method until the matter of *how* you will make the cue ball hit the target begins to vanish and is replaced by the knowledge that the cue ball *will* hit it. Then proceed to make the breakout following each of the other tracks that you can see.

If some of the language for setting up the exercise appears vague, it's because, in reality, much of pool is often vague and abstract; there are billions of possibilities on a pool table. And if the instructions for where to hit the cue ball appear too ambiguous, consider cue-ball control and its three main variables for a moment. The spot you hit on the cue ball works in concert with speed and stroke in a way that makes it impossible to quantify each variable to give specific instructions for position play. If anything, zero in on your stroke and the different ways that your tip can hit the cue ball. Players who believe that hitting an exact spot on the cue ball produces an exact result will look like Mosconi as soon as pianists who merely hit the right keys will sound like Horowitz. I can honestly say that I have never seen a great player spend time laboring over the precise spot where the tip will meet the cue ball.

We use the clustered pair as a position target because it presents itself clearly on the table as an object of focus. After you are hitting the target balls, start shooting to roll the cue ball up to one of them with just enough speed to nudge it. Then you can remove the target balls to play the cue ball for the spot on the table that the eight ball occupied. Many players are reluctant at first to mark a pinpoint on the table as a position target because doing so gives rise to a very daunting game we like to play with ourselves called “right and wrong.” Making a single point “right” creates almost 35 square feet of “wrong” on a nine-foot table.

The shot in the exercise is a nice simulation of real play as it illustrates a position challenge with several answers to one question. As you play the shot and hit the target along the various position tracks, your connection to exactly what you want will sharpen

as you shed your concern for how to achieve it, never planting a seed of doubt. That's called trust, our direct access to confidence and a professional, see-it-do-it game. Like any accomplishment, the moment we choose exactly what we want, the way to get it begins to shape itself as we move into action. Once you are playing in the realm of choosing an exact dot for position you will amaze yourself with how often the cue ball lands on it. Most of the time however you may be "wrong" and miss the dot but find that your position is still great. And you will experience the joy of running racks without being right.