

Precision

Based on stories, photographs and some short films, when Willie Mosconi comes to mind I get an image of pure, cold precision. I see an endless stream of easy shots and a perfect, compact stroke flowing from a man who, during his reign, might have literally run a hundred balls more times than he changed his socks. No doubt that there had to be many weeks when that was true. While some of the stories seem too rich to be credible, I believe them. There's a nice one about the famous nightclub owner, Toots Shor, inviting Mosconi to New York to humble the blustery Jackie Gleason in a little straight-pool match. In the first 100-point game, Gleason came close but lost somehow to the unskilled yet lucky "clothing salesman." So he doubled the bet on the second game and watched Mosconi run 100-and-out—shooting the last thirty balls left handed! Away from the table he exuded a keen precision that's evident in every photograph. Always he appears as a fastidious dresser and perfectly groomed gentleman, someone who might be seen on the town dancing with Grace Kelly or Audrey Hepburn.

Mosconi was not alone in his time; he was only the best. Caras, Crane and Greenleaf brought the same sharpness to the table and the same level of sophistication to their appearance. In my memory there is no picture of Ralph Greenleaf in anything but a tuxedo. They were dashing gentlemen from an age when a man left his hat at the door and straight pool was king. We've since lost almost all care for precision in our dress, our language, our manners and, it seems, our pool games. We can blame prosperity, hippies, rock and roll or whatever, but still we're left with the fact that, compared to our predecessors, we cut a sloppy figure and we play some sloppy pool. So when someone comes to me in wrinkled shorts and a dirty tee shirt to report that he ain't runnin' out in a bitchin' way, it's tempting to guess that maybe the problem goes back to a time long before his first pool game. But I run a billiard academy, not a charm school, so we address the matter at hand.

Nowadays nine ball's the game and its best players rival anyone in history. But further down the ranks toward the beginning level, nine ball does not reinforce the qualities of a finished pool player. A typical first rack run in nine ball may include a desperate bank shot from bad position, a wild cut shot that sends whitey off of four rails and three balls for good position, and a ball slopped two-rails into the side after missing the corner. Now if that same guy makes the nine on his next break he has a two-rack run and an experience from which to build. Straight pool, or 14.1, on the other hand is too unforgiving and a player works hard through a frustrating stage of sixes and sevens before running that first full rack. Putting two racks together in straight pool requires skill, knowledge and touch. A two-rack runner in straight pool may be miles from the top but that person knows something about pool. The point is not to assert that one game is better than the other but that one game teaches us better than the other.

Players who begin with straight pool soon learn that having a good shot on an open table may not necessarily lead to completing the rack. It's very common to come

down to the last four or five balls with a good shot but knowing that the last ball, the break shot, is now unreachable because the cue ball is two inches out of position. Nine ball players must meet the same type of position demands but with far wider margins for error. So when I encounter someone that wants more run outs, that person takes a simple test. I'll set up a few balls to run in rotation with an ideal first shot and ask the student where the cue ball will land for the next shot. If the answer sounds like, "over there" or "somewhere in this area," we have a place to begin working. Over hundreds of trials with hundreds of students, most of them excellent shooters, not one person has ever taken a careful look at the next ball and chosen a specific point or line on the table for the cue ball's destination.

The fact that nine ball gives us some leeway with the cue ball can fool us into thinking that the game does not require precision. Great nine ball is very demanding and it looks a lot like great straight pool, one easy shot after another. What really fools us though is the memories we have of running some racks without taking care to play precise position. We learn to believe that, since we have run racks in the past without care, the answer must lie somewhere further on that path. Unfortunately that's where the path ends and improvement stops for many intermediate players. The good news is that every mid-level player has the skills to place the cue ball precisely. It only requires a small shift in thinking to allow our skills to give us their full capability by choosing to play precise position. We can walk a new path and tear up that scholarship to the school for shortstops called "area shape."

For a good example of the role that precision plays, consider the phenomenon of tight pockets. When many so-called tight-table players see a table with generous pockets, first they scoff and then they boast about how many racks they're about to run. Almost invariably though, within 15 minutes, the same second-rate brand of pool that they play on their favorite tight table emerges on the easy table complete with a seemingly preordained number of key misses. Only the very best players, those at or near the professional level, run considerably more racks on a soft table. The top players shoot with deadly precision, aiming their shots at a pinpoint in the pocket, and are thus the only players who take advantage of a table where that pinpoint has more space surrounding it.

In an age where the most popular quiz show asks contestants questions like, "What is the capital of France?" and allows them phone calls to get the answers, we cannot hope that precision will come to us from somewhere "out there." We have to find it within ourselves and bring it into our pool games. Whenever we make broad, sloppy choices, we dishonor and dull our skills. Instead we must call upon our skills and allow them to deliver their best by asking for precise results with the cue ball and the object ball going into the pocket. On our most recent July 4th, a friend asked me to read and contemplate the Declaration of Independence. It's an amazingly powerful document that sternly informs the king of a new and exact design for this country's future. If Jefferson had called on the king and said, "George, dude, like chill," we'd probably be eating a lot of fish and chips right now. Wait a minute. We'd be playing a lot of snooker too with no need to discuss precision.

