

Gimmicks

Recently I overheard an intermediate shooter asking a first-class player what makes professionals so great. Is it desire? Tenacity? Vision? Depending on the player and the situation, surely all of those qualities and then a few more must play a role. But, if we really want to get at the essence of great pool and the sharpest contrast between the best players and the rest of us, I think the answer is pretty obvious. They pocket more balls. If we set aside the mumbo jumbo for a moment the difference is clear. Compared to the rest of us, top players make more shots and miss fewer.

Because pocketing balls is the most basic part of the game and the one thing that everybody at every skill level understands, it is often degraded to secondary status among students who have decided to leave recreational pool behind to learn the game. The prevailing wisdom at that stage takes students by the hand to lead them away from the one basic concept that everyone grasps into the more captivating world of techniques, tactics and secrets. In fact, soon after most players begin learning some of the finer points, their shot-making skills suffer as their heads fill with a new, dizzying array of choices and decisions.

According to a pet theory of mine, another major problem with shot making grows from something most of us learn early, namely that it's okay to miss. Since beginners tend to play with other beginners and every rack comes with plenty of chances, reliable repetition teaches us that a missed shot usually costs nothing. Then, by the time most players encounter someone who can run out, it takes hard work to reverse that early conditioning. And as much as I would rather see youngsters pursuing greatness at the table instead of money, I admit that betting may be the fastest way to learn the price of a miss.

Now, after recently viewing and testing a small collection of pool gadgets, I see a third, more sinister cause of shot-making shortfalls that's rooted in the way almost every one of us learned to pocket balls. In Diagram 1 we have Shot A to illustrate the most widely accepted method for shot making. The red line goes through the centers of the cue ball and the 10 ball to the center of the pocket. The spot on the 10 ball farthest from the pocket is commonly known as the contact point, also shown here as the point where the "ghost" ball touches the object ball. So, we're taught that, in order to pocket the 10 ball from anywhere, we need only to replace that ghost ball with the cue ball. It looks right, sounds good and dwells deeply in our beliefs. Unfortunately though, it does not work. Because of friction, if the shot were played that way with the blue ball and no english, the 10 would get pushed past the pocket in the neighborhood of the blue line. And, hitting the same spot on the 10 with the yellow cue ball and no english would send it toward the short rail as shown with the yellow line. Eureka!

Eureka might be nice, but no dice since there's nothing new here. Robert Byrne began investigating this phenomenon in 1981, after reading about it in a Joe Davis Snooker book from 1949. In his *Advanced Techniques In Pool And Billiards*, Byrne and Bob Jewett collaborate to give us a simple yet conclusive proof that can be repeated easily on any table. Another star from the BD stable, David Alciatore, has since conducted exhaustive research on this topic. Dr. Dave lives close to me and I am constantly pulling on his coat for the scientific lowdown on pool. During a visit last winter I asked him to confirm my suspicion that a sliding cue ball throws an object ball farther forward than a rolling cue ball. In his October 2006 *Billiards Digest* column, he shows that, on a 30-degree cut with medium speed, a sliding cue ball throws the object ball farther by a factor greater than four. So, while one of the colored cue balls in Shot A might possibly pocket the 10 using the ghost-ball method and follow, that same contact point with stun would surely cause a miss at that distance.

When the most popular method for aiming pool shots conflicts so sharply with reality, a flood of questions comes to mind. Why, if a champion began sharing the truth in print almost sixty years ago, with additional supporting proof appearing through subsequent years, do we stubbornly cling to a fairy tale, and worse, pass it along to others? I think it's because the conventional method is so easy to apprehend and comes in the form of a pretty picture that simply *looks* correct. When we train a beginner with shots like Shot B, the dotted-line aberration that falls into the right half of the pocket counts as a success and helps cement that person's relationship with a faulty technique. Later, when that same shooter misses Shot C repeatedly because the friction pushes the 3 ball forward to bounce off the cushion and onto the dotted line, I wonder how much damage is done as that person no doubt asks, "What's wrong with me?" My biggest question however is, with all of the evidence available to disprove the conventional wisdom, how can someone manufacture and sell gadgets that do nothing but teach beginners to apply a principle that does not work?

Though I risk threatening sales in an already fragile industry, I must nevertheless take a stand for the game itself and the advancement of those who play it. So, I object when I see people selling devices that promise to enhance progress but do the opposite instead. While there are some fine training aids available, our industry, like others, is still an industry, so, let the buyer beware. Exploiting vulnerable beginners with useless contraptions harms, not only them, but also the game as a whole by stalling awareness and progress. When I hear players blaming pool gods after missing easy shots, I wonder how far we've come in the 400-plus years since billiards' beginning. Maybe, instead of an aiming tool, someone should sell us a gadget to combat evil spirits.

