

The Elements of Straight Pool

Last week during a short trip to Vancouver I had the pleasure of making a new friend, an old friend of a good friend. He is a native of Taiwan who moved to Vancouver three months ago to begin his education in English. Not long into the full day that we spent together he began, very eagerly, to tell me all he knows about pool. Naturally we discussed the famous players from his country: Fong-Pang Chao, Jennifer Chen, Number-One Asian Player, Chin-Shun Yang, and the current Women's World Champion, Shin-Mei Liu.

Is he a pool player? Not really, he says, just a very engaged sports fan. I won't go into his picks for this year's Cy Young awards. And to show that his knowledge is not limited to his countrymen, he went on to tell me about Earl, Cory, Johnny, Karen, Allison, Oliver, Ralf, and a host of others. He knows the players because in his native land, and elsewhere throughout the world, pool is a major sport with heavy television coverage. The recent world tournament in Wales aired live matches in some 60-plus countries while here in the U.S., we have to pore over arcane cable listings to find edited, taped matches somewhere around 2AM between Seniors Lawn Darts and the Chauffeurs-Of-The-PGA Skins Game, a sad reality indeed and a good topic for an editorial somewhere else. Our pool conversation hit its peak when we turned to the World Junior Competition and the probable reason that seven of the last eleven winners are from Taiwan. My new friend turned to me and, in crystal-clear English, said, "In the U.S., nobody plays 14.1."

How does he know that? Do they report our participation figures on the evening news around the world? Where he got his information is irrelevant really. What's important is that he hit the nail on the head. When we see a country with a population that's roughly seven percent of ours moving toward dominance in the game we invented, and a mere spectator summing up the cause, it's time to take notice.

I believe that the biggest reason for not playing enough straight pool is that the game is too painful. It simply hurts a lot to look at a full rack spread out over the table only to run four or five balls before committing an error and sulking back to the chair. 14.1 humbles us with its quiet and constant demand for razor-sharp skill. But maybe we can find a way to break through the pain by segregating the game's key elements to practice separately.

The first skill called for in straight pool is running balls. The two most popular games limit our runs to eight or nine balls maximum before the action stops and a new game begins. Straight pool has no limit and allows for the possibility of a player staying at the table for hours, forever really with enough food and water on hand. A few years

ago, someone invented a game called equal offense and it provides excellent training for running balls. One plays by breaking open a rack, taking cue ball in hand and running the balls to a maximum of twenty. A game lasts ten innings, making 200 a perfect score. The complete rules are in the rulebook and probably online somewhere, but that's enough information to get started. Equal offense has two primary features that make it a perfect practice game. One, both players get equal opportunities at the table; and two, even if played alone, it facilitates accurate record keeping to objectify one's progress. Try adding one, ten-inning session to your daily practice routine and keeping a log of your scores to chart your improvement.

The second important skill, and the key to high runs, is getting the break shots that are necessary to string racks together. Instead of waiting two or three years to see enough break-shot opportunities in play, you can isolate this part of the game by practicing the end-rack portion of straight pool. Place a ball next to the rack in ideal break-shot position and another ball in front of the side pocket so a stop shot on that second ball will serve up the position you want for the break shot. That ball in front of the side is called the key shot and never has something been so aptly named; it holds the key to continuing a run. Now add three or four balls spread out around the same half of the table and, with cue ball in hand, run out to the break shot. For now, instead of shooting that break shot, simply take a good look at it and visualize yourself sending it home and going off to the races with the next rack. Repeat the exercise for an hour, running four or five balls to position for the break shot and stopping there.

Then you can practice break shots. Start with the most preferred ones that lie next to the rack and shoot them with cue ball in hand. Focus on pocketing the ball and freeing the cue ball. If you make the shot and have a shot in the new rack with possibilities beyond it, you have done the job and can rerack the balls to play another break shot. There are about a half dozen common, effective break shots ranging from the most-preferred corner-pocket shot next to the rack to side-pocket shots near the front of the rack. Remember to focus on moving the cue ball from the rack toward the center of the table. On some shots you will draw the cue ball off of the rack while on others you will roll it through the edge of the rack.

Isolating the major elements of straight pool to gain comfort with each one will cause rapid improvement and make the game less daunting when played in its entirety. It's also very helpful to see how the game looks when played at its best. Accu-Stats has a number of championship matches with runs of over a hundred balls that will provide a view of perfection that's hard to imagine without seeing it in reality. Mike Sigel's instructional video is another great source of inspiration. Of course the best way to learn is from experience. Practicing and learning the king of the pool games guarantees improvement in every game. Who knows? Maybe you will start running three hundred balls every time you step up to the table and become the one person on earth who can lay honest claim to straight pool's most common criticism, "This game is boring." Or at least when you encounter someone in your own travels who tells you that Americans don't play pool's most elegant game, you can say, "I do and I love it."

