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Looking for Trouble?

Although the possibilities for screwing up seem endless, one common thread running through all pool games is the easiest way to get into trouble. It occurs most often in straight pool, probably because less experienced players tend to look at a table with a lot of balls on it, and then focus primarily on making the shot, assuming that another shot will be there afterwards—always a dangerous assumption. And what is the easiest way to get into trouble? Except in very controlled situations, you will almost always find yourself facing a difficult shot when the cue ball is the closest ball on the table to a short rail.

Because we like to shoot at nearby pockets we must be careful to examine certain shots that move the cue ball toward an end rail to ensure that, when we let the cue ball go toward that rail, we will not wind up with a long shot to the other end of the table or an awkwardly difficult shot into a side pocket. In any situation where the angle of the shot sends the cue ball toward any rail, experienced players generally employ enough speed to bounce the cue ball off that rail and back toward the center area of the table. When there's a short rail involved, doing so becomes critical.

Let's first examine a setup where leaving the cue ball nearest to the short rail works better. Looking at shot A may help remind us how relatively rarely layouts like this tend to arise. Here we have an easy shot on the 7 ball with an almost straight-in angle. So we play a soft stop shot, making sure to leave the cue ball close to the rail for the next shot on the 8 ball. From there, with the cut angle on the 8 ball, a simple follow shot will move the cue ball out to the left and toward the side rail for position on the 9 ball. If we began this run with the 7 ball somewhere else on the table, say a side-pocket shot with an angle that moves the cue ball toward the 8, controlling the speed for the same position would be extremely difficult. From somewhere else we would want to bounce the cue ball off of the short rail, ideally to somewhere near the X, for an angle that uses another bounce from the short rail to get to the 9 ball.

Shot B, where we begin with the striped ball in the side pocket, is far more common and only one of countless possible shots that naturally move the cue ball toward the short rail. It's easy on shots like these to be fooled by that stripe near the top-right corner pocket, thinking perhaps that position for it is no worry at all. Less experienced players may look at the shot in the side and attempt to play it softly to keep the cue ball from rolling too far. But the ball is not right next to the side pocket, and getting it there requires some speed. Often that's just enough speed for the cue ball to roll down to somewhere near the Y and no good shot. Players with more experience will let their strokes out a little on a shot like this and send the cue ball straight to the short rail with enough speed to come out at least past the stripe nearest the corner, but often back out to the center of the table and above all three balls.

Set up shot B and practice shooting the side-pocket shot with a smooth follow stroke and no english on the cue ball. Practice it until your cue ball is rolling straight into the short rail and rebounding straight out to the center of the table where you have a shot on all three remaining stripes. It's also a good idea to hit it softly once or twice to experience the speed that can cause problems by sending the cue ball up to the short rail and no farther.

This shot is only one of many possible shots that can lead us into the trap of winding up too close to a short rail. On any shot where you see the cue ball headed that way, it's wise to stop and think about speed. If the shot angle is nearly straight, it's not usually difficult to play the shot softly and hold the cue ball closer to the table's center than the any of the likely balls to shoot next. But on those shots where it looks like the angle can send the cue ball to the short rail, even with a fairly soft hit, plan to hit them with enough speed to get a good enough bounce off that short rail to come back out above some other balls. Then, when someone greets you with the cliché, "Have you been staying out of trouble?" you will be able to answer confidently in the affirmative.



