

Combinations and Position II

No matter how much we think we know about pool, we will always encounter setups that may look familiar but don't quite match the models for the principles we have learned. In those situations we must analyze the table to determine if we can apply the principle that appears to work or if we must find another answer.

During an 8-ball match a few weeks ago I faced the problem in the diagram where I needed the two stripes and then the 8 ball to win the game. Two months ago I diagrammed a similar combination shot and talked about the best way to ensure another shot after sinking the ball in front of the pocket. Basically, when we have a combination shot on a ball in front of a pocket, we want to hit the second object ball full to keep first ball in front of the same pocket for the next shot. Taking care to shoot the first ball slow along the line of centers, as shown with the longer dotted line, will keep that ball from straying too far away from the pocket.

If we look carefully at the shot in the diagram, we see that it's possible to shoot the first stripe along the line of centers for a full hit on the second stripe. However, that choice demands a perfect straight-on hit and offers only a small part of the pocket for the intended ball. Still, that's what I opted for and it turned out badly. When I played the shot I over cut the first ball slightly to hit the second ball a bit to the left of the line of centers and wound up with the first stripe on the top rail where we see the shaded ball, and the cue ball over on the side rail, as shown with the dotted-outline cue ball. From that position, with solids all over the table and no safety option, the game looked hopeless. Somehow I managed to cut the second stripe along the top rail, into the top left corner, but my runaway cue ball hit the 8 and moved it into a spot where I had no shot. And of course, after I missed whatever crazy kick shot I tried, my opponent ran out easily while I was left feeling stupid.

If I had examined the shot more carefully I would have found the solution. In this situation the line-of-centers method may be possible but is too difficult, especially on the fast table where I encountered the problem. If we look at the short dotted line going through the second ball to the center of the pocket, it's easy to see that it's the best line for pocketing that ball. But because the first stripe must cut the second one to move it along the short dotted line, there's no way to leave that first ball in front of the pocket for another shot. So then what?

Very often on combination shots, the first ball must cut the second ball and will therefore move off to one side after contact. Whenever that's the case, and the first ball is the one to shoot next, we must visualize the movement and then predict where that first ball is going. For the shot in the diagram, it's easy to see that the first ball will hit the second ball and bounce over to the left, which is exactly what it did to wind up where the shaded ball lies. So, instead of trying to hold it in front of the top right corner with a soft

hit, the smart choice is to add a little more speed to make it bounce off the top rail toward the top left corner, into the vicinity of the X. That choice offers wide margins for error, with both speed and the contact point on the second ball, whereas my choice demanded perfection with both variables. The shooter only has to hit the second ball somewhere left of the line of centers with enough speed to bounce the first ball off of the top rail. Whenever a layout looks familiar enough to suggest a principle we know but does not match the paradigm precisely, we must examine the shot to see if it offers a different, but better, possible outcome than the one we see first.

