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Two Practice Shots

Above all skills the one that receives the most attention from players and instructors is the ability to deliver a smooth, straight stroke. It's the first skill we must acquire to pocket balls consistently and the one that we continue honing as long as we play pool with purpose. As a player's stroke improves that person pockets more balls while position shots that were once out of reach become routine. Our two practice shots for this month serve nicely to help bring out the kind of long, silky stroke that we see among top players.

Set up the balls as shown and mark their positions. The precise set up is not critical but you want a shot along the side rail to the upper right corner with some cut angle. The solid ball can be about a ball's width from the cushion with the cue ball placed a little farther away at maybe two or two and half ball widths. As indicated with the arrows you will play position on both sides of the striped ball after shooting the solid ball into the far corner. Before introducing precise cue-ball control, practice pocketing the solid ball consistently with no concern for the cue ball.

After you have a good feel for pocketing the solid ball you can play the first position shot along the solid line. To pocket the solid ball and get position for the stripe as indicated you will hit the cue ball above center for follow with some left-hand english. Two common errors with this shot are hitting it too hard and a reluctance to use enough english. Play the shot with a slow, smooth stroke making sure to bring the ferrule into your bridge hand on the final backswing. Failing to move the cue far enough back before the stroke is the leading cause of a jerky poke at the cue ball instead of the smooth stroke that we seek. Practice this shot until it feels comfortable and easy and until the cue ball is hitting the top left diamond on the long rail consistently. That diamond is almost always your second-rail target for balls lying on the short rail at the other end of the table. Arriving short of that diamond can cause a rebound that does not yield good position while going past it toward the corner introduces the risk of a scratch.

Our second shot is somewhat more difficult so it's critical to get comfortable with the first one before moving on. For position on this shot you will draw the cue ball with enough right-hand english to move it around the table as shown with the dashed line. This shot usually requires maximum draw and english so do not be afraid of the cue ball's edge. Miscues in practice cause no harm and can help us find the cue ball's limits. There's a definite temptation to hit this one too hard and sacrifice all accuracy and control. Here the long, smooth stroke is a must, and so to generate the necessary speed without straining yourself you can try lengthening your bridge an inch or two. With every attempt remember the cardinal rule for these shots of making certain that the ferrule reaches your bridge on the final backswing. If the position is not working out at first, practice getting the cue ball started on its necessary path at slower speeds. Then add speed gradually while maintaining accuracy and control. This one is a professional level shot, so remain patient and be prepared to devote some time to mastering it.

Neither shot is easy so remember to stay calm and relaxed while playing both of them. Although success may seem elusive at first it will come with focused practice. And as you continue working with both shots you will see noticeable improvement in your stroke along with your performance.



