

Eight Ball—The Fine Points of a Run Out

Two months ago we discussed the importance of planning the run out before taking the first shot in a game of eight ball. This month we shall continue in that vein with some tips for making and executing a plan that will work for a run out or a plan that leads to a tactical move for a victory in games where the run out is too difficult.

Let's begin with an examination of an open table to find the key for putting together a complete run. When faced with an open table your first and most important decision is the choice between stripes and solids. You will make that choice by looking at the eight ball. If the eight ball's path to the most logical pocket is blocked by a stripe, that will lead you to favor stripes since its path will be clear after the stripes are removed. Suppose that the eight ball has a clear path or is blocked by a stripe into one pocket and a solid into another, equally favorable, pocket. Then you must look backwards from the eight ball for the best key shot, the stripe or solid that will yield the easiest position for the eight ball after you pocket it as the last ball of the group. In one of those two situations the group that offers the best key shot is the one to choose. When the eight ball is in the rack area, the best candidates for the key shot are balls lying between the foot string and the side pockets because they offer stop-shot position for a shot on the eight into the corner.

From the key shot, move backwards another step to find the ball that leads most logically to it. You can make a complete plan in this fashion proceeding backwards through the rack until you arrive at your first shot. Many books offer that method as the way to make a plan but I believe that there is a simpler and more logical approach. Once you have established your key shot and the one preceding it, you can now simply divide the table in half at the side pockets and examine the layout of the remaining balls. Because it is too difficult to move the cue ball up and down the table through the traffic of your opponent's balls, complete the remainder your plan to pocket all of the balls at one end of the table, then all of the balls at the other end. The simplest racks proceed with pocketing the balls at the foot end, making one trip up to the head for any balls there and finishing near the middle of the table with the key shot. Practice finding that pattern by breaking open racks and looking for a basic foot, head, middle procession to the eight ball.

Many racks will contain problem balls, balls that you must move or break out before you can pocket them. Always attack those problems as early in the run as possible. If, after identifying your key shot, you see a ball that must be moved, look for the most logical break ball and plan the most direct route to it. Make your plan to the necessary breakout, after which you will complete the plan from there to the eight ball.

Remember that your options diminish with every ball that you pocket. In *The Eight-Ball Book*, the Monk states that if you have to execute two or more breakouts to complete a rack you should consider an early safety and play for a tactical win. Balls on or near a rail, especially a short rail, present another problem simply because they require more precise position play. Place those balls as early as possible in your plan. Keep in mind that the best balls to play at the end of the run are ones near the middle of the table.

From a defensive standpoint it's also important that you identify balls of yours that will cause a problem for your opponent if you relinquish the table. You may have a ball that you can pocket easily but blocks the path for one or more of your opponent's balls to the best pocket. Place these balls later in your plan since they will work for you in case of an error or miss on your part. When pocketing such a tactically favorable ball, it's always good to feel confident that you will proceed from there to finish the rack. NEVER pocket a ball that will stymie your opponent while you still have a problem ball of your own on the table. Look instead for a safety or better, a shot that moves your problem ball into the clear before giving the table back to your opponent with a ball of yours still there to block his run out.

Because eight ball requires shot selection it contains myriad tactical possibilities that are absent from nine ball. As you practice and play in the context of planning the run out, you will learn that planning leads to execution as you become a run-out player. In those racks that are too difficult to run out, you will identify your problems before taking your first shot and will no longer find yourself the victim of a surprise dead end. Great players like eight ball because it rewards great thinking as much as great shooting.