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Speed Control, Touch, and Position

Last week I received an e-mail from a reader asking for help with speed control. It came at the perfect time as I had begun searching for the topic that I would address in this month's installment; after nearly fifty columns ideas for new material do not always spring forth. So, as a way of keeping the information flowing, please feel free to send an e-mail, make a phone call or dispatch a carrier pigeon with any questions. Chances are good that I can address your concerns in detail right here.

Speed control can be very difficult to discuss in specific terms. For example, if you are coaching someone on a shot, how do you tell that person exactly how hard to hit it? Words like "soft," "medium" and "hard" fail to cover the range of possibility. And we know that very slight variations in the power applied to a shot can cause great differences in result. So we need ways to learn and practice what we call touch.

To begin we must understand where that touch originates. Although pool requires constant thought and complex decision making, we play the game with our hands, one hand really, the shooting hand. Just as it is with most endeavors, particularly artistic ones, the feel required to make fine adjustments lives in the fingers. Our best pool game always emerges during those times when we move the game out of our heads and into our hands.

The primary cause for position errors is not lack of skill but the absence of complete thinking. As I've written in the past, precise position play results from two critical steps during the preparation for a shot. First, while standing and studying the shot, the player must identify precisely where he wants to leave the cue ball by choosing a pinpoint rather than an area on the table. The second step after choosing that pinpoint is to forget about it, simply let go of it to focus on pocketing the ball. In that moment where you allow yourself to forget about the spot you chose your hand is liberated to perform. Clinging to thoughts about position during the shot will cause internal nagging and physical tension as in any experience with incomplete or unresolved matters.

Another cause for speed errors is opting for cue-ball tracks that invite them. After choosing the spot discussed above examine the line from that spot to the next object ball. Now compare the cue-ball path you are considering to that line to determine if the cue ball will be moving on that line or across it. A shot with the cue ball moving across the line requires perfect speed while a path along the line allows for error. Shot A in the diagram is a very simple example of that principle. Once you have determined that you want to leave the cue ball on the X for a straight-shot on the eight to hit a stop shot for the nine, how do you get there? An inexperienced player chooses the one-rail, solid-line path, which intersects the desired position line almost perpendicularly thus requiring perfect speed to stop the cue ball on it. The seasoned player hits this shot with draw and left english to move onto the line off the second rail, a path that yields the desired angle on the eight ball with a considerable margin for speed error. Many if not most shots offer

options for the cue ball and better players identify and choose the paths that widen the margin for error regarding speed.

Now we need a method for adjusting easily to the speed of a strange table. Great players can do so with most tables after just a few shots. A useful tool is a reference speed for all tables, one that will help your hand make the proper adjustments for all of the shots that you will encounter. I use one called lag speed and I like to tune it in before I play on a strange table. Place the cue ball as it is in shot B and shoot it straight through the center of the table to hit the foot rail, come back and hit the head rail with enough speed to rebound and stop within a half diamond of where it originated. Three or four consecutive, successful trials will work to begin tuning your hand to the table's speed.

The ability to play with precise speed control and adjust one's touch to different tables comes mainly from experience. Experience also teaches us to make definite and smart choices. Always look closely at your next shot to avoid leaving yourself too straight when you need to move the cue ball or too thin when you need keep the cue ball close. Choosing the correct angles will allow you to play more shots with comfortable speeds that are easier to control, which beats finding yourself trying to power one shot and bunt the next to stay in position. That is how great players can go through racks seemingly hitting every shot with the same speed.



