

Etiquette

From time to time players will ask me to address various topics in print and pass along some tidbits that they deem important. Naturally I welcome those suggestions since they help me tune into widespread concerns and minimize the time I spend staring at a blank screen on deadline day. The most popular request by far is to write about pool etiquette. We don't have to stretch our imaginations to conclude that someone who wants others to enroll in a billiards-obedience course is only working to create a world that is more comfortable for him to play in. But no matter, proper etiquette is a vital part of our game and necessary to enhance everyone's enjoyment and performance.

Every game or activity involving more than one person has a set of rules that must be followed to keep things flowing. Think about driving for example. Sometimes I look at hundreds of cars on the road together, all within a few feet of one another, and find it remarkable that they can move along toward their destinations without mishap. Denver drivers might do well to remember that a focused effort to move forward works, while coming to a dead stop to make a lane change does not. But even here, where thirty-miles-an-hour occurs as supersonic to most drivers, many cars, and even a few SUV's, often manage the task, more or less.

Because I envision my loyal readers as refined, educated players we can breeze through the common rules of etiquette to get at the more esoteric ones that may still escape some of us. We all know the basic rules but in order to be complete, here is a brief summary. When it is your shot, shoot. When it is your opponent's turn, sit down and shut up. If you have been playing regularly with someone for less than ten years and you know that person's last name, you're probably talking too much. If you make any move toward the table while your opponent is shooting you have just conceded that game. If your cell phone rings and you answer it during a pool game, then maybe you should leave the room and go join in all the fun that you're missing out on somewhere else or better yet, sell your cue and find a new hobby. If you're married to someone who has the temerity to call while you're playing and you like your cue, sell your spouse.

When it is your opponent's shot and you're sitting there watching quietly, you have as much use for a piece of chalk as a doctor might have for a book entitled, "Fair Pricing Practices." As you give the table back to your opponent, dig deep and find it in your heart to leave the chalk with it. Now, I understand that many players currently carry their own chalk in various devices that clip onto belts or hang out of back pockets. I can only surmise that those are necessary because some bar owners do not provide chalk for their customers. If you're a bar owner, it's a safe bet that your juke box has all the .38 Special and Molly Hatchet it needs so why not apply some of this week's record budget to buying a damned box of chalk. While you're at it, order a pair of speakers that won't buzz when the bartender cranks up "Free Bird." Finally, when you do set the chalk down on the rail, make sure to leave it there top up. Think about all the snappy dressers that you meet around the game and consider that they may not want chalk dust on their clothes.

If you play on tables with drop pockets here are the steps to the breaking/racking dance. The player breaking retrieves the balls from the two side pockets and the corner pockets at the head of the table and rolls them gently to the player racking, who will pick the balls out the corner pockets at the foot of the table. Nothing looks stupider than two players circling the table and bumping into each other.

We know of course that we do not talk to our opponents during a game. Someone practicing alone deserves equal if not greater consideration. The practice table is sacred ground and I have yet to see a player working on long shots while sporting a sign that says, "I'm lonely and only pretending to look interested in pool." When someone is practicing, that person is thinking and studying in addition to shooting and deserves the utmost respect and privacy. And if you're one of those guys that walk up, uninvited, to bother women while they're practicing, open that little zippered pocket near the top of your left sleeve. It holds a cyanide pill for you to swallow in case you're captured by the enemy. Just eat it now because you're such an ass that the enemy has no use for you either.

If you have advanced enough in your game to play in a tournament that may have a few spectators, spend a moment in consideration of them before you dress yourself. We use up a good deal of our time whining that our beautiful game deserves more attention and television coverage. Maybe we should take a look at ourselves and ask whether the American viewing public wants to tune in and see a bunch of slobs who look like they got dressed at a rodeo-rapper rummage sale. First, buy some clothes that fit. Second, make sure that they're clean. Third, get rid of all the cell phones, buck knives, and torque wrenches that are hanging off of your belt. You look like a weirdo that never got the Batman look just right as a six-year old; and it's doubtful that the pool table will need a new alternator while you're using it. Fourth, unless you're Pete Sampras, do yourself a favor and throw away any nylon warm-up suits that might have found their way into your closet. It's not the Olympic pole vault, it's pool, an indoor game perfectly suited to regular, water-absorbent clothing. Willie Mosconi never played a tournament match without a necktie and cuff links. We may not go that far but trust me; an oversized, wrinkled tee shirt is not dress wear because it's the last one in the drawer without tobacco-juice stains. We have finally reached the point where even golfers and bowlers look better than we do. Is that what we want?

Pool is a tough game that is played in close contact with the opponent. The same rigors and challenges exist for everyone and we must play in consideration of that fact. So the last, and perhaps most important, rule of etiquette is sportsmanship. Learn to accept victory and defeat with equal grace and to congratulate your opponent honestly regardless of the outcome. You will find that as you extend greater courtesy to other players, your own enjoyment and performance will grow from there. And maybe some day we will drive two miles in less than an hour to arrive at a tournament where everyone showed up looking good and behaving well. And maybe we'll make that trip in a new Cadillac that came from the Easter Bunny.