

8 Ball—The Anatomy of a Run Out

Each different pool game offers its own set of challenges to the player. A great one-pocket player for example employs tactical moves that would be inappropriate in other games. As we play each game inside the unique framework of its challenges, our knowledge and skills grow while our performance improves. When we fail to recognize what the game asks from us we end up merely shooting at balls and find ourselves on a flat learning curve that leads nowhere.

When I observe beginning and intermediate players at the table for some games, I see them responding to the challenges and playing in the same manner as the best players, simply not as well. The one game where this seems not to be the case is 8 ball. Though I am not sure why, most players, some of them very good, fail to play 8 ball in the context of what the game requires. If we can uncover the essential challenge of 8 ball then we can, with some practice, improve our performance and begin driving on the same road as the professionals.

The most obvious difference between 8 ball and other pool games is that it is the only game where some of the balls on the table are never available to the shooter. With a full rack, the player shooting has fewer than half the balls on the table available to him, slightly less than 47%. Each ball pocketed reduces this percentage or increases the odds against the shooter until he gets to the last ball of the group, which comprises 11% of the balls on the table. Note that the odds against the shooter are worst when one ball remains of his designated flavor. If he pockets that ball and gets to 8 while his opponent still has all of his balls remaining he now shoots at 12.5% of the balls on the table. If one thinks of the unavailable balls as the enemy, the shooter is always outnumbered and things get worse with every successful shot. In other pool games every ball pocketed thins the traffic and opens up the table for the shooter. The mounting disadvantage to the shooter in 8 ball however becomes the opponent's advantage if he gets to the table. When you miss the 8 your opponent gets a table with 87.5% of the balls at his disposal. This was not intended to be a math lesson but we must acknowledge the numbers' relevance and consider how unlikely it is to win a game by merely shooting a shot and hoping for another.

Good players lose 8-ball games mainly because of their refusal to believe that pocketing balls can hurt them. The fact is that once you start pocketing balls you must do one of two things, run out or play a good safety. That safety incidentally becomes more difficult as you move through the rack because you will have to hide more of your opponent's balls behind fewer of your own. We cannot discuss fully the many complexities and tactics of winning 8 ball because of limited space so we shall focus on one aspect, running out.

Many players possess the skill to run 8 balls but fail to convert the opportunities when they arise. The challenge of 8 ball is not running 8 balls but running 8 balls that are laid out among a growing army of obstacles. The answer is simple though perhaps not easy. You must have a plan. Every time you come to the table in a game of 8 ball you must make a complete plan for the order of shots in your run out. If you see a ball that needs to be moved before it can be pocketed, plan to that breakout and then finish the overall plan from there. Often you will not see a simple plan. You must make one regardless. Map out 8 shots from beginning to end and evaluate the plan after each shot to determine whether you are following it or need to change it.

Here is a great practice routine to transform you into a player with a plan. Scatter all of the balls around the table and take cue ball in hand. Now name your next five shots and begin shooting; include all of the balls with no regard for stripes and solids. This routine works best with two players taking turns because the shooter gains more and improves faster from declaring the plan openly. Keep shooting until you miss, but remember to evaluate the plan after each shot. If it looks as though you will not complete the original plan for five shots, announce a change in plan and name the next five. As you practice and experience the planning of your shots, mapping out the rack will begin to feel routine. If looking at a rack of balls and planning its sequence is new to you, ignore the initial discouragement that usually arises from this exercise. The change that this exercise will cause in your game is very powerful, so you shouldn't expect it to occur quickly and easily.

When you begin to feel some comfort with the exercise you can modify it for 8 ball. Scatter the rack around the table and, with cue ball in hand, make a plan for a run out of stripes or solids and the 8 ball. When that becomes a piece of cake you can break a rack and shoot from there with your plan in the context of a real game.

8 ball, with built-in odds against the shooter that make a casino seem generous by comparison, is very challenging in a unique way. Foremost among the challenges is the precision required to maneuver the cue ball through traffic for a run out. Although the ability to plan the run out is only one of the skills that 8 ball requires it is certainly the biggest and the one that, more than anything else, will move you and your game closer to greatness.