

8 Ball Overview

The Canadian Club tournament is back in town with an expanded schedule and some notable changes. The tournament consists of a series of 16-player qualifiers from which the top two finishers advance to the local finals at Shakespeare's in March to qualify for the national finals in Las Vegas. Look for the qualifier schedule in this issue of *Cue Times*. What may appear as just another liquor promotion has evolved over the past few years into a first-class tournament thanks to generous sponsorship and to Howard Ashford, who does a superb job of organizing and directing the events on the Denver calendar.

The most conspicuous change for this year is that the game has been switched from 9 ball to 8 ball to encourage more participation and create a better fit with the establishments where the sponsor sells its product. Last fall and winter I discussed 8 ball here twice and offered some tips for winning. Since the game is in the air now I want to review some of those tips and offer some enhancement.

8 ball is unique among pool games in that it is, without doubt, the most popular game across the whole range of people that play pool. Despite, or perhaps because of, its popularity, 8 ball is often dismissed by many skilled players as a beginners' game or maybe something that a pool player grows out of to play 9 ball. So, although most players improve their skills as they continue, many do not improve their 8-ball games. They continue, despite the fact that they are becoming very adept pool players, to play 8 ball the same way they played as beginners and then perhaps grumble that there's too much luck involved with the game.

There is in fact a great deal of luck involved with the game and it will almost invariably turn out as bad luck for anyone who attempts to play without careful planning. The primary difference between 8 ball and 9 ball is that 8 ball requires shot selection while 9 ball does not. If you play 9 ball exclusively you may want to consider for a moment how great of a difference that is. If we compare 8 ball to the other major game with shot selection, straight pool, we can appreciate the essence of playing winning 8 ball.

A good straight-pool player learns early that table management is far more critical to success than shot making, and so learns to look out into the rack to run it. Even the straight-pool player has some work to do to learn 8 ball though because he is not trained to manage a table where he cannot shoot at more than half of the balls and is accustomed to the table opening up for him as he pockets balls and thins traffic. Here lies

the challenge of 8 ball. As you pocket balls, the rack becomes more difficult for you and easier for your opponent should he get back to the table. For a mathematical breakdown refer to my November 2000 column at cuetimes.com; the numbers will show why it is so common for someone to think that he ran into bad luck in a game of 8 ball.

Since the game requires shot selection you need to select the shots before shooting one. Whenever you come to the table in a game of 8 ball you must examine it until you see the run out, whether it is 8 balls or three. If you have to stare at the balls for five minutes then do that. If you have considered every possibility and cannot see a run out there must be a problem on the table. Identify the problem and its solution before shooting. Sometimes the solution is to do nothing or rather, play a safety. If you choose to pocket balls merely hoping for a solution later in the game, probability dictates that you will be racking the next game. Three things to remember about 8 ball: 1. Plan the run out. 2. Solve problems early. 3. If you have fewer balls on the table than your opponent while he is at the table, you are losing not winning.

If you play only 9 ball you will need to work on shot selection and running balls. The main feature of shot selection is the possibility of mostly easy shots from good planning. It turns out that planning and visualization are more important than execution. It's very difficult to execute something that you cannot conceive beforehand. To improve your 8-ball game practice and play straight pool. Soon you will see runs that exist in groups of five or six balls with a break shot at the end of the run. From there you can transfer those skills to the 8 ball rack where you will find that threading the cue ball through the traffic of your opponent's balls is not so difficult now that you can see what you want to do.

Though maligned in some circles 8 ball is a complex, tactical game that challenges every player's planning and visualization skills. If you have set 8 ball aside in favor of 9 ball, Canadian Club is offering you a great opportunity to reacquaint yourself with the game in a well-run tournament series that offers respectable prize money. And there's no entry fee, a fact that eliminates the need for any planning skills from your decision to compete.

