

Rail Shots and Stroke

Certain shots come up so frequently in all pool games that if we gave them a name it would have to be one that connotes more familiarity than the word “routine.” Sometimes however, regardless of thousands of prior encounters with them, they can appear a bit too daunting when, under pressure, we need precise cue-ball control to complete the run out. The challenge proceeds from looking at the shot and asking ourselves exactly *how* we will get the cue ball where it must go, despite a perfect angle and distance. Regarding position play, the major difference between professionals and the rest of us is that the pros rarely have to wonder how they will accomplish something with the cue ball, but instead move directly from distinguishing what is needed to its execution.

We all have a “see-it-do-it” game to some degree with its magnitude dependent mostly on experience. Since pool requires no real physical gifts a player’s talent correlates directly to the number of hours that he has spent on the table, given sound fundamentals. Compare that to basketball where most of us could spend the rest of our lives working at it but never emerge as competition for players at the high-school level. There is one gift that some players have and, in the absence of coaching, occurs very rarely. It is a keen awareness of what skills matter most followed by the dedication to practice those skills until their execution occurs without thought.

In the diagram is a shot that we have played thousands of times. It not only comes up very often but, most commonly, is the shot we would want to leave ourselves and is what we would design with ball in hand in many situations. Despite having played it countless times in the past, this shot can be tricky when we need precise position and therefore merits some practice. Because of the angle and short distance, the shot is very sensitive to each of the discreet variables of position play—stroke, speed and the chosen spot on the cue ball. And because of an immediate rebound from the rail, the cue ball will be very responsive to english.

You may notice that the shot offers a wide range of possible cue ball tracks, the entire fan between the spots marked X (draw with outside english) and Y (follow with inside english). The first step in your practice should be to establish and learn to nail a very important track, the cue ball rebounding exactly perpendicular to the cushion (the dotted line). Two things make the ability to hit this track compulsory for any rail shot: 1. A cue ball moving perpendicular to the cushion it just left cannot scratch no matter how far it travels, and 2. It serves as a very useful reference when a small adjustment in either direction is required. The perpendicular track can be hit in a variety of ways including a slight punch stroke near center ball, less punch with a lower hit, and a follow stroke with some outside english. In every case, the three variables of cue-ball control must work in

concert to produce the precise result. Observe how changes in speed will require you to make adjustments to your stroke and the spot where you hit the cue ball. After hitting the perpendicular track with regularity, move the cue ball to spot A and practice going up and down the table to return to the first rail exactly where the cue ball hit the object ball, a very critical shot when needed.

Practice the shot with your strongest focus on stroke. With a medium speed and a center-ball hit, observe the variation in cue-ball tracks as you move from a smooth follow stroke to a short, rapidly-accelerating punch. Observe more variations by altering stroke as you move your tip from low to high on the cue ball. From there you can experiment with spin and english. Observe how far forward you can move the cue ball with your best follow shot and no english. Then add some inside english (right in this case) to that same stroke to observe how much farther forward you can move the cue ball. Repeat the same steps with draw, beginning with no english and then adding outside english to observe how far behind the perpendicular track you can move the cue ball.

Now that you have a good feel for moving the cue ball you can practice hitting precise tracks. Place an object ball anywhere in the fan between X and Y and, using that ball as a target, pocket the shot and move the cue ball one rail to hit that second object ball. Then you can practice hitting the target ball at various speeds, from a light nudge to a full, firm hit that moves it several feet. If you are averse to hitting other object balls with the cue ball, place two balls in the position range with a four-inch space between them and practice moving the cue ball through that space. As you work with this exercise you will find many ways to challenge yourself for precise cue-ball control. You can work further to play the shot at slightly different angles and observe how a thinner or fuller cut angle affects the cue ball and what is required to control it. In all cases pay closest attention to stroke and exactly how the acceleration of your tip feels on successful trials.

As you experience the countless possibilities that pool offers, your library of routine shots will grow as you begin to play more from memory than analysis. A shot like the one in this month's exercise can take years of encounters in play to acquire the mastery that brings out confidence in competition. With some focused practice you can compress several years into several hours as you capture the feel that will generate the confidence to perform with precision under pressure.

