

Precise Aiming

On most pool shots, especially anything but the most routine ones under a little pressure, we tend to apply all of our focus simply to shooting the object ball into the pocket. Sometimes the shot's importance and the amount of pressure can combine to make that pocket look pretty small. So it may come as a surprise to some that the best players choose exactly which part of the pocket they want the object ball to hit. The concept of using the whole pocket is well known to most players but I wonder how many have spent dedicated practice time working with it.

Before we begin with an exercise I want to discuss the relationship between the sizes of the pocket openings and the balls. On a nine-foot table the standard pocket opening for a corner is $4\frac{7}{8}$ inches; for a side, $5\frac{3}{8}$ inches. A pool ball measures $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter, meaning that a standard table has space at the opening of a corner for two full balls with $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch to spare while a side allows for two full balls with $\frac{7}{8}$ of an inch left over. An extremely tight table can have four-inch openings at the corner pockets, which still allow for a full ball and 77 percent of a second one. The side pockets on a tight table usually conform to the standard difference at a half-inch wider than the corners and therefore allow two full balls. So, even the tightest tables give us some room to work with on many shots.

Because most of us begin playing pool with making the shot as our only objective, and counting a ball that falls into any part of the pocket as a success, using the entire pocket is something that must be learned. The ability to match a shot angle in a situation where the player has options with it to the same angle from a shot where the player is forced to shoot the object ball one way requires a small leap in conceptual thinking. In other words, players who know how the cue ball will move on a shot that offers one certain angle do not always know how to identify and choose that same angle from a straight-in shot with a big pocket.

Set up the shot in the diagram with the object ball about four inches from the lip of the side pocket and centered with the opening. Place the cue ball about one foot back, making sure that the shot is aligned dead straight to the center of the pocket and mark the balls' positions. From this setup you will be able to hit every diamond on the table, as well as the other five pockets, with the cue ball.

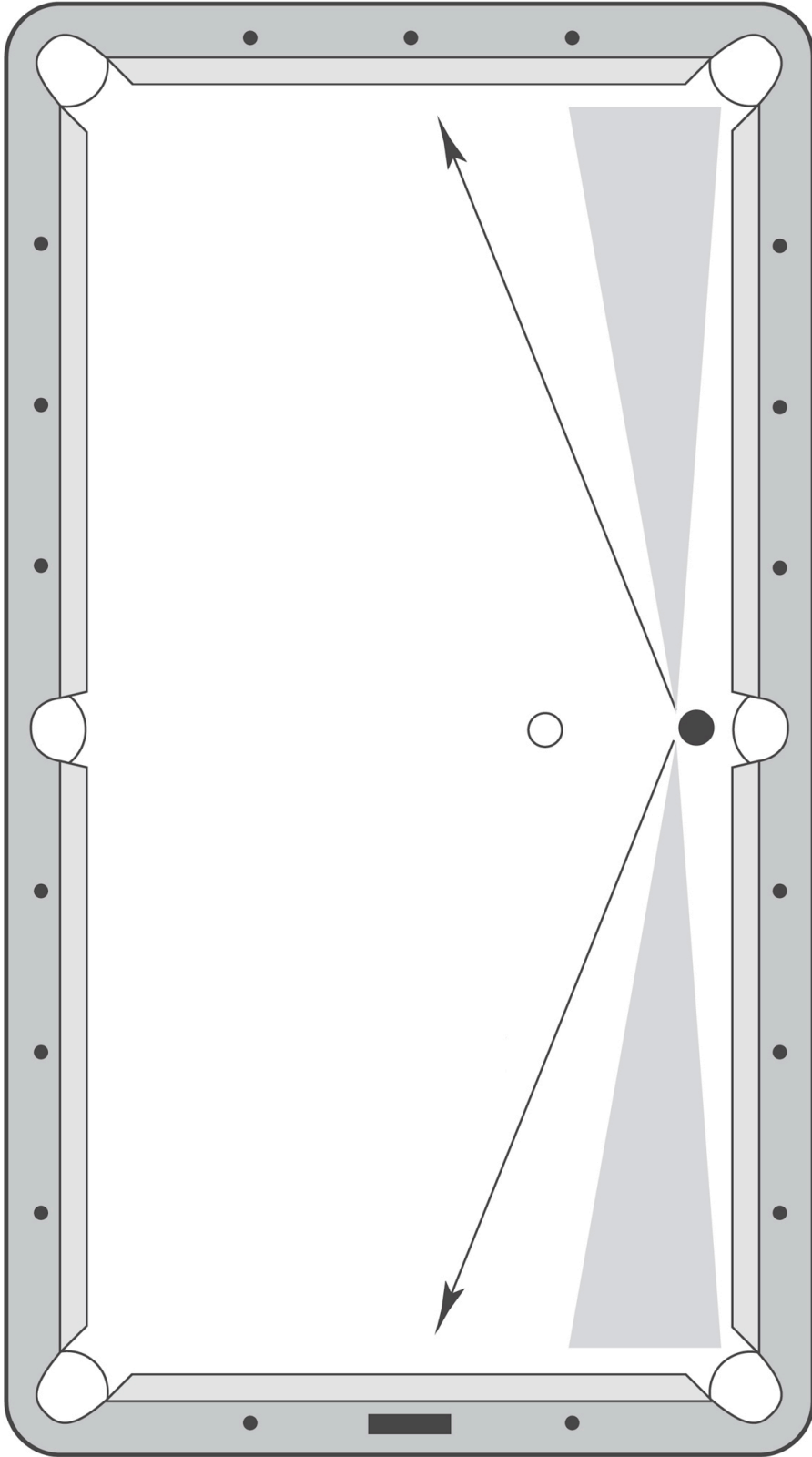
Begin by shooting a few shots with no regard for the cue ball. Shoot a few exactly straight in and shoot some cutting the object a little to the left and then the right. Cut some very slightly and play some to rub the pocket facings as they fall in. When you think that you have hit just about every part of the side pocket you can begin working the cue ball.

Start with a straight draw shot that scratches in the opposite side pocket. Now play another draw shot where you cut the object ball just enough to the left to draw the cue ball to the first diamond right of the opposite side pocket. **DO NOT USE RIGHT OR LEFT-HAND ENGLISH ANYWHERE IN THIS EXERCISE.** Play one now adding enough cut to draw the cue ball two diamonds to the right of the opposite side pocket. Keep moving the cue ball, a diamond at a time, counter clockwise around the table by adjusting the angle at which you cut the object ball. Play for the scratches as you encounter pockets along the way.

Every diamond between the arrow heads is a draw shot. From the arrow heads to the far corners of the shaded areas, you will use stun draw. The diamonds on the far long rails will require follow or stun follow.

Of course you will want to continue around the table until you arrive back at the draw shot into the opposite side pocket. After completing the exercise you can spend some time tuning your follow to hit five different spots on the rail, a ball width apart from one another, between the side pocket and the first diamonds to the left and right of it.

This is a great exercise to develop awareness of the what's possible with a big pocket in addition to honing accuracy and stroke. After completing it you will no doubt be an expert with the shot that you were practicing but there's a hidden benefit. You now know how to look at and hit an object ball with more precision. From now on you can play every shot choosing an exact spot in the pocket instead of merely choosing the pocket. For corner-pocket shots where the object ball does not have a direct line to the center of the pocket, aim for the point where black meets green, where the pocket facing meets the pocket liner. What you will find is that choosing a pinpoint target will improve your shot making. As you learn to sharpen your focus on smaller targets the space around them may begin to appear increasingly larger.



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