

# The Nine-Ball Break

Many great players and instructors call the break in nine ball the most important shot of the game, comparing it sometimes to the tee shot in golf and the serve in tennis. Who can argue? A well-played break shot, where at least one ball goes in and the shooter has a clear shot, leads to a run out and allows the opponent back to the table only to rack again. As they say, "If you can keep your opponent in the chair, it doesn't matter *who* it is."

A powerful, effective and consistent break may also be the greatest challenge facing most players. But maybe it does not have to be that way. If we analyze the break and distinguish its two components perhaps we can find a way to break more effectively immediately. We shall discuss the break in terms of power and control.

Every player wants a powerful break and it is precisely that desire which leads to the most common problems. I want to hit my tee shots as far as Tiger's but I find that swinging harder does not help much. Swinging better however, when I have the discipline, at least moves me in the right direction. In pool we see some of the top pros with their killer breaks and try to emulate them by swinging harder and throwing our bodies into the shot. Most of us are attached to the idea that power comes from force, which leads us to try harder. Consider for a moment that real power results from timing and balance and never emerges when one of those elements is absent or even slightly off.

The first factor of a powerful break to consider is efficiency. A strong break is merely an efficient transfer of energy from your shooting hand to the rack, something best achieved with a dead cue ball and perfectly square contact with the one ball. Any time that the cue ball makes partial contact with the one ball and continues rolling or sits spinning on the table, that rolling or spinning shows energy retained in the cue ball that did not go into the rack. A cue ball that moves slightly slower, but arrives at the rack to hit the one ball square with no spin always produces better results than a faster, spinning cue ball that makes less than straight-on contact with the one ball. Remember too that a cue ball moving wildly around the table after it hits the rack often finds a hole to fall into.

In order to develop a more efficient break stroke, practice with these guidelines. If you stand low with your chin near the cue for normal shots, stand taller when you break. Standing higher straightens your shooting arm and facilitates a longer, freer swing. Make sure that your back heel is slightly behind your rear end for balance. Instead of trying to take a hard, fast stroke, lengthen your bridge a couple of inches to take a long, smooth and slightly slower stroke. Be sure that your shooting hand moves back on the butt of your cue for the longer bridge so that your forearm is perpendicular to the floor when your tip is about two inches from the cue ball. The extra two inches of

bridge length will allow for your accelerating cue to build up as much speed as you generate with a shorter, faster stroke. During your warm-up strokes, focus hard on the center of the cue ball to avoid unwanted spin. With a relaxed shooting hand and a light grip (any tension or squeezing in your hand will slow down the cue) make sure that on your back swing the ferrule of your cue comes all the way back to your bridge before pausing slightly and starting forward, for perfect timing. The final stroke should feel like a long and relaxed throw of your tip straight toward the exact spot on the one ball that you want to hit. When you are hitting the rack as well as possible, the entire process will feel effortless and relaxed. Finally, if you want to move your body forward with the stroke, a trick that requires tremendous coordination to execute properly, make certain that your stroke begins moving before your body, which should follow behind the stroke.

Because breaks that lack efficient power often make balls anyway, the more important element of the break is control, which includes controlling the cue ball, certain object balls and ultimately the table. The first element of control to master is the cue ball. Picture a square defined by the four diamonds that sandwich the side pockets one diamond segment in from each long rail. Now, with no regard for making balls, practice breaking, at very slow speeds if necessary, and leaving the cue ball in that square consistently. As you develop your feel for doing that, you can add speed until you are keeping the cue ball under control at your break speed. If you make three balls on the break and have to push out on your first shot, you have just given away the advantage of the break and made yourself the underdog for that rack.

To get a professional handle on control you can start working on the one ball and then the two ball. Try breaking from the side rail and moving the one ball with consistency to stop in front of the corner pocket that you are standing over to break. So, if you are breaking from the right side, hit the rack to make the one ball move toward the left side pocket and bank to the lower, right corner pocket. You will find that it is not very difficult to manage the one ball in this way. If the one ball is going into the side pocket on most of your breaks, you have to see where the two ball is racked to raise the probability of coming up with a shot on it from the center of the table. Most tournament players are savvy enough to rack the two ball in the bottom row of two in the rack. When you see that, you should break from the same side of the table as the two ball in the rack. Generally, when a player breaks from the side rail, the ball in that bottom row of two on the opposite side of the table moves toward the upper rail and stays there while its partner in that row rebounds from the upper rail and moves out away from it. A classic, controlled break pockets a ball, moves the one ball in front of the lower corner and leaves the cue ball in the center of the table with an easy shot on the one ball. If the one ball goes into the side pocket the two ball is often in good shape for an easy shot in the upper corner from the center of the table. When Cory Deuel's soft break is working, he plays the one ball in the side and position on the two ball, often rolling it to the upper rail and moving the cue ball up table with it for a shot.

Pool has many brilliant players who have come along and changed the break from a random explosion of balls into another shot that offers the kind of control we like during the game. After learning the elements of power and control you can break open some racks to study where balls in various positions tend to wind up on the table. Try breaking open some racks and taking ball in hand on the one ball to see how much easier it is to run out when you start off with such an advantage. From there you can work toward leaving yourself with ball-in-hand quality position from a standard, competitive break.

