

## Focus on Position

One of pool's enduring challenges is the ongoing conflict between pocketing balls and playing position. For beginners and intermediate players, trying to do both can cause fits while even top pros must confront the question from time to time. For most of us it often seems that we must make a choice since trying to accomplish both goals at once can short circuit the shot. Yet, when we apply our focus to one step of the process, it can feel as though we have to sacrifice the other. Every pool player knows the sting of solving a complex position riddle only to look back at the pocket and see the object ball thumping its nose in a defiant refusal to drop?

The best way to hone a skill is to isolate it in practice in order to focus the work on a specific task. Since almost all pool shots require pocketing the object ball and controlling the cue ball, we're forced to manage both demands continually, making the desired separation of skills difficult to achieve in practice. It's common to see players sharpening their shot making skills with no regard for the cue ball, but I've never seen anyone explore the other side of the coin to work on position play alone.

As a recent experiment to help put a student in better touch with the cue ball, I offered the exercise we see in the diagram. If we repeat a shot that's virtually impossible to miss, we can focus more completely on position play with no worries about the shot itself. Because the exercise allows complete focus on position play, it works well to develop feel for pinpoint control. To accomplish that you will need a target that you can move to various spots as you practice the shot. A piece of paper from a notepad will work or you can try one that I like to use, a paper circle cut to the size of a CD. Whatever you choose for a target, mark a half-inch spot in its center to give you an exact goal for every shot.

Place your target on the 1 and begin shooting the striped ball from both positions, A and B. Since the shot itself is a piece of cake you can use this exercise to enhance your grasp on some of the principles of position play. Number one, before making your stance for each shot, take a good look at the spot in the center of your target and tell yourself that is where the cue ball will land. The second principle of position play that position 1 illustrates is arriving at the target with a cue ball that's moving away from the nearest rail. Whether shooting from cue-ball position A or B, a two-rail shot works best with the cue ball bouncing from the right side rail to the target. The best way to keep the cue ball from freezing on a cushion is to hit that cushion and rebound away from it.

Move your target to position 2 to get in touch with the table's center spot. From cue-ball position A use two rails with a little right-hand english. From B, it's a one-rail shot. Stopping it on the exact center will demand perfect speed. Pay attention to the

attempts that do not stop on the center spot to see if the cue ball is on that track. Remember one of pool's most valuable principles: When moving around the table for position, a cue ball that rolls over the center spot cannot scratch. With that in mind and the cue ball at position A, move your target to the 3. Ideally on this shot your cue ball will roll over the center spot to hit the bottom left side rail and, employing the second principle, finish with a short bounce from the bottom rail to the target for four-rail position. Note how the right-hand english reverses off the third and fourth rails to hold the cue ball in the target area. For target 4, shoot from B and go three rails, with some left hand english to land on the target with the same side-rail, bottom-rail finish on the right side of the table.

Even though we only see four positions in the diagram, you can place the target anywhere on the table to hit as many different positions as your imagination will allow. And finally, as an added bonus, the exercise helps us with a skill that all players need but few practice. Because most pool shots require us to hit the object ball in one precise spot in order to pocket it, shots that offer a range of places to hit the object ball can sometimes baffle us. We typically have that kind of range whenever the object ball is hanging in the pocket as it is here. With that in mind we can also use the exercise to learn how to choose the best spot to hit on the object ball to achieve the desired position when we have that luxury. So, even though the shot looks easy, it still calls for the same attention and precision as any pool shot.

