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## A Clever Safety

After our skills reach a certain level most of our improvement comes from gaining new knowledge and the capacity it gives us to address more problems effectively. Once we understand that fact we learn the value of watching or competing against better players to pick up their responses to some of the game's endless challenges. When I watch pros on television I like to keep a notebook handy to capture anything that I can add to my personal library of shots and moves. On rare occasions, while watching a professional match, I will see a mistake from a player who lacks a piece of information that I have.

Recently I watched a professional 9-ball match where one of the players encountered the problem we see in the diagram with only the 8 and 9 left on the table. Because there's no way to shoot the 8 straight into the upper right corner without scratching in the side pocket the only reasonable offensive shot is the cross-corner bank to the upper left corner. That's the shot she played, and it cost her the game and contributed to losing the match.

Now, I understand the reluctance at that level to allow one's opponent back to the table, but sometimes that's the better option. In this situation there are two problems with the cross-corner bank. One, it's an exceedingly difficult shot. Two, the draw that's required to beat the kiss will combine with the shot's necessary cut angle to leave the cue ball somewhere up near the top rail for another very difficult shot on the 9 ball.

Let's examine another option for this problem, a clever safety that Grady Mathews taught me about 15 years ago. Instead of trying to bank the 8 ball into the corner pocket we're going to bank it to the top short rail with enough speed to send it around the table to the middle of the bottom short rail, as shown with the solid line. Meanwhile the cue ball will stun forward to the top rail as shown with the dashed line.

Set up the balls as shown to practice the shot and gain a feel for its three critical elements. First, the 8 ball must hit the top rail as shown to get it started on its journey, but that's the easiest factor to manage since the shot offers some margin for error on that hit. The second element is speed, which is critical since a ball hit too softly or too hard can leave the 8 ball out in the middle of the table. Good speed is a bit easier than it may appear however because the 8 ball hits the fourth rail with a touch of reverse english to deaden its rebound and keep it down table. The third element and perhaps the trickiest to master is the stun-follow cue ball, which is also critical since draw will keep the cue ball closer to the table's center while follow might send it up to the top rail to rebound back down table toward the 8 ball. To get a feel for the stun follow place your tip where you would for a stop shot at the speed you're using and then raise it a hair to give the cue ball some forward influence.

Here is a very difficult looking shot that I find easier on a table than it looks on paper. It's a little complicated but everyone can learn it. Yet it's certainly not a shot to try in competition without first practicing it. It will occur in a variety of setups, so it's a good idea to move the balls around a little to play it in its diverse forms after learning it with the setup in the diagram. One thing to keep in mind is that it will behave differently from one table to another because of speed and the table's rebound angles. So it's also a good idea to set it up and shoot it on a few different tables. It's definitely a professional level shot, but it's fun to learn and it will save a match some day.



