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## Safety Second

When players first set out to learn pool almost everyone follows the same learning progression. Initially we understand little beyond pocketing balls to win the game. Then as we hone our cue-ball skills we begin to enjoy longer runs and more victories. Some time later we discover safety and the power it gives us over our opponents' options. At that point we see what sets pool apart from the other leisure sports, such as golf, where players simply watch one another perform in the absence of interplay. Throughout my many years with pool I have seen exactly one player who chose to practice and refine his safety play before he could reliably run three or four balls. As a result, he soon enjoyed many more wins than the other players at his skill level.

In the diagram we see a situation that arose during a recent Thursday clinic. The shooter is looking at his last stripe while his opponent has only the 8 ball that we see blocking any reasonable shot. Failing to see another option he elected to go for the safety that would leave the stripe and the cue ball on the same rail as shown with the dotted outlined cue ball and the shaded stripe. He came up a little short and his opponent sank the easy game winner in the wake of the failed safety attempt. Afterwards I watched them set up the shot repeatedly to attempt executing the safety, with little or no success.

The safety shot that we see comes with two major problems. One, it requires the most precise possible control to leave the balls as we see them. Two, in the event that the shooter does pull it off, he still leaves an easy kick on the 8 hanging in the pocket, a shot that any decent player is likely to make more than 50% of the time. In order to appreciate those two points, set up the balls and try both the safety and the kick a few times.

Another aspect of safety that we learn at a somewhat more advanced stage is when it's better to forgo a difficult safety in favor of a difficult offensive shot. In this case, banking the stripe three rails into the side pocket, as shown, can not only win the game, but it's easier than the safety option. As diagrammed, the cut angle required to get the stripe on track will transfer considerable reverse english to the object ball. To help offset that reverse english I use a lot of right hand english on the cue ball. But since that adds another variable to manage it's better to begin with the cue ball at the X, where you can shoot straight at the stripe with no english to gain a faster feel for moving the ball on the desired path. After finding the side pocket from the X move the cue ball back to its original position to shoot the slightly more difficult version.

At first sight the shot that I'm promoting here may seem too outrageous to consider, but I promise that it's the better option in this case. In a nutshell, when faced with a safety that's at least as difficult as a tough offensive shot, it's usually better to go for pocketing a ball. In this case the safety is considerably more difficult than the three-rail bank shot. When my eyes were first opened to the principle I'm describing the experience was a bitter lesson as I chose a nearly impossible safety over a tough but reasonable bank, a bad choice that cost me a tournament final. Afterwards, when I reset

the balls to study the problem, I pocketed the bank with acceptable frequency but never once pulled off the safety that I had envisioned. In most situations, when there's no good shot, safety is the way to go. Occasionally however, when the only available safety is too difficult and likely to lose the game, it's better to go down swinging.

