Honing Straight-Pool Skills

Straight pool is back and in the air everywhere, from the revival of the U.S. Open to Peter Way's local, Monday-night league. Many very talented players who had not previously played 14.1 are now playing enthusiastically and enjoying the game that places the highest demands on the full range of a player's skills. With that in mind we shall work this month with an exercise that fits the style of straight pool most closely but will lead to immediate improvement in all games.

Although the exercise has been around forever its presence in every player's practice routine faded with the decline of straight pool's popularity. To begin place all fifteen balls on the table taking care only to keep each ball at least a foot or so from any rail and to keep separation among the balls themselves. Beyond those two conditions there is no specific order of arrangement. Begin with cue ball in hand and try to shoot off all fifteen balls without allowing the cue ball to hit a rail or another ball. If you miss a shot or allow the cue ball to hit something return all of the pocketed balls to the table to begin again.

Initially many players encounter problems with speed as they find themselves unable to minimize cue-ball movement sufficiently to keep it away from the rails on even slight cut shots. Most newcomers to straight pool simply hit the balls too hard to meet the control demands of the game. The solution to the speed problem lies in the stroke. Most of the shots in the exercise will be played with a very low hit on the cue ball and a short, snappy stroke with very little speed. A short bridge works very well for this stroke. These elements combine to "kill" the cue ball or restrict its movement on cut shots. This is what you see when you watch a master of the game take off all of the balls in a tight group sliding the cue ball a couple of inches on each shot while never disturbing other balls.

Sometimes you will want to move the cue ball forward a few inches with precise control. Another important shot to master is the roller, distinct from a follow shot as one where the weight of the object ball provides resistance to the cue ball, while on the follow shot, the forward-spinning cue ball plows through the object ball. Practice a few rollers by hitting some shots with a center cue ball and a lazy stroke to send the cue ball rolling naturally to pocket the object ball and move forward a few inches. You must combine that stroke with a soft touch to keep the cue ball from getting away. After you get the roller, try some at various distances and speeds experimenting with below-center hits to control the cue ball's forward movement by getting it to contact the object ball just as it reaches the end of its slide. Use a striped ball for your cue ball to observe the slide that results from a below-center hit.

Your next major challenge will be shot selection and planning. As you repeat the drill your success will show in longer runs. Before long you will find yourself looking further out into the rack and planning longer sequences while learning common, recurring patterns. With all fifteen balls on the table, choose a first shot that appears to lead to many more. From that first shot, ask yourself what a stop shot will give you for the next shot. What does a stop shot yield from there? Continue evaluating the table this way from the third shot and so on until you see five and six ball sequences that require no more position play than a stop shot. A good rule of thumb when looking at any straight shot is to begin by evaluating what you will have if you play a stop shot. Long stop-shot sequences often exist on the table yet go unnoticed.

The second critical element of shot selection and planning is playing position for the next shot that will lead you easily to the shot beyond it, planning and executing three-ball runs as we discussed here previously. When you need to move the cue ball for position on the next ball, you must already be in a position that allows you to do so. Therefore you will learn to look at your next shot and decide exactly what angle you need on it to proceed from there. You will learn a lot about how much you need to cut a ball to move the cue ball a certain distance. Because of the rail restriction, thin cut shots will cause a certain end to your run. Most shots in an open rack are played either straight in or with just a slight angle since the cue ball generally does not need to move very far. If your run ends because you failed to play the position that you wanted, set up the last shot and play it again from where you tried to leave yourself to study the soundness of your prediction. If your run ends because your prediction was incorrect, set up the shot some more and play it from different cue ball positions until you find what works.

Until now, all of the exercises presented here focussed on mastering one specific technique or element of great pool. We now move to the realm of running balls where vision, planning and execution work in concert to produce ever-longer runs. As you play through this month's exercise, which simulates straight pool minus a lot of problem solving, you will experience the challenge of coordinating your plan for the future with the execution of the shot now in front of you. Your planning will result from evaluating numerous options to make decisions for running the rack, while your execution of each shot must occur in an environment free from the thinking that surrounds it. As you learn to coordinate these two disparate processes remember that great players make their decisions before beginning to shoot and then move into the shot with focus on the object ball and confidence in their choices.