

The Four-Ball Exercise

With several Monk workshops scheduled for March and The Monk himself coming in May for a three-day workshop at Shakespeare's, I have been reviewing some of his videos lately to brush up on his material and teaching methods. Last week I found an exercise of his that I had neglected for a while but enjoy practicing for its productivity and simplicity.

It uses only four balls and is called--get ready for this--the four-ball exercise. I want to share it this month with a short discussion of how it works and its benefits. Look at the diagram and set up four balls as shown. Make sure that you do not freeze the object balls to the rails but place them about a half-inch away. Begin with cue ball in hand to pocket any of the four balls and play position for any other. After pocketing the ball, re-spot it before shooting and continue in that fashion, shooting until you miss a shot or scratch. You can shoot any ball and play position for any other remembering to re-spot every ball that you pocket. There are only two restrictions. One, you must keep the cue ball within the square formed by the four balls. And two, you must play position for a ball other than the one you just shot. Although it might be helpful to set up a straight shot for one of the balls and practice repeating a six-inch draw shot with it, that would be a different drill—the one-ball exercise.

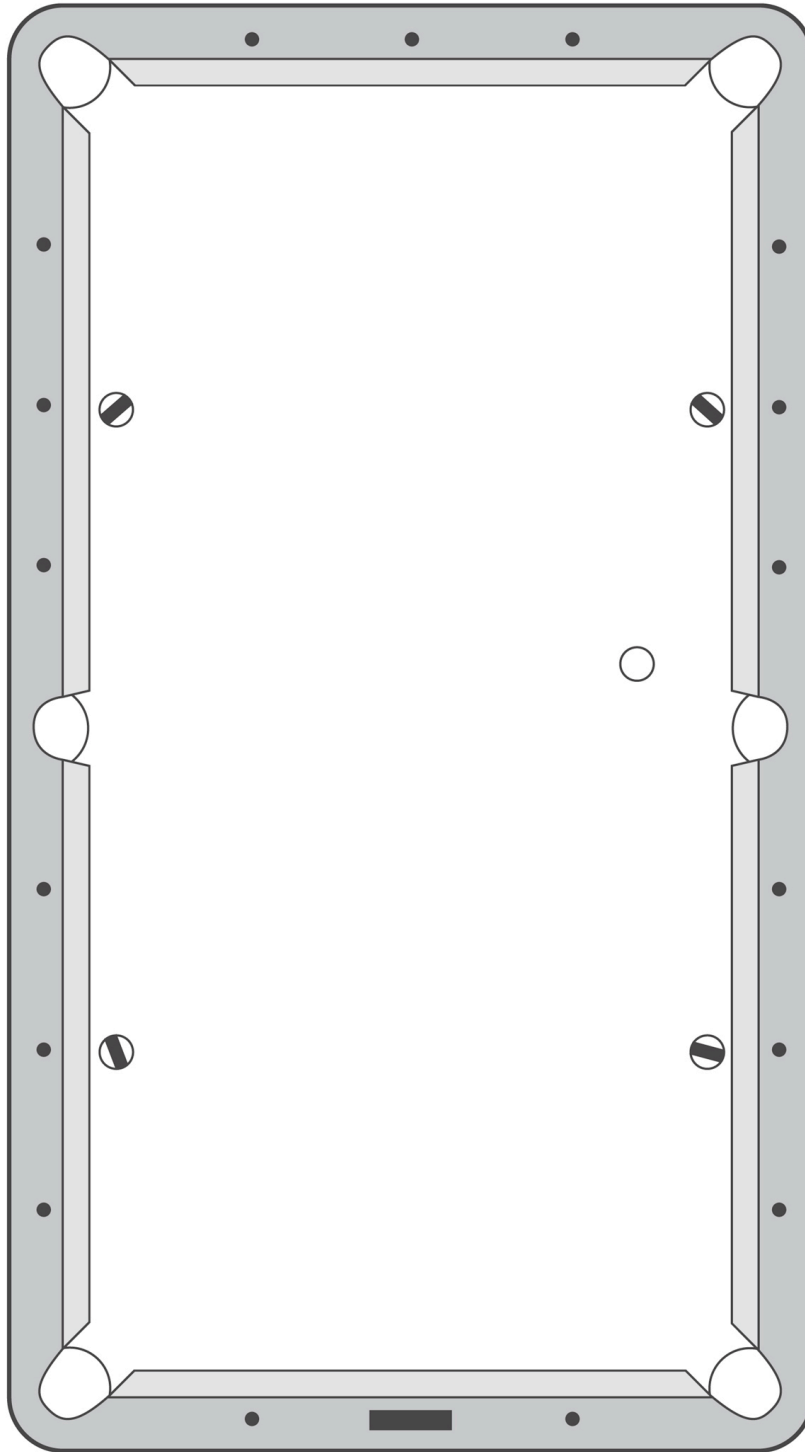
The first benefit from the exercise is the practice that it gives you for pocketing a ball on a rail. Rail shots appear repeatedly in every pool game and should not cause fear in a player when they come up. Practice is necessary for improvement and will lead to mastery. Play them with the goal of shooting the object ball along the rail, without touching it, into the far facing of the pocket. Remember that with a ball near a rail, you have no direct line to the center of the pocket and that your target for the object ball moves to the pocket facing. The exercise will offer opportunities to play the shots at various speeds and to play them with and without outside english. You can also experiment with the table you are using to see how much rail it allows for you to hit and still pocket the ball. A table with tight corner pockets may not accept a ball that touches the rail at all on its way in while a more liberal table may allow for you to hit the rail as far as a full diamond in front of the pocket.

After you feel confident with pocketing the shots you can examine the relationship between speed and the angle of the shot. When you land straight or close to straight on a shot the easiest position will be drawing the cue ball just past the side pocket for the other ball on the same rail. I like to see how many times I can draw the cue ball straight along the same rail back and forth between those two balls before I lose the cue ball to an angle that requires cross-table position for one of the balls on the opposite side

rail. If the cue ball is still close to the rail but the shot is not straight, try a little outside english with a low hit and smooth stroke to keep it close to the rail for another shot on the same side of table. Learn to recognize exactly where the angle makes it too difficult to keep the cue ball near the same rail and more logical to let it rebound across the table with comfortable speed.

As soon as you get into a pattern of moving the cue ball across the table you will realize the greatest benefit of the exercise. When I play this exercise it rarely ends on a miss. My nemesis is the scratch across side when moving the cue ball to the opposite rail. To avoid that scratch you must become deft with moving the cue ball across the table to hit the opposite rail at the diamonds closest to the side pocket. With all of your cross-table shots, practice choosing and then hitting the opposite rail at one of the two diamonds that sandwich the side pocket. You should experiment with various angles and cue-ball hits to hone your feel for moving the cue ball one diamond laterally as it stays beneath the side pocket on its path to the opposite rail. And you will play shots from various angles to move the cue ball three diamonds laterally to hit the opposite rail one diamond past the side pocket. Practice the necessary speed to land right on the opposite rail for a straight-in shot and the speed required to hit that rail and rebound one diamond segment to create a continual, cross-table sequence. From there you can experiment with thinner cuts and the challenge of moving the cue ball twice across the table without a side-pocket scratch.

Sometimes the simplest exercises with the fewest rules produce the best results through focused practice. This one exemplifies those properties and, since the table is never cleared, allows you to shoot for indefinite stretches of time before your first mistake. Do not be discouraged if you make a mistake early when you first begin practicing this exercise. Soon you will see your control of each discrete element fall into place as you move toward mastery with the exercise and ultimately, your pool game.



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