

The 12-Shot Exercise

When dedicated players talk of their practice and the routines that they work on, they often refer to them as drills. To me that sounds a bit too much like a visit to the dentist's office; so I like to call them exercises, a more positive word with a decidedly healthful connotation. Whatever we call them, the good ones work to shave months off of our learning by focusing our practice time on critically useful skills. And, the best teachers are creative enough to invent exercises that sharpen our focus while, at the same time, engaging us deeply enough to learn a valuable lesson, perhaps without even knowing it. On my own, I've designed a handful that would fall into that category. And I have some talent for recognizing a good exercise when I see one and stealing it to pass it along.

In December I spent two weeks in Maine working with my good friend Tim Miller, aka The Monk. Tim's greatest strength is his ability to distinguish and then articulate what the great players know as he translates that knowledge to the rest of us through exercises that work to hone very specific skills. As in most endeavors, true genius usually manifests itself in simplicity. So, I want to share a very simple but ingenious exercise that Tim showed us in Maine.

When pool reaches out to draw some of us in, the first call is invariably to position play and the revelation that we have some say in the matter of where the cue ball goes. Unfortunately most players spend their lives believing that the exact spot we hit on the cue ball determines its path. Enlightened players know that it's not where we hit the cue ball so much as *how* we hit it that controls its movement. Great players do not labor over the precise spot where the tip will hit the ball. As The Monk says, "The stroke determines the track line," and this month's exercise illustrates that idea perfectly.

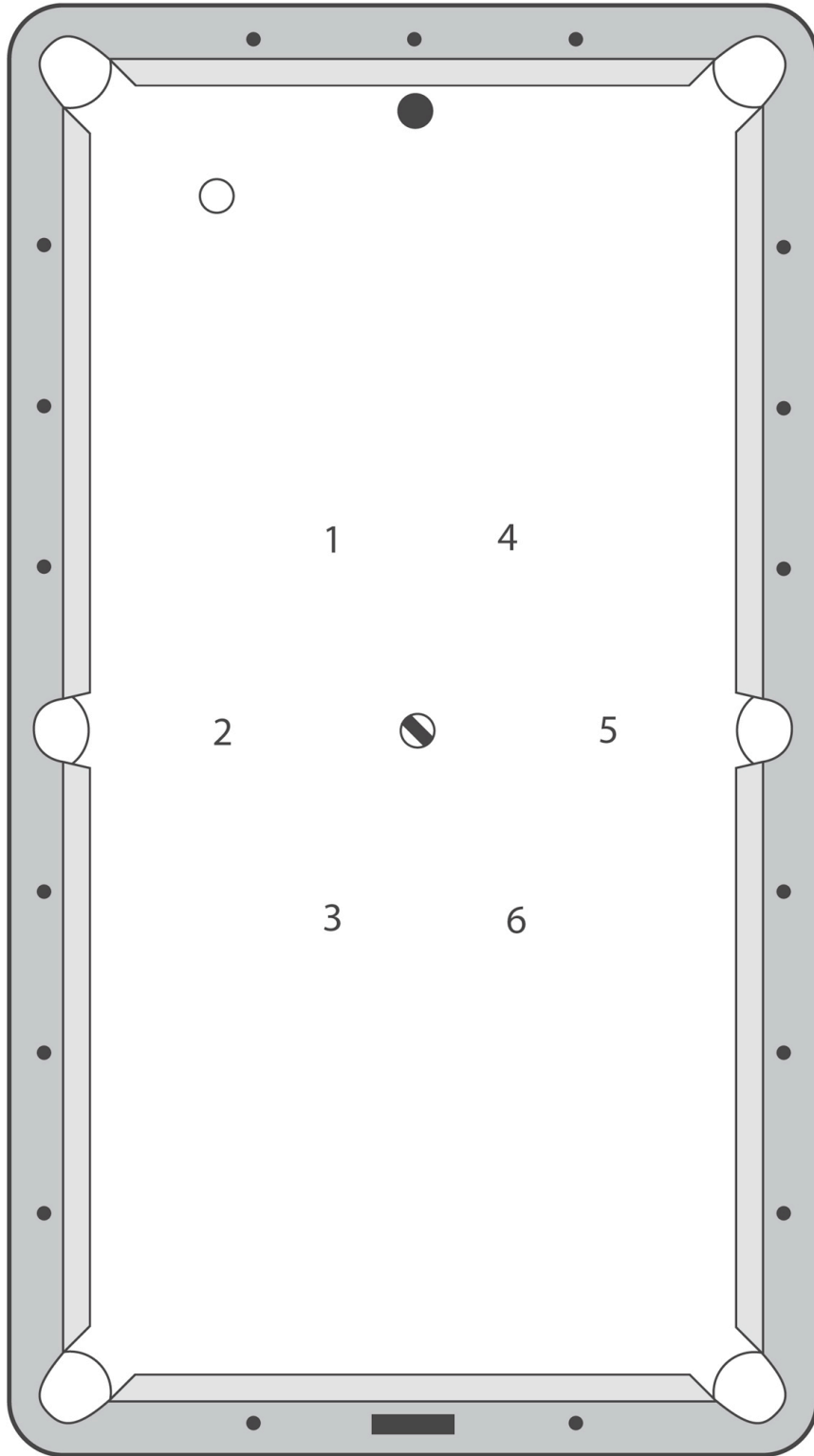
Set up the shot in the diagram with a ball on the table's center spot. Your goal is to shoot the solid ball into the corner and play position for the striped ball into each of the six pockets, hence the numbers on the table for the various positions. And you will shoot that striped ball after each shot, even if you land horribly out of position and must shoot a crazy three-rail bank to make it in its intended pocket. So, a perfect run-through will have six pairs of successful shots in order. Now here's the rub. You will hit the cue ball in the same spot—dead center—for every shot on the solid ball, meaning that you will hit each number on the table with the cue ball by varying your stroke slightly.

Each of the first three shots will require a punch stroke and measuring the exact degree of needed punch matched with proper speed. The punch stroke is the stroke we use to hit a stop shot and we accomplish it by adding a little extra acceleration as the tip approaches the cue ball. Numbers 1 and 2 are pretty straight forward, requiring no more

than a slight punch with proper speed. Number 3 may be a little tricky though. If I were playing to that spot under normal circumstances, I probably would hit the cue ball low to bounce it off the side rail just before the side pocket. Since that low hit is not allowed here you must play the cue ball straight to its destination, coming off the short rail to pass the striped ball very close to it. You will find that hitting that track requires less punch in the stroke combined with the bit of extra speed needed to get there.

Moving the cue ball forward to hit the numbers 4 through 6 is accomplished with a follow stroke. The follow stroke accelerates constantly through the cue ball. When 3-cushion players describe this stroke they often say, "Keep your tip on the ball," a good image to keep in mind. The follow stroke is quieter than the punch. If you're only accustomed to following the cue ball with a high hit, you may find yourself punching the cue ball on these shots at first because of a tendency to match certain strokes with tip placement. In that case, shoot a few shots with a high hit to distinguish the follow stroke and, once that's accomplished, move your tip back down to center ball and repeat the same stroke. You may be somewhat amazed when you see how far forward the cue ball will track with a good follow stroke despite the center-ball hit. Hitting the far side rail before the side pocket is possible with a good stroke. And if you can hit that track to bounce the cue ball to numbers 5 and 6, do it.

This exercise should be challenging enough to engage any player. When you can complete it, you will find yourself in a new realm of position play where you feel each cue-ball track in your hand instead of on the ball. That's where the feel belongs. I have to thank Tim for his creativity to invent such a powerful exercise and his generosity to allow me to share it.



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