

Precise Stroke and Speed

The first important concept that a pool player learns is that he has say in the matter of where the cue ball goes. Along with that revelation comes the knowledge that such control is accomplished with hitting a certain spot on the cue ball. In that moment the complexity of pool emerges and the game changes forever in that player's mind. Unfortunately many players, even competitive ones, never move beyond this elemental technique to see all of the possibilities connected with the cue ball's destiny.

This month we shall work through an exercise that will help you to identify, distinguish and employ two of the strongest influences on the cue ball's track off of the object ball. The variables that we will concentrate on are the spot on the cue ball and speed. Since the cue ball won't be rebounding off of any rails we can confine the cue tip to the vertical axis moving it from the top to the bottom without any right or left-hand english.

Set up the shot in the diagram with the cue ball and object ball one diamond apart from each other and both balls one-ball width away from the rail. Look at the shot and try to visualize all of the possible tracks that the cue ball can take off of the object ball. Now shoot your best follow shot, one that will track the cue ball to the long rail as close to the corner pocket as possible. Next shoot your best draw shot, one that will move the cue ball back to the opposite long rail as close as possible to the corner pocket. Mark the spot where the cue ball hit each long rail by placing a piece of chalk on the rail where the cue ball hit it. Probably the cue ball tracked on lines close to the dotted lines in the diagram. The chalks mark the boundaries of the possible cue-ball tracks for this shot; note that every track line between them is available to you.

Pick a natural, medium speed and shoot the shot the few times to nail down that speed. Without changing the speed or your stroke you can begin to hit various tracks within the zone that the chalks define. Find the line perpendicular to the object ball's path to the pocket and place a target ball on that line at point A. Now pocket the object ball with medium speed and adjust your spot on the cue ball until you are hitting the target ball consistently; you should be hitting the cue ball close to center. After you are consistent at point A you can move the target ball to a new place and find the spot on the cue ball that will track it to the new target. Keeping your speed and stroke consistent place the target ball on any of the infinite tracks within the zone and find the corresponding spot on the cue ball for each track that you choose.

Now that you have a good feel for the cue ball at medium speed it's time to experiment with various speeds to alter its track line. Begin with the target at point A and hit the shot with medium speed for a reference. Now hit the shot with enough speed to knock the target ball to the other end of the table. Where are you hitting the cue ball? Shoot it now with just enough speed to nudge the target ball. You will find with these shots that more speed requires a higher hit on the cue ball while the slow shot may force you down near the bottom of the cue ball. Every speed between the two extremes has a spot on the cue ball that goes with it for this track. Again move the target around the zone and continue to experiment with speed in this way noting the different tracks that the cue ball takes as you change the speed of the shot. Every variation in speed for a given target will yield a corresponding spot on the cue ball to place it on the track you have chosen with your placement of the target ball.

Now we can see how speed affects the shot out at the boundaries of the zone. Shoot your best follow and draw shots with a lot of speed and note where the cue ball hits each rail. Try the follow and draw shots again with minimum speed. You will find that more speed forces the cue ball farther from the corner pockets than the soft shots making the zone smaller. Additional speed will reduce the limits of your zone because the cue ball always leaves the object ball tracking on the line that goes to point A. The harder you hit the shot the more time the cue ball will spend on that line before any spin that you applied moves it forward or back. The actual path of the cue ball is often curved as noted by the line that goes to the rail at point X as it would on a follow shot that was hit hard. In situations with an apparent obstacle in the cue ball's path, knowing that you can make the cue ball take a curved track is a very useful tool.

As you work with this exercise you will develop a strong feel for the cue ball and controlling the way it tracks off of the object ball. You will begin to sense the small distinctions in the cue ball's behavior as you alter the spot you are hitting and the speed you are using. More powerful though you will learn to feel how precisely the two variables combine to produce a result. Next month we shall move forward from your mastery of spot and speed to explore the influence that altering your stroke has on the shot to take you another step closer to greatness.

