

Two Elegant Solutions

One might think that the job of navigating a simple rectangle with a white ball would offer a relatively small set of options. Heck, the entire playing field is right there in front of us with no ponds, trees or sand traps. I know that to casual observers, pool looks very simple. We who play the game know better and the deeper we delve the more we learn that there's more to learn. It's impossible to imagine bowlers or golfers discovering and unraveling new mysteries in their respective games after years of dedicated playing. Committed pool players however never stop learning and still never see all of the possibilities available on that rectangle. Simplify the setup further by removing thirteen balls along with the pockets, and you have billiards, a mind-expanding game with a daunting array of greater possibilities.

No matter how long we've played or how much we know, problems will arise that challenge our imaginations to conceive the most effective solutions. The great news is that after learning the solutions and practicing the shots, we generally remember what we've done when we see those shots in competition and they no longer occur as brainteasers. There are two shots which, when I set them up for many players, the best approach is not immediately obvious. But in each case, after learning what works best, great position is easy.

There are two setups in the diagram with a good shot on the eight ball but challenging position for the nine, which lies in the same place for both shots. In shot A the angle is nearly straight making the direct route along the left side rail very difficult. If the cue ball were another few inches toward the center of the table, cutting the eight ball in and rolling along the side rail would be a piece of cake. In this case, the straight angle calls for something else. What makes the easiest position option less than obvious is the fact that it is not a simple, one-rail route. For this shot it turns out that the best and most reliable choice is to draw the cue ball with outside english (left) four rails to the spot marked X. The cue ball will hit the first two rails at the spots marked 1 and 2, roll over the dot in the center of the table, hit the third and fourth rails at the spots marked 3 and 4, and come to rest on the X for perfect position. Of course getting the cue ball anywhere past W would yield a good shot on the nine; but for perfection's sake, work with the shot until you can execute it as described. The key is to apply a long, smooth stroke without trying too hard to *draw* the cue ball four rails. The smooth stroke with a full tip of english will get the cue ball spinning so the english and draw work together to move four rails without much effort.

Shot B is a lot more fun and often stumps some very good players when I show it to them. To be honest it would likely fool me if I hadn't seen Ralf Souquet shoot a similar version of this shot on TV a few years ago. The shot on the eight ball in the side

is not difficult but the cut angle is too thin to hold the cue ball near the upper-right corner for short-side position on the nine ball. The angle is also too thin to draw the cue ball to the top rail on the left side of the nine ball. Shot B is identical to shot A in the way that the cue ball completes its trip to the nine ball. It turns out that the best option here is to cut the eight ball into the side and let the cue ball go with high, outside (left) english, seven rails to the spot marked X. This is a fine example of what pros call “letting your stoke out” to play the cue ball naturally instead of risking a miss by trying too hard to kill it. Shoot it with a long, smooth stroke to help the cue ball roll the entire distance. If you avoid the two-rail scratch in the left side pocket the rest of the route is more-or-less automatic. Make certain that your set up works to send the cue ball into the first rail at the first diamond as shown with the dotted line. From there it will hit V, W, Y, and 2 on its way to the sixth rail. As with shot A, anything past W would work but keep playing this one until the cue ball is rolling consistently over the center spot from 2 to the sixth rail to hit the spots marked 3 and 4 and finish on the X. Naturally the shot is much easier on a fast table and it would be worth your time to find one if necessary just for the sheer thrill of executing a seven-rail position shot.

Here are two shots that violate the old, reliable rule of finding the simplest path to the next ball. In most cases that rule is sound advice but sometimes we have to take a walk on the wild side and flout the rules. Beautiful, textbook pool is very routine and the word “boring” should appear in bold letters at the top of every player’s list of goals. But when it’s called for, nothing beats hitting a shot that wakes up the fans in the back row and generates some real noise.

