

## The Long Way

Anyone who reads this column regularly probably knows that I like to present examples where intuitively logical and apparently simple choices may not produce the most effective results. And, in contrast to what seems easiest, we often discuss choices that may appear more complex in theory but turn out as the most trouble free in practice.

In the diagram we see a straightforward, three-ball out to win a game of 9 ball, beginning with the straight-in shot on the 7 ball. A great rule of thumb when making a position decision is to look at the next ball, the 8 in this case, and ask, “Where would I put the cue ball with ball in hand?” And, in this situation, if the 7 ball were off the table, a shooter with ball in hand would likely place the cue ball near the A and shoot a simple draw shot to move the cue ball back to the right, side rail for a shot on the 9 ball, a shot that most players will execute consistently and effectively. One danger to note with the draw shot is the temptation to cut the 8 ball slightly left to draw the cue ball back and toward the 9 ball for a better shot on the game winner. Naturally, that introduces the possibility of scratching in the right, side pocket. It’s a somewhat remote possibility perhaps but, as we know, anything can happen under pressure.

Because many of us would place the cue ball near the A with ball in hand on the 8 ball, our natural inclination for the shot in the diagram might be to replicate that position when shooting the 7 ball. We might, without thinking, try to draw the cue ball back, about to where it is now, for the same angle on the 8 ball that position A offers. Although drawing the cue ball back a foot or so is fairly easy for most players, a close look reveals that that option places very precise demands on the shooter, a common problem with side-pocket shots. A ball width to either side of the desired landing spot can make position for the 9 ball very difficult by introducing unavoidable cue-ball drift without enough cut angle to move the cue ball around for a good shot on the 9 ball. And if, in an effort not to under hit the shot, a typical thought under pressure, we make *sure* to draw the cue ball, it’s easy to wind up over drawing it back to the X and freezing it on the cushion.

In this situation the most reliable choice may, on the surface, appear too complex. Or, that choice may not occur at all to a lot of players since we rarely move the cue ball to the next ball from an angle that initially moves it away from that ball. However, in this situation the best choice is to begin with the most reliable shot we know, a stop shot on the 7 ball. From that spot, indicated with the dotted-outlined cue ball, we play the 8 ball in the side, hitting the cue ball above center with a little running (left) english to send along a natural path toward the 9 ball, hitting two or perhaps three rails, as shown with the solid line. That’s the superior choice for several reasons. First, that option does not

demand a precise angle for the 8 ball, and offers easy position on the 9 ball from places where the cut angle on the 8 is considerably thinner or fuller. Second, the shot is very forgiving regarding speed; a player would have hit it way too hard to land with no shot on the 9 ball. Finally, the ultimate position track falls within a wide margin where almost any cue ball moving in the general direction of the solid lines will yield a good shot on the 9 ball, whether it takes a two or three-rail route to its destination. The big danger with this shot is a two-rail scratch in the right side pocket, an outcome easily avoided with a little practice for finding the table's speed and rebound angles.

Experienced players do not like to threaten the current shot with any kind of heroic position attempt and will often opt for a stop shot even in situations where doing so can add difficulty to the next shot. Here of course, that is not the case, and the stop shot offers greater reliability for the next shot. However, even if we removed the 7 ball from the setup, it's likely that the seemingly more complex two-rail position shot to the 9 ball is the better choice with ball in hand on the 8 ball. A good way to test that premise is to take ball in hand at position A, and ball in hand from the table's center spot for the same angle we get with the dotted-outlined cue ball. Shoot ten times from each position and note the number of successful trials from each. Doing so will uncover the reliability of this natural, albeit extended, path for position while demonstrating that longer can be easier.

