

Carom Shots

Sometimes the difference between winning and losing a nine-ball match rests on the outcome of one's attempts to convert early opportunities to make the nine ball. It's very common to hear a player saying something along the lines of, "I had the match but then he made a nine on the break and two more on combination shots." I'm referring to a well-played match, not a grenade fest with both players taking ridiculous flyers on the nine and hoping for some luck.

Many times a player jumps on an opportunity to play the nine and then loses the game when the missed attempt leaves the nine hanging in the pocket for his opponent. More often than not, such an outcome can be avoided by choosing the carom shot over the combination. Look at Shot A in the diagram and imagine what you would do with it. This is a good example of a situation where going for the nine ball is the best shot since it lies right in front of the pocket with no good shot on the two ball. However the shot is not easy. If the cue ball were at point X the combination shot would be straight-in and much easier, though still not a piece of cake. From this cue-ball position, cutting the two precisely into the nine is very difficult and carries a strong possibility of a miss that leaves the nine hanging with the two nearby.

In this situation the carom is clearly the better choice. Playing to hit the two and pocket the nine with the cue ball is not easier than the combination, probably more difficult, but the carom shot will separate the two and nine in case of a miss. Play the shot a few times working to control the speed so that the two ball and cue ball are at opposite ends of the table after the balls stop rolling.

Here is a reliable technique for playing many carom shots. A couple of months ago we discussed hitting stop shots when cutting a ball to track the cue ball on the line perpendicular to the line of the ball to the pocket. Since you have no doubt mastered the stop shot you can put that concept to work for you on caroms. With your cue find the track that you need off the top of the two ball to pocket the nine. Now find the line perpendicular to that; it happens to meet the first diamond on the short rail in this example. To pocket the nine simply aim to shoot the two into that first diamond and play a stop shot. Now you are playing a shot that employs two things you know very well. One, you are aiming to shoot an object ball at a specific target, the most fundamental objective in pool. And two, you are using the stop shot, the one that you've mastered, to give you a precise track to the nine ball. Practice the shot now combining all of the necessary elements including the proper speed to leave the two ball and cue ball at opposite ends of the table. You may find that the best way to play the shot is to focus on shooting the two ball at its target with a stop shot while giving no thought to the nine ball. If we were billiard players perhaps we would feel the shot as a carom but as pool players we are more comfortable doing what we do most, aiming to shoot an object ball somewhere.

Sometimes you will see a shot like the one diagrammed in B. In this situation you will pocket the five ball and continue the run, but you can't help noticing that nine over there waiting for something to come over and nudge it home. In this case the line perpendicular to the line of the five to the pocket does not meet up with the nine. Since you will pocket the five ball you know that a stop shot will not work here to make the nine as well. For this shot look at where the perpendicular track leads and, using the stop shot as your reference on the cue ball, make an adjustment upward to where you think you will apply the right amount of follow to move forward from the perpendicular track to the nine ball. Focus on pocketing the five ball and play it with proper speed for position on the six to ensure the run out if you miss the nine. The six is the critical ball in this layout since it lies in a place that matches up with your attempt on the nine. If the six ball were down at the other end of the table you would play position for it and run out disregarding any attempts to pocket the nine ball.

Great players generally play run-out pool moving through the vast majority of racks in sequence. At the same time however they are on the lookout for opportunities to win a game early in the rack. You will learn, as everyone does, that thoughtless flyers at the nine will lose far more games for you than they win. You will also learn though how to recognize opportunities that, when played with planning and caution, can lead to a win if converted and still keep you in the game when the attempts fall short.

