

May '99

Concentration

Once in a while we need to veer from the mechanics of pool to discuss the more elusive qualities of the game, the mental aspects. Regardless of skill level we all face the challenge of playing our best game more often and, more important, bringing that game out when it is needed most. Last spring I presented an exercise designed to improve consistency through the development of a natural tempo. This month I want to continue in that vein with a discussion of concentration.

For this discussion let's define concentration as the ability to stay focused on the task at hand without succumbing to distractions. Distractions come mainly from what's happening in the room around us or externally, and from our own minds or internally. Regardless of the source if we shift our attention to a distraction at a critical moment in the execution of a shot the result is usually unfavorable. Let's examine some ways to handle distractions and sharpen our focus.

In order to improve our concentration and examine the effects of distraction we need to understand how we think while playing and the times we need to concentrate most sharply. Also we must understand the sources of distractions which basically arise from the external world and from our own minds or the internal world. When we play pool we have to employ both creative and analytical thinking to pocket a ball and play position for the next shot. Our challenge is to think effectively and apply the two types of thinking amid the noise from both worlds in order to perform effectively.

In the matter of external distractions we have very little control over what goes on around us in the public space of a poolroom. In any environment we face the momentary external distractions such as someone walking in front of a shot. If you think about when you are most vulnerable to external distractions you will find that it is when you are in your stance and ready to shoot. This is the time that your mind is working creatively to pocket the ball. When any of your attention shifts to such a disruption you are distracted and must address the distraction. Most experienced players handle this by standing up and allowing the distraction to pass before getting back down to shoot the shot. It is very difficult to give such a disruption partial recognition and then shoot effectively pretending not to be distracted.

Because our minds have such broad capabilities the range of internal distractions can be limitless. Let's divide them into thoughts pertaining to the game and those irrelevant to pool. As with external distractions we are most vulnerable to adverse effects if we are distracted just before shooting. The most commonly experienced internal distraction occurs as a concern for position play that pops up in the shooter's mind just as he is about to shoot. Many players struggle with this specific phenomenon so consistently that they accept it as part of the game and a struggle that everyone suffers during the learning stages. This struggle will endure for any player who attempts to combine position play with shot making.

Because position play and shot making arise from separate and distinct thought processes they need to be kept separate from each other. Position play is accomplished through analysis and a series of logical thoughts and decisions. This thinking should be performed while standing erect and studying the table. Regardless of the time required the player must make a decision for how the cue ball will get to its position for the next shot and commit to that decision. Commitment to that decision is far more important than that decision's correctness. In my instructional groups we affirm that we do our thinking standing up so that we can focus sharply on the shot once we are in the stance to shoot it. You must be complete with your thinking before you can proceed to the creative process of pocketing a ball.

As for irrelevant thoughts, which come in infinite varieties, we again only have to guard against their presence during the shot-making process. For a long time I believed that concentration was a state of mind that occurred over the duration of a tournament without any interruption from thoughts irrelevant to my performance. Playing from that perspective caused a struggle in which I believed, erroneously, that I could stop my mind from wandering into the affairs of my life. The harder I resisted the more stubbornly these thoughts fought for position at the worst times. I've since realized that I only need to concentrate during those seconds when I am in my stance and ready to shoot. For the rest of the time during a pool match I am free to think. Since replacing the resistance to thoughts with an invitation to them I find that they do not nag me as they once did and there is time to address any thoughts that come up during the time when I am not shooting.

If you distinguish concentration as clear focus during the creative time of shot making you can learn to clear your thinking to protect that time. Concentration occurs most powerfully when in that moment just before pulling the trigger the image of the object ball occupies the entire mental realm and appears clearly as a ball that is certain to go in. If a doubt comes up when your focus is so sharp you will hear it as a loud warning that you need to stand up and complete your preparation before shooting. This is the zone of concentration where great players perform.

