

Smarter Planning

Sometimes we play good position for the next ball but not the position needed to pocket that ball and complete the rack. In many nine-ball situations, any reasonable shot on the next ball is good enough to continue beyond it. So when things are going well it's easy to feel comfortable merely glancing at the next ball and then moving the cue ball into position for it. Often however, more precise or careful position play is required. This month we shall discuss position strategy and distinguish techniques for avoiding good shots that end the run.

The most common example of good position that does not work is landing straight in on a ball near a rail when the next ball is on the opposite rail. The eight-ball shot in the diagram from position X illustrates the problem. The typical cause of ending up at X is not bad position play but careless planning. The player who finds himself in this predicament probably feels good until he gets ready to shoot the eight and sees his error. Very often we take a quick look at a ball *near* a rail and regard it as a ball *on* the rail. If you look at the eight ball in the diagram and mentally move it to the rail, you will see that position X is ideal for moving cross-table to the nine. An experienced player would note the few inches between the eight and the rail and move the cue ball out to position Y from the seven.

Look at the diagram now to examine the routine out from the seven ball. Going from the seven to eight here is very straightforward. It requires an above-center hit on the cue ball to roll one rail along the track indicated by the dotted line. A closer look reveals that the dotted line heads for position X and the problem just discussed. A more thoughtful player is likely to play the two-rail position indicated with the solid line. For this setup that would require a slightly lower hit on the cue ball and maybe a touch of outside english.

One of the first valuable rules we learn is to choose the simplest cue-ball routes to the next shot. Why then would a player opt for two rails when one-rail position appears to work? The answer is found in another rule that we usually learn a bit later in our pursuit. The best way to avoid a rail is to hit it. In this setup we have a choice between two cue-ball tracks to get to the eight ball. The simpler one moves the cue ball one rail to the eight and *toward* the rail it lies near. As the cue ball moves closer to the eight ball on this track, it moves closer to the rail and the straighter angle for the shot on the eight. Opting for two rails sends the cue ball into the long rail and then across the straight-in line to raise the probability for an easy shot on the eight to get to the game winner.

Using the concept of hitting a rail to avoid it will work to prevent another nagging position problem, finding the cue ball lined up nicely for the next shot but frozen to the rail. When this happens mid-rack, it often ends the run because of the difficult, hard follow shot with english that it offers up as the only option. Even a soft, straight-in shot on the game ball is easy to miss with the unwanted difficulty of shooting off the rail, especially under a little pressure. We leave ourselves frozen to the rail too often for one primary reason; we use the rail as our target. Usually when determining a cue-ball target for the next shot we pick a spot on the rail, a diamond or half diamond and play for it. If that is the last thought we have going into the shot, we typically land on the chosen target. It's frightening sometimes how well we can play position. The remedy is simple. After choosing your target on the rail, make a clear decision to hit it. If the cue ball hits a rail it will rebound from it. Practice some rail shots with cross table position to get a feel for hitting the opposite rail and rebounding from it to a specifically chosen spot.

We find ourselves in trouble too often after playing the position that we wanted. This shows up as a lack of planning rather than talent. Balls lying near a rail as the eight ball in the diagram will lead to us to this dilemma more than any others. It's very easy to glance at such a ball and think of it as a ball on the rail. An object ball three or four inches from the rail can require a cue ball shift as great as one and a half diamonds for the proper angle. Begin now to look carefully at such balls and decide exactly where you want the cue ball to land while considering the option of hitting the rail to avoid leaving yourself on or too close to it. Great players rarely encounter unpleasant surprises after executing the desired plan.

