

Mastering Draw

Perhaps the best indication that someone is approaching mastery in almost any endeavor is when those around him can say that he makes it look easy. While learning, practicing and executing the draw shot nothing will serve you better than the aspiration to make it look easy. Of all the shots and techniques in pool, the draw shot is most vulnerable to that nasty pitfall of trying too hard.

Consider for a moment the things you do well and the way you are when performing your best. Or consider the way you feel when you are playing your best pool. Chances are that you are relaxed and performing without apprehension or worry. Trying too hard lives in all of us and appears when we encounter a challenge that dwells near a perceived limit of our abilities. When we try too hard the typical outcome is a somewhat frozen action and a result far different from our intent.

To learn to avoid trying too hard we should first examine how it manifests itself in pool and why it appears most with draw shots. Applying the necessary backspin to the cue ball for a draw shot requires a very smooth and rapidly accelerating stroke, a kind-of explosive punch that is the exact opposite of the follow stroke discussed here last month. Knowing that even a soft draw shot requires some power can cause an attempt to produce extra power usually leading the player to grip the cue at impact and often move the shoulder forward in an attempt to put more of something into the shot. Both actions lead to disaster by slowing down the cue and moving it off line.

The temptation to grip the cue at impact is a strong one but easy to overcome. In this exercise to eliminate gripping we should also remove any shoulder movement if it is present. Since your desire is to stroke the cue ball with maximum acceleration, consider that the best grip is no grip at all. Let's work first on developing a feel for not gripping the cue.

With no balls on the table get into your stance and prepare to shoot a shot. It will be helpful here to stand a bit more upright than you may normally stand when you are playing. Prepare to shoot an imaginary shot in exactly the same manner that you would prepare to shoot a real one. With focus on your shooting hand and an awareness of its relaxed state and neutral position just before impact, complete the stroke allowing the butt of your cue to slide forward through your shooting hand. In this exercise you are shooting at imaginary balls with a slip stroke, which some great players have and other great players do not. Whether or not the slip stroke becomes a part of your game is unimportant. It is critical however that to apply maximum spin to the cue ball, which results from acceleration, you learn not to squeeze the cue and thus slow it down when you are hitting the ball. Do this until you have captured the feeling of simply letting the tip go through the cue ball.

You can now set up any shot you like as long as it is straight in and the cue ball is within two or three feet of the object ball. Lower your bridge to make your cue as level as possible and move it close to the cue ball, within five or six inches. A level cue facilitates a lower hit on the cue ball and a longer follow through, two necessary elements for great draw. A shorter bridge is helpful when learning to shoot with maximum draw because it produces more rapid acceleration to get your tip to the desired speed over a shorter distance.

Before we begin shooting we should examine what I consider one of the greatest myths in the game of pool, the idea that your tip shouldn't vary from the cue ball's center more than one tip diameter. We won't do the math here though you are welcome to do that for yourself. Using 13 millimeters as the standard tip and simplifying things a little by using circles instead of spheres, a 26-millimeter circle on the face of the cue ball comprises roughly a fifth of its total area. Now, ask yourself if you think that Efren Reyes confines himself to 20% of what's available on the surface of the cue ball.

Now is the time to learn to hit the cue ball at the bottom when you want to draw it. Try some draw shots with medium speed. If you are miscuing trying to hit the cue ball's bottom check your tip to see that it is chalked well and taking chalk; perhaps it needs a little roughing to get the chalk to adhere. If your tip is in good shape, focus on your shooting hand to determine whether it is moving upwards at impact. If your back hand goes up your tip will go down. If you are miscuing perhaps you are gripping the cue at impact, an action that pulls the butt of cue up into the palm and forces the tip down. A miscue on a draw shot may result from too much concern for what you are doing and fear of a miscue. You can eliminate this by remembering to place all of your focus on the object ball when you are ready to shoot and keeping it there throughout the shot.

As you practice drawing the cue ball, shoot the same shot repeatedly until you are getting more draw with less speed. Ultimately great draw results from a smooth, effective stroke rather than force. Work on the shot and on incorporating everything discussed above until it all feels smooth and natural. While you may find it necessary to work out some bugs to get the stroke flowing naturally, remember to make it look easy and, I promise, it will. Soon you will hear an observer say those magic words about your game and will know that you have just made a leap toward greatness.