

Rail Shots

Because the purpose of this column is to help you, the reader, become a better player I always welcome input and suggestions for future columns. In the absence of that input we might end up reading only about the aspects of the game that concern me such as where to leave the cue ball for a female opponent wearing a short skirt. Last week a very charming lady informed me that she has trouble pocketing balls that lie on or near the rail and suggested I address that problem for her here.

Balls on or near the rail can present problems for players at every skill level and more so for less seasoned players. First we shall discuss balls that lie close to the rail and then balls that are frozen to the rail. When beginning players approach cut shots near a rail I believe that their attention shifts to the rail, much as a golfer faced with hitting a ball over water succumbs to focusing on the water instead of the landing area beyond it. You can learn to use the rail to help guide the shot and stop seeing it as an obstacle or hazard. Many of us visualize an imaginary line from the ball to the pocket when lining up or aiming a shot. In the case of a ball near the rail there is no need to imagine; the line is right there for you. Set up the shot in the diagram with the object ball about a half-inch away from the rail. Now look at the rail and follow the line of the cushion to the pocket. It's very easy to visualize a line through the center of the object ball that goes to the pocket parallel to the cushion. Play this shot from cue-ball positions A, B and C with the idea in mind of shooting the ball along that parallel line instead of trying to shoot the ball into the pocket. Note that when you're successful, the object ball hits the pocket facing of the long rail at point X.

The distinction between aiming for the pocket and aiming for the pocket facing is a very important one to learn early. If you stand behind the object ball for the shot in the diagram and make a line from its center to the center of the pocket you will see that the line goes directly into the cushion. You must aim the ball along the cushion at the facing on the long rail to pocket it. We can aim shots to the center of the back of the pocket when we are shooting at object balls in the vicinity of point Y in the diagram.

For a full understanding of this shot we must discuss the physics of how balls react with one another. Whenever you cut a ball, the friction between that ball and the cue ball causes the force from the direction of the cue ball's travel to push the object ball forward slightly. Byrne calls this phenomenon cling. In other words when you pocket a ball you really are cutting it thinner than you may think. When cling occurs on a cut shot along a rail, it pushes the object ball directly to the rail causing it to bounce off away from the pocket. Instead of discussing friction and physics at great length, here's the solution. When cutting a ball along a rail, aim to over cut it very slightly. Practice the shot now from the indicated cue-ball positions with this in mind.

For balls that are frozen to the rail the best advice I can give is something I read in a Loree Jon Jones column. Play the ball as if the rail were not there. Simply shoot the ball into the pocket, but practice a lot of them. After shooting enough shots you will begin to feel confident aiming them. This works far better than trying to hit the ball and rail simultaneously or trying to hit it rail first to compensate for the compression of the rubber. Set up the shot in the diagram again, except this time, freeze the object ball to the rail and shoot it from point A. Now move the cue ball to point B to shoot the shot some more. When the cut angle exceeds 45 degrees there is a technique that makes the shot very easy. For the shot in the diagram use extreme right-center english, making sure to stroke it smoothly and play the shot rail first. If the cue ball hits the rail right next to the object ball, the right-hand english will spin the cue ball off the rail and into the correct contact point on the object ball to pocket it. Practice this technique from point B and then try it from point C. Remember, when you are cutting the ball to the left use left english and when cutting it to the right, use right english. I have never met someone who could not acquire a good feel for this rail-first technique in fifteen minutes or less.

Many students have conveyed their frustration with rail shots to me. In a way, the techniques for executing them successfully are methods for missing the shot, over cutting and hitting rail first for example. There are other shots in pool where, because of throw or deflection, we aim in reality to miss the shot. After enough experience and practice with shots like these, the required adjustments will blend into a new picture for you of shots that you will make without any thought given to how you are manipulating the balls.

