

# Mirror Practice

For the past five years I have enjoyed the great fortune of working with and learning from Tom Rossman, the world-famous Dr. Cue. Earlier this month I spent a week in Peoria, Illinois as a guest instructor for the very first Masters Clinic with him, The Monk, and a deeply enlightened teacher named Fred Fechter at the Cue Sport College, an incomparable learning environment that Mr. Fechter created. Anyone with the desire to learn should pay him and his dedicated staff a visit to experience the essence of our game in a room with perfect equipment, no noise, and no windows. Try to imagine what can be done in a room with nothing around you except dozens of photos of Mosconi and other masters from our past. I'm guessing that after a week or so I would begin to feel their presence in my own game. On my last night there, after the clinic finished and all the students departed, my gracious host had to pry me away from the table so he could get some sleep. In a world where people say, "That's an 'awesome' paper clip," I'm left without the single word that would describe my Peoria experience.

Over the past five years I have been hearing Tom talk about mirror training and its effectiveness as a learning tool. Though I never doubted his wisdom I never really experienced it before the Masters Clinic, where we had an entire mirrored wall in front of the table. As Tom says, video tape can be very useful but when we watch a tape we're looking at someone playing in the past. We can say to the TV, "Move your hand a little to the left," but that person will not obey. We only see our mistakes with no chance of correcting them in that image. When we practice in a mirror however, everything happens in the present and we can tell that guy in the mirror what to do. And guess what, that guy in the mirror is a very quick learner and will follow instructions intently.

Many times I have encouraged students to practice stroking away from the pool table and the balls to get in touch with the movement and its flow. When we see balls in front of us they usually cause enough tension or fear to inhibit the motion of a pure stroke. But I never really knew about the power of the mirror. Practicing without a mirror can help for sure but, since we cannot see ourselves, we have no way of giving ourselves any feedback. In fact, if we have an unseen movement that takes the cue off line, what Tom calls a glitch in the stroke, we face the likelihood of reinforcing that glitch by repeating it in practice where we are unaware of it. In the mirror however we see any glitches and therefore can correct them immediately.

If you have a pool table at home you should purchase a good sized mirror that you can place next it to watch yourself. If you have no pool table you probably do have mirror somewhere in your house, and for this work to enhance your self awareness, you may be better off without a pool table. Get in front of a mirror, maybe the one on your dresser, with your cue and begin your mirror training. In the mirror you will isolate and work on each separate aspect of your stroke and your routine. Tom advocates doing



nothing but chalking in front of the mirror for ten minutes or until the guy in the mirror is a perfect chalker. Practice making your stance until the guy in the mirror lands in a perfect, balanced and stable stance every time. Isolate the alignment of your head until the line that goes through both eyeballs is parallel to the floor every time you land in your stance. Focus on your alignment until you see your shooting hand, wrist, elbow, shoulder and cue on one line. Determine how your eyes line up over the cue. Your cue may be centered between your eyes or lined up under one of them. Repeat making your stance until the relationship of your eyes to your cue is precisely the same on every trial.

Now you can work on your stroke while facing the mirror. First, without any movement, look at your shooting hand. It should be hanging straight down from your wrist with no inside or outside cock to it. Look at it as you begin moving the cue. Sometimes a player's hand starts out hanging straight down and then cocks once the cue starts moving. Begin stroking to study the movement and the path of your cue. You want it moving on a straight line, back and forth, with no right or left movement. This is the easiest aspect to work with since you will see how straight the line of your shaft is as your tip approaches the mirror. With the side-to-side problem solved you can focus on a level stroke. Watch your hand move until you can eliminate any, even the slightest, up-and-down movement. The level stroke is critically important to consistent pool yet rare. Here is where practicing away from a pool table will work wonders since shooting over the rails is what causes most players to elevate the butt of the cue. Throughout this work remember that you are stroking, not shooting. Keep your cue moving back and forth at one constant, slow-to-medium speed with no stops in front or back. Make the movement flow.

After facing the mirror turn sideways to it so you can see your stroke from that aspect. First find the precise place on the butt to hold the cue. Use any object as an imaginary cue ball and place your bridge behind it. Move your tip toward your "cue ball" and stop two inches before reaching it. Look at your forearm to see if it is perpendicular to the floor. If it is not, move your hand along the cue's butt until it is. With the tip two inches from the cue ball and your forearm perpendicular to the floor, you are holding the cue in the correct place. Now experiment with different bridge lengths, the short one that you would use for a snip draw or the long one you might use for a nine-ball break to find the new grip points on the butt to match up with the various bridge distances according to the two-inch/perpendicular guideline.

After you find the grip point you can study your shooting hand to perfect the timing of your stroke. Make sure that your hand and wrist are relaxed and begin stroking. When your stroke reaches the limit of your back swing you should see your hand behind your forearm. As the stroke comes through to the cue ball your hand will pass through the perpendicular point to finish in front of your forearm. This is not a big "wristy" motion but a natural, small hand movement that finishes the stroke with the tip going through the cue ball, a movement that proceeds from a relaxed and neutral shooting hand

and wrist. Finally, it's time to take some imaginary shots. After some warm-up strokes, stop your tip and then take one final stroke to shoot a power draw shot. Look at your hand to see if it grabs the cue as the stroke finishes. Grasping the butt at the end of the stroke nullifies all your hard work as it kills the acceleration and causes the tip to dip into the cue ball. On a proper stroke you will feel a release when the tip hits the cue ball as all of your hand's energy leaves you and goes into the cue ball. Take the tip back to your hand and pause it there. Now deliver the stroke as a throw where, after the initial forward thrust, your hand has released all of its energy and ceases to influence the cue's movement.

Make friends with the guy in the mirror and work on these subtle aspects of your stroke. There are many other parts of your game that you can study in the mirror as well such as the effect that elevating your cue has on your balance. For a deeper understanding of self awareness visit my new friends at [www.cuesportcollege.com](http://www.cuesportcollege.com) to explore their unique and powerful approach to our beautiful game. Perhaps you will learn as I did from them and the fifteen extraordinary Masters-Clinic students, everyone has something to contribute and the learning never ends.

