

Deceptive Simplicity

As much I love to ramble on about pool's complexity and illuminate the game's difficulty—how else could I help ensure my own job security?—in reality, the task at hand is usually pretty simple. And, that's the standpoint from which we like to proceed with a lot of shots and layouts, especially when we're playing well. Most run outs tend to be straightforward and demand minimal consideration to complete the rack.

In the diagram we see a good example of an easy run out with just two stripes and then the 8 ball in the side for the game winner. The first shot in the left side pocket is almost straight in and lies nicely to roll the cue ball forward to the X for a stop shot and then another straight-in shot on the 8 ball in the right side pocket. After looking at the first shot, I think many, if not most, players would begin to run those three balls exactly as I just described. And I'm sure that, most of the time, everything would work out splendidly. But, there is trouble lurking in that route, the kind of trouble that can surprise us under pressure.

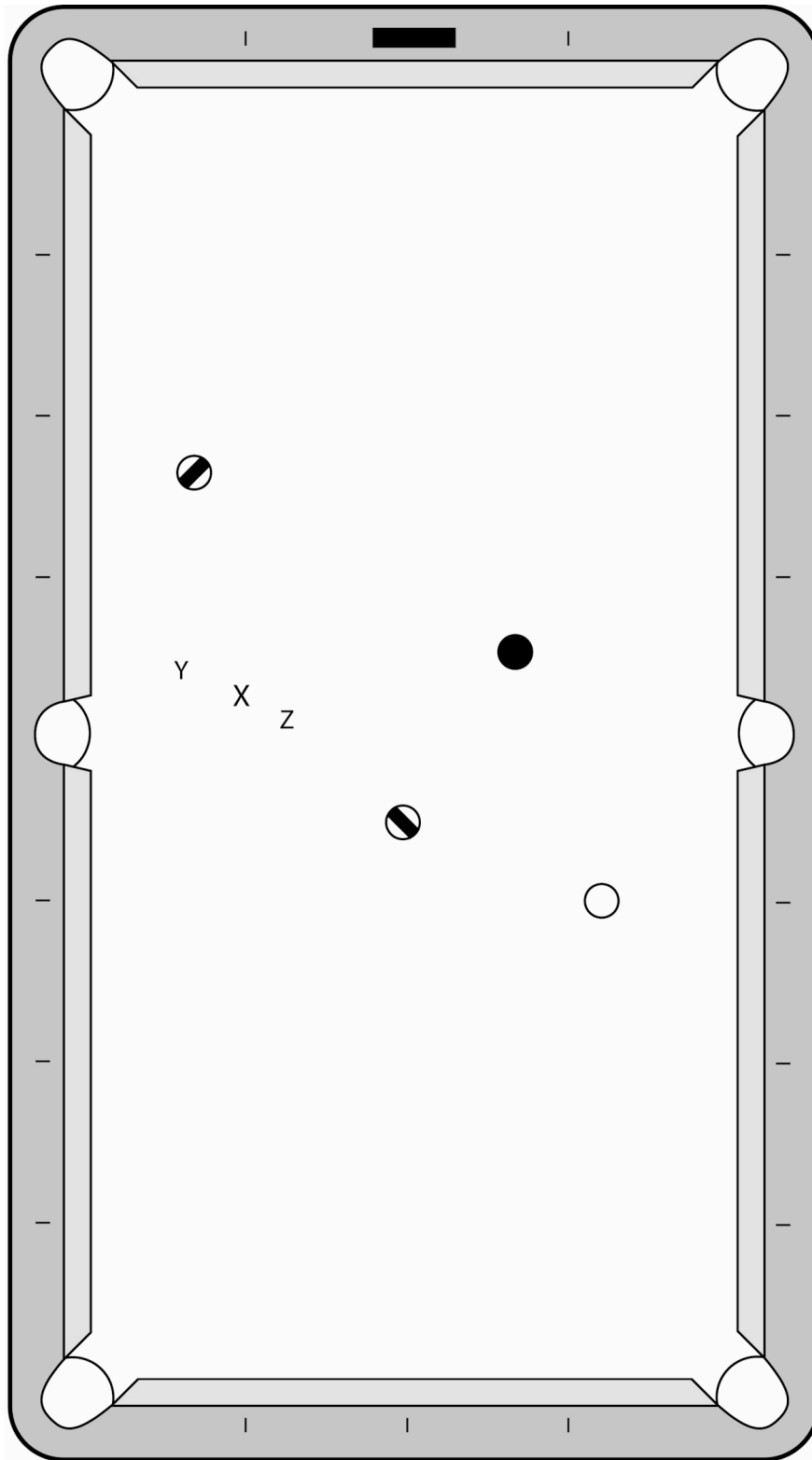
After observing that the straight-in line on the second ball lies past the first ball, just about anybody would automatically play a follow shot to the X. But there's an inherent problem with that play, a problem that stems from the fact that the cue ball is rolling on a path which crosses the straight-in line for the second shot. And although I would place the cue ball on the X with ball in hand if all I had were the second stripe and the 8 ball, rolling it to that spot from the first shot requires precise speed control, a skill that likes to slip away from us when the heat is on. A closer look at the layout in the diagram will reveal that rolling a few inches too far to the Y or pulling up a little short at the Z can lead to problems and maybe end the run prematurely.

Sending the cue ball to the Y leaves a tricky backwards cut on the second shot and an angle that moves the cue ball toward the 8 ball. Sometimes an angle that moves the cue ball toward the next ball will force the cue ball to hit that ball and thus add a frightening measure of uncertainty to the shot. Even with this setup, where such a collision is unlikely, what kind of position can we play for the 8 ball from the Y? There is no easy answer as things are. And if the table were full of solids, potentially blocking other pockets and useful position tracks, running out from the Y could be impossible. Falling short and landing near the Z presents another kind of problem, an easier one perhaps but a problem nonetheless. A cue ball lying on the Z yields a slight cut angle to the right on the second ball, an angle custom made for leaving the cue ball frozen to the left side cushion for a result that nobody ever wants. Many players will try to avoid that outcome when they recognize the possibility, employing techniques that can threaten the shot. A player may try to shoot too softly to keep the cue ball from reaching the rail or

slam it with maximum speed to get a rebound from the cushion, two adjustments that add undesirable difficulty to the shot. Even worse, a shooter will sometimes over cut or under cut the object ball for a miss after allowing “fear of frozen cue ball” to take over as the shot’s top priority, a blunder I know all too well.

The good news is that this shot has a very simple solution. While a straight-in shot on that second ball would be ideal, playing for one may be a bit too risky. The more reliable alternative is to play a soft stop shot on the first ball to leave a healthy cut angle on the second ball. The angle that a stop shot leaves on the second ball is ideal for a natural, center-ball roll to the side rail and then back toward the 8 ball with comfortable speed. The stop shot is our most basic and reliable position tool and, in this situation, yields position on the second ball that offers a wide margin for speed error to serve up an easy, straight-in shot on the game winner from anywhere within that margin.

Even though most of the layouts we encounter may be routine, the simplest run outs can become difficult under pressure. So we must learn to identify options that promise good results in the possible absence of precision. Professionals often appear to exhibit near-perfect speed control for two major reasons. One, they find options that yield optimum results within wider margins of error. And two, they have great speed control. But as we learn to recognize more reliable choices, we too will convert more and more racks with ease while staging our own illusory show of perfect speed control.



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