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## **Fine Tuning Shot-Making Skills**

A few years ago I read someone's account of a meeting between himself and Willie Mosconi where he asked what he could do to play better straight pool. Mosconi's response was, "Don't miss." What might have sounded at first like a flippant dismissal is really great advice. Regardless of a player's knowledge and mastery of the game, when he misses the shot in front of him he sits down. Yet very little instruction addresses the subject of aiming and pocketing balls.

Every player's early encounters with pool are centered on one basic challenge, to shoot the balls into the holes. After hitting the first few thousand balls most people become comfortable with the hand-eye coordination required to pocket basic shots. Those who want to progress open themselves to learning the myriad techniques and strategies that make up the game and, for the truly committed player, this stage of learning typically lasts two or three years. Those players who attain the skills and knowledge to compete at or near the championship level break through to a new challenge, pocketing every ball. Pool is odd in the way that it returns the player who has studied and mastered the complexities of the game back to the original problem.

Twice previously we have examined the separation of the analytical aspects of pool from the creative in columns on the subjects of tempo and concentration. Because position play is analytical once a player learns the answer to a specific position problem he has that information and the same situation never again occurs as a problem when it repeats itself. Making a shot on the other hand is wholly creative so the challenge to pocket balls consistently never changes or fades.

What I want to offer now is a set of directions that will fine-tune your shot-making skills and help with your consistency. Precise aiming results mainly from stance and alignment. Most players have natural, proper alignment, which is defined, for the right-handed player, as having the right foot, hand, wrist, elbow, shoulder, eyes and cue all centered on one line. If you are unsure about your alignment ask someone to look at your stance and tell you if everything listed above falls onto the line. If not take the time now to adjust your stance; as in other games the ball goes where your body directs it.

When you know that your alignment is good it is very simple to place that alignment onto the line of the shot. Set up a straight-in shot and look at the object ball while standing erect behind the cue ball. Make it a habit to begin aiming every shot from this upright position behind the cue ball. Hold your cue over the top of the cue ball so that it makes a line that goes through the centers of the two balls to the pocket. Now place the front of your right foot under your cue and make your stance while keeping your eyes on the object ball as you bend down. Looking at the object ball while making your stance is critical to precise alignment because it places your body on the one line that connects the two balls correctly. If it were a thin cut shot you would make your stance while looking at the edge of the object ball. When we form the stance with our eyes on the cue ball we focus on only one point of a line and invite the possibility of

aligning the stance imprecisely. After you place your bridge hand down you may have to adjust the distance of your feet from the table until your stance feels comfortable and balanced. Doing so will not change your alignment.

Once you feel comfortable with your stance the second critical element is how you look at the object ball just before you shoot it and how it looks to you. All beginners look at the cue ball when they shoot because it is the ball they are hitting. Most players learn that they must look at the object ball last after realizing that they will not miss the cue ball and therefore need to focus on the target. Many however do not learn to make an effective transition with their eyes from cue ball to object ball. Every player has a routine of practice strokes while looking at the cue ball to make certain he will hit it where he wants. After you complete this step practice moving your eyes very deliberately to the object ball and stopping them on it. With your eyes locked on your target now stop moving your cue. Whether you take this pause at the front or back of your stroke is not important, but it is critical that you stop completely with your eyes on the object ball. Now take one stroke and shoot.

That moment with your stroke paused and your eyes locked on the object ball is the moment of concentration when your creative mind can take over and pocket the ball. This is when you will know if you are ready to shoot. If you are looking at the ball and you know that you will make the shot shoot it. If anything other than the image of that ball as one certain to go into the pocket creeps into your mind, be it a doubt for pocketing it, a concern for position, a distraction from the room, or any thought, you are not ready to shoot and must stand up to begin again.

The final element of consistency is the discipline to apply the same set-up and aiming techniques to every shot instead of reserving the effort only for long or difficult shots. Attempting to regard shots according to their difficulty will upset your tempo and reinforce their distinction as difficult. When you regard every shot in the same manner and approach it from the same routine all shots will eventually merge into occurring for you simply as pool shots. Spend a moment to imagine the straight-pool champion shooting mostly easy shots for an hour or longer without a miss and how he must regard each shot to retain his focus and concentration.

