Shoot the Ball into the Pocket

Last week, the lovely Teresa Heinz Kerry lost her cool momentarily and told a reporter to "shove it." It's too bad that someone so refined and dignified has to talk to political reporters at all, let alone worry about saying something that she may have trouble living down. But it happens. A couple months ago, while out playing social pool with some friends, a shot came up that prompted me to coach my partner with the words, "On a shot like this, just make sure to shoot the ball into the pocket." Since then, some of my friends continue to adduce those now-famous words as perhaps the most ridiculous remark they've ever heard. So I must work to live it down.

The great majority of pool shots occur to us in one specific way and, as we play, we become "wired" to handle the most common challenge—shooting an object ball into a pocket by hitting a precise spot on it. But, there are a few common shots that do not come up enough for us to learn in play alone and must be practiced. One example is a shot where the object ball lies close enough to the pocket to give us some latitude regarding the point on the ball to hit. With some practice we learn how to use the whole pocket, and how to choose the part of it we need to achieve the position we want for the next shot. On the flipside are shots where, because of an obstructing ball, we do not have the entire pocket at our disposal. Success with those shots may require a shift in thinking.
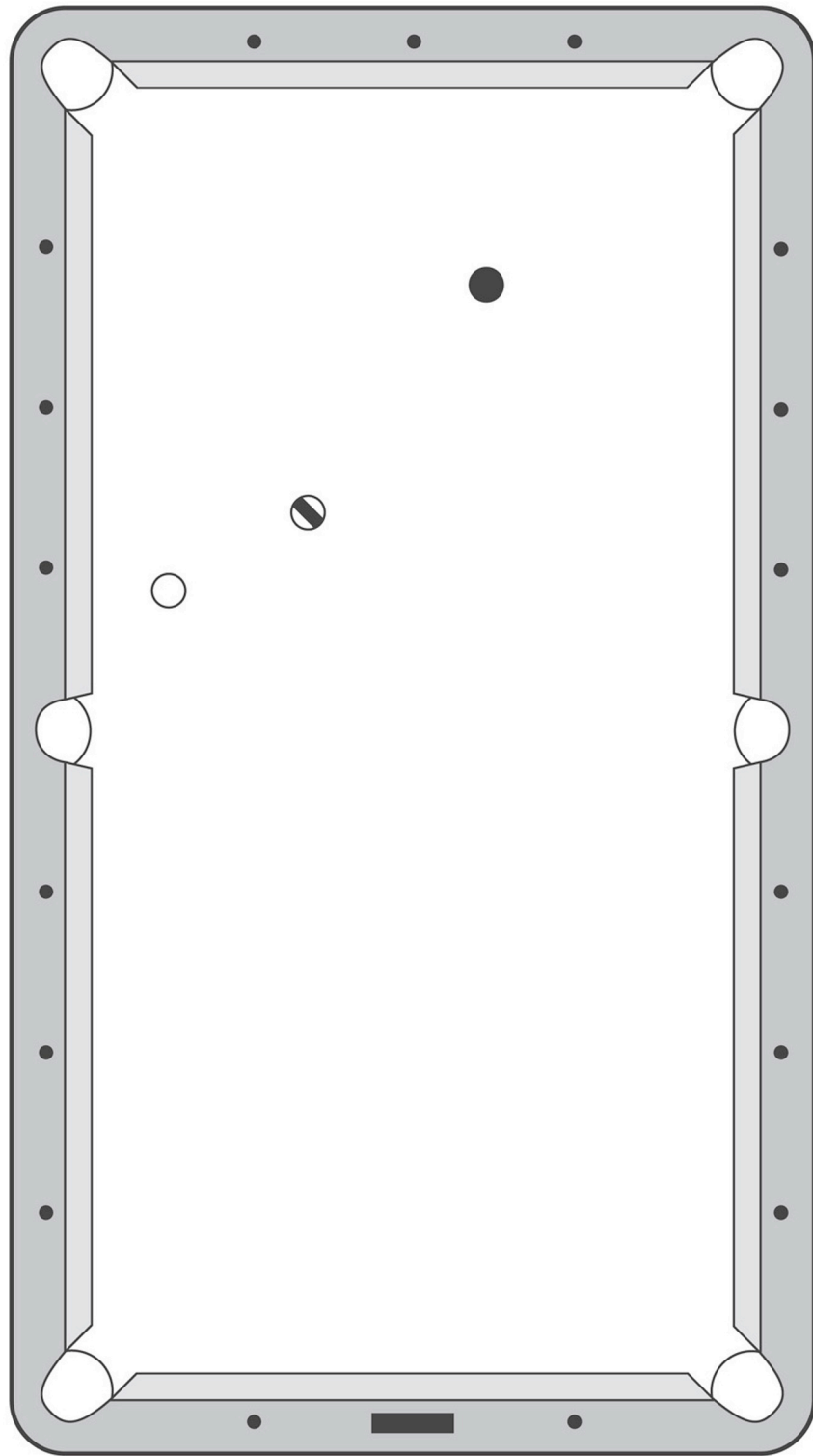
In the diagram we have a shot where we need to shoot the striped ball past the solid ball and into the corner pocket. With the solid ball blocking the left half of the pocket, it becomes immediately obvious that this shot will require a very accurate hit. In reality though, every shot requires an accurate hit, so that's not the real problem here. The problem lies in the way we regard the solid ball.

One way to miss the shot is to shoot the striped ball into the solid ball. That happens when we give the obstruction too much value in our thinking about the shot. In golf, when we need to hit a ball over water to the dry land on the other side, any thought for the water during the swing almost guarantees landing in the drink. The same power of suggestion applies to this shot. If we think about the obstruction during the shot-making process, we are almost certain to hit it every time.

Most players learn to overcome that type of miss. We have more experiences hitting the obstructing ball earlier in our careers than later. From there we graduate to the more common way to miss these shots by remembering to shoot the ball past the obstruction. Perhaps we think, "I will not hit that solid ball," as we're shooting. It's a small ball and easy enough to avoid, but unfortunately, that only leads to missing the pocket on the right side.

TOM ROSS POOL

Set up the shot in the diagram with the solid ball first blocking a fraction of the pocket's left side. Before shooting each time, get down and look at the striped ball's clear path to the pocket. Then, place your focus on the relationship between the striped ball and the pocket with no regard for the solid ball. Learn to treat this shot as a pool shot, where, once you determine that the striped ball has a clear path, the solid ball has no bearing on the shot's outcome. Then you can move the solid ball inward by very small increments and continue to play the shot. When it looks as though there is not enough room for the striped ball to pass, test the shot by shooting the striped ball in with your stick to confirm that it has enough space go into the right half of the pocket. When you find the shot's apparent limit, shoot it repeatedly with the cue ball to embed the direct relationship between the striped ball and the pocket into your thinking.

At some point, every accomplished player performs this test and learns that the pocket is really bigger than he might have previously thought. It's one of the common epiphanies on the path to great pool. With a little practice we can learn to take the obstruction out of our thinking and just shoot the ball into the pocket. That still doesn't sound like weird advice to me.