

Combinations and Position

Whenever we find ourselves shooting at something difficult or out of the ordinary, like a bank or combination shot, we commonly apply so much focus to making the shot that we often leave ourselves with no position to continue the run, even in situations where position is simple. Combinations can be extra tricky with the introduction of another object ball to control.

In the diagram, shot A offers a pretty simple combination with the two striped balls. Because even the simplest looking combos can sometimes fool us, we must always examine them carefully, both to pocket the intended ball and to play position. In shot A we see that pocketing the ball is very easy, which should allow us to focus on position without threatening the shot. With the intended ball lying so close to the pocket's jaws we can safely make the shot within a wide margin for error. But often, such latitude can be the precise source of potential difficulty for position play with a shot like this. Because we can hit the second ball with the first one in such a variety of places and still make the shot, we can easily fail to look beyond pocketing the ball and end the run there.

There are in fact so many ways to pocket the ball without leaving another shot that we cannot discuss all of them. Primarily, we run into problems when we cut the second ball with the first one, and thus send the first ball glancing off and rolling to a spot where we may not have another shot. Imagine looking at the shot and, without thinking, playing a stop shot. That's what I usually do with the cue ball when I'm shooting just to pocket a ball. Doing so here would make the first ball cut the second ball, roll off the left side of it to the top rail and then rebound from there toward the left side rail. To make matters worse, with the cue ball left near the corner pocket after the stop shot, an easy next shot might be highly unlikely. So, in order to guarantee another shot, it would be far more effective to leave the first striped ball in front of the pocket, as if shooting a stop shot with the object ball. The good news is that, in situations like shot A, holding that first striped ball in front of the pocket is relatively simple. All that's required is the same type of straight-on hit that we execute when we stop the cue ball after hitting an object ball.

Any time we see two balls, there is always exactly one line that passes through the centers of both, known as the line of centers and shown with the dotted line. And in cases like this where the two balls are close to each other, we can stop the first one simply by shooting it along that line. To keep the cue ball close by, on a tighter track to and from the top rail, I would hit it high with no english and hard enough to come back to the X, in case I missed the line of centers and sent the first stripe to the side rail or top rail.

This same technique often comes in handy for safeties, mostly in 9 Ball, as shown in shot B. Because a full hit on the second object ball leaves the first ball at the point of impact, we would cut the solid along the dotted line of centers to kill it after hitting the stripe and leave it in the middle of the top rail. With good speed it's not difficult to send the cue ball two rails to point Y on the bottom rail for the most difficult possible leave. More important however is a precise hit on the solid ball to keep it centered on the top rail, leaving no good shot with the cue ball just about anywhere down table.

Except in the relatively rare case of the mixed combination to lead off an open rack of 8 Ball, we almost invariably want the first ball in a combination for the next shot. And learning to control that first ball for another easy shot is an important skill for success in every major game—8 Ball, 9 Ball, Straight Pool and One Pocket.

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