

Rail Shots Part 3—Stroke

Over the last two months we have worked with a common but very important pool shot in a progression toward mastering control over it. This month we shall continue our work by adding another variable to the mix, adjustment to stroke, and another tool for controlling the cue ball with this critical shot.

The last session ended with the concept of transcending thought to play in the realm of feel. Although a pool game exists as a series of complex thoughts and decisions, the execution of shots occurs most effectively separate from thinking. Many times, when great players are asked how to do something with the cue ball, I have heard them say, “I don’t know really, I just do it.” You may find yourself saying the same thing after learning to identify the result you want and trust your feel to achieve it. Let’s proceed with the exercise in the realm of experiencing the shots to allow the outcomes into memory as the way they feel. From that standpoint, you will not be doing things right or wrong but absorbing the feel of any result that you achieve apart from its agreement with your intention.

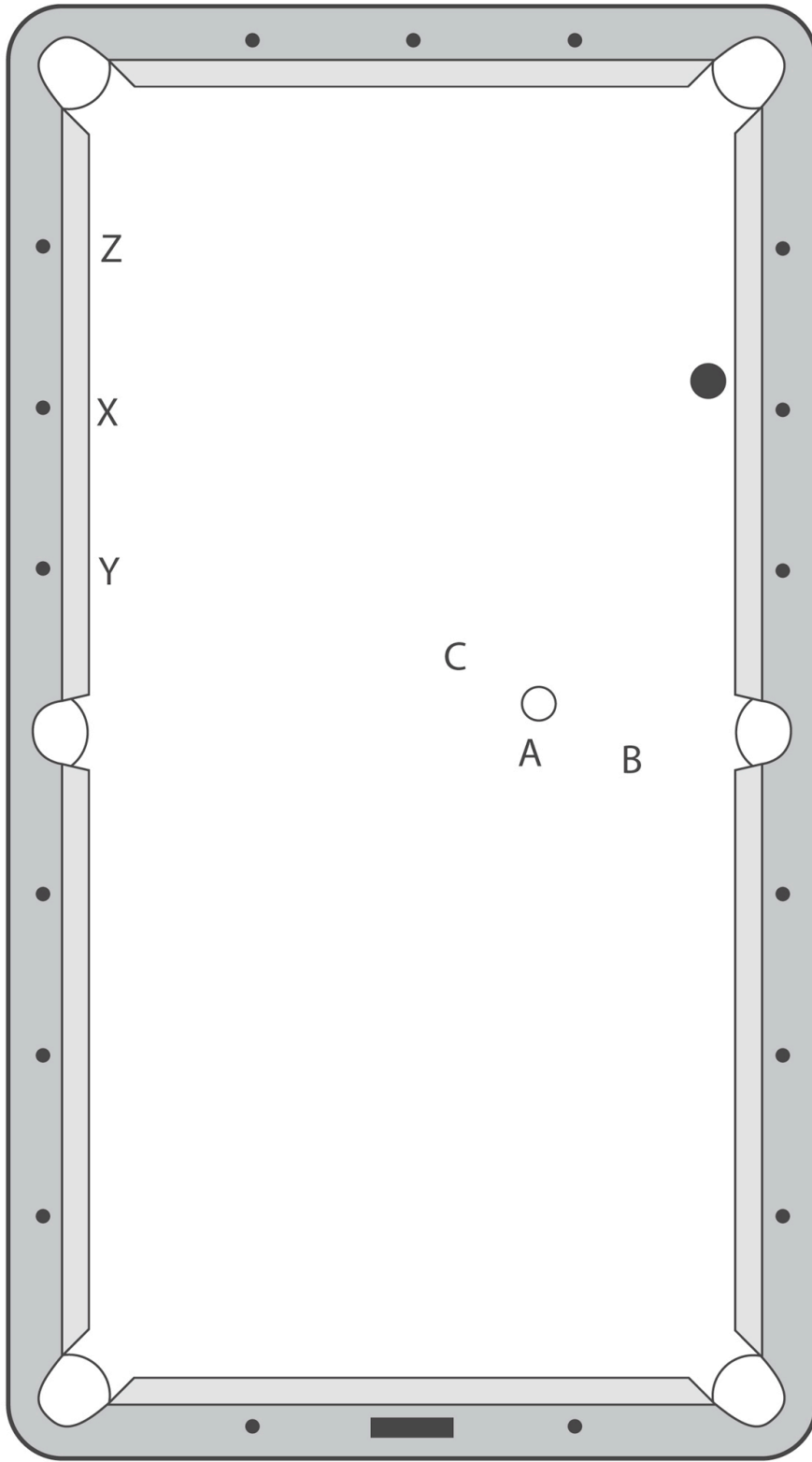
Set up the balls as in the diagram with the object ball about an inch away from the rail and the cue ball at point A to start. As you began last month, play the shot to pocket the ball and move the cue ball on the perpendicular track to point X, your benchmark or reference track. When you are hitting that track with consistency you can begin moving away from it in the context of adjustments from the reference.

Let’s begin adjusting the stroke and observing the results. While continuing to hit the cue ball in the same spot as the one you chose for the perpendicular track, which is probably close to center, try a follow stroke. Remember the follow stroke is a smooth and gradually accelerating stroke with a level cue; there is no burst of acceleration or shifting of gears as with the punch and draw strokes. With once-across-the-table speed, note where the cue ball is hitting the opposite rail and how that spot on the rail feels in your shooting hand. While maintaining the same spot on the cue ball, adjust your stroke to hit point Z. If the cue ball is going past point Z add a little punch to your stroke to make the cue ball follow a tighter track. If the cue ball is hitting the rail between points X and Z make your stroke lazier until you can reach point Z and then lazier still to move beyond it.

Now, while maintaining your follow stroke, move your tip lower until you find the below-center spot on the cue ball that will return it to the perpendicular track with a follow stroke. You should be feeling how profoundly your stroke affects the path of the cue ball. Take the time before each shot to try to remember with your hand exactly how you will hit your target. Remember also how the actual result feels in your hand. While hitting the same spot on the cue ball, add the amount of punch needed to hit point Y. Continue with that same spot on the cue ball and the same speed adding more punch or snap to your stroke with successive shots. Note the outcomes.

You can continue exploring the shot after moving the cue ball to points B and C. Continue also in the framework of changing one variable, your speed, your spot on the cue ball or your stroke, while maintaining the others in order to isolate and observe each separate aspect of cue-ball control. As you shoot the shot from various cue-ball positions, observe how the angle of the shot affects your control over the cue ball. You will find that from point B, a straighter shot, small changes in your stroke will have a more pronounced effect on the cue-ball track than they have from point C, a thinner cut.

The relationship between where you hit the cue ball and how you hit it is paramount to mastering position play. If the language surrounding this discussion seems vague or ambiguous, that's because there is no precise way to quantify a description of exactly what makes up a pool shot. Every player's relationship with the cue ball is unique and grows from comparisons of intention to result, either consciously or unconsciously. We work to arrive at the place where we can say, "I don't know how I do it. I just do it."



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