

Offensive Safety

Increasingly over the past ten or fifteen years, pool players have adopted a more aggressive style of play. In the past, conventional wisdom dictated that if you do not have a good shot, play defensively even if it merely leaves a long, tough shot for your opponent. Since 9 ball replaced straight pool as the standard game that wisdom is giving way to a stubborn reluctance to allow one's opponent back to the table with any shot. We all have too many bad memories now of losing to a great bank, jump or kick shot, tactics that were rarely employed in the straight-pool era.

Of course a well-executed safety is a devastating weapon since the reward for leaving your opponent helpless is often ball in hand. However we face many tough situations throughout a match or series of matches where playing a good safety is at least as difficult as the bank, thin-cut or combination shot in front of us. As with every tactical question the solution will rarely be the straightforward product of a simple rule but will require weighing options and applying judgment. And the answer in a tough situation is never just to come out blasting. We know those players and it is their scarcity that forces most of us to work regular jobs.

Because 9 ball is a rotation game we find ourselves facing the choice between safety and a difficult shot more often than we do in straight pool. Sometimes our opponent leaves us this way and sometimes we do it to ourselves. Regardless, the game calls for us to take more chances on difficult shots. We old guys are conditioned, from our straight-pool experience, not to take chances since a competent player can run 50 balls while a great player is liable to run out the game from any open shot. In 9 ball, where the odds are against a champion running five or six racks, the stakes are not quite so high. Nobody wants to sit down and watch his opponent shoot but the 9-ball player can feel more confident than the straight-pool player that he will get another chance at the table if he makes a mistake early in the match. Here lies the primary cause of the shift from the cautious play of the past to the more aggressive and flashy play of nowadays.

When faced with a tough shot the first thing you must do is examine the table to evaluate the risk. Sometimes you will find that you can go for an extremely difficult shot with a great chance for a safety or least a tough leave if you miss. These are called two-way shots since a good result is likely whether you make the shot or not. Look at the shot in the diagram, a classic two-way shot. The first thing you will notice here is that there is no shot on the seven. After that you will see the opportunity for a good safety by sending the seven down table and leaving the cue ball behind the 9. An experienced player will see an offensive opportunity here as well. Though it is a low-percentage shot, the set up is perfect to bank the seven off of the short rail into the opposite side pocket. Practice this shot with the proper speed to hold the cue ball behind the 9 and send the seven to the middle of the opposite short rail, point X, if you miss. Your top priority is to keep the cue ball behind the 9 on this shot so the possible, unpredictable roll off of the pocket point of the side still leaves your opponent safe. You would not play a shot like this in a situation where a miss leaves your opponent a good shot or in a situation that does not yield a good shot for you on the next ball if you make the shot.

Usually in a tough spot we are not so fortunate to have a clear, two-way shot like the one in the diagram. Most of the time when there is no good shot the best option is to play a safety. Playing an effective safety however can be difficult when you have to control the speed and direction of the cue ball and object ball very precisely to execute successfully. Sometimes you will see a possible safety but notice that its execution is very difficult, a paper-thin cut or sending the cue ball two or three rails with perfect speed to hide behind a ball. If you do not see a safety that you know you can execute with confidence you should consider playing the shot. My own rule of thumb dictates that if the safety is questionable or appears as difficult as the shot, I play the shot. Some players will pass up an easy bank shot in favor of a difficult safety. Another factor that you must weigh is the position that you will have for the next shot. If you do not see simple, natural position for the next ball you probably need to lean back toward the safety. Being forced to manipulate the cue ball while pocketing a difficult shot may be too much to handle and nothing is worse than making a great shot only to find yourself facing a harder one, or worse still, no shot.

As the game changes and players continue kicking and jumping balls better than ever, the conventional wisdom for safety strategy is changing with it. I believe that players are executing tighter, more powerful safeties nowadays. And, in situations where a truly devastating safety is not an available option, we see more players going for shots that others would have passed up a few years ago in favor of a weaker safety. What used to be cut and dried, “no good shot, leave a bad one for your opponent,” is becoming more complex as other options appear more effective. Examine your own safety play to see if it is winning games for you. Also look for and practice safeties that would stop any player. Finally, pay attention to the pros and compare their responses in bad-shot situations to what you think you might do in the same predicament.

