

Common Pitfalls

Instead of learning a new skill or technique this month let's do some work with a short checklist that will serve to allow the skills we possess already to work for us when we need them. Following are several common pitfalls that occur occasionally to stand between players and success. The operative word surely is "common" since these problems continue to show up for every player at one time or another. It's a sure bet that every great player can find at least one item on the following list and recall making a conscious effort to eliminate that problem. Since all items on the list lead to the same result—an early trip back to the chair—they come in no special order. Some may ring louder bells than others for you so feel free to arrange them according to your priorities.

The Miscue:

Is there anything worse? Miscues result from two basic causes. One is delivering a bad stroke and will be addressed later. Otherwise we miscue when we shoot without enough chalk on the tip. Make chalking part of your routine for every shot and learn to chalk properly by brushing the tip with the chalk rather than spinning the cue into it, which drills a nice hole in the chalk but does little to put chalk on the tip. Make sure that the tip's edge is well chalked since that is the part that makes contact when you shoot near the cue ball's edge. Also, check your tip regularly while playing to see that it is taking chalk. Carry something to roughen your tip, either a piece of coarse sandpaper or one of the many tools designed for that purpose. It's a good idea to check your tip before any draw shot.

Jumping Up Too Soon:

If you only do this occasionally it will happen when you get ahead of yourself and shoot before you are ready; jumping up in this context results from an overwhelming eagerness to get the shot over with. If you have any doubts about the shot when you are in your stance, be it position or pocketing the ball, you need to stand up, figure out what you will do and start over. If jumping up is habitual you will need to work on eliminating it. Set up a straight shot with the cue ball and object ball about a foot apart but at the other end of the table from the intended pocket. Shoot the shot repeatedly with just enough speed to pocket the ball, follow the object ball to the pocket with your eyes and don't move until it goes in. Shoot off a few practice racks making sure to stay down on every shot until all of the balls have stopped rolling. When playing it may work to remind yourself that you will watch the object ball fall into the pocket.

Getting Down Too Soon:

Once you have made your stance you must be ready to shoot. So two issues must be addressed before you can make your stance, position and aiming the shot, in that order. First, while standing and studying the table, decide where you want the cue ball for the next shot and how you will get it there. Apply your thought to identifying a specific, intended position; visualize the cue ball going there and then let go of the whole matter. In order to let go simply trust yourself to execute the shot instead of agonizing over how you will execute it. After you have the position problem solved you can aim

the shot. From behind the cue ball stop and look at the object ball until you feel that you will pocket it, then keep your eyes fixed on the object ball while you make your stance. In this way you will learn to aim the shot with your body rather than trying to aim it with your eyes after you are down. While watching professionals on TV note that when a difficult shot requires more time they spend that extra time standing up and do not get into their stances before the problems are solved and the shot is aimed.

Trying Too Hard:

This phenomenon results from failing complete the steps discussed above and proceeding without trust and confidence. When that occurs the player, in an attempt to put forth a mighty effort, tenses the shooting hand and grabs the cue at impact causing two major problems. One is that the tension will move the cue off line. On a draw shot for example grabbing will pull the butt of the cue up, force the tip down and cause a miscue. If you do manage to deliver a straight stroke after grabbing the cue it will be a lifeless one since grabbing will kill any acceleration. Practice the procedure discussed above to strengthen your self-trust and enhance your confidence. And make certain that before you shoot every shot that you stop completely with your eyes on the object ball before delivering the final stroke. If everything feels right during that pause and you know you will pocket the ball you can take a moment to feel your relaxed shooting hand and remind yourself that you will deliver a smooth, effortless stroke.

Here is a list of problems that occur from time to time for all players regardless of skill level. The common thread running through the list is the real problem of moving too fast, a temptation that arises when we feel nervous. Pool is a complex game but has no clock so it allows for players to make all of the necessary decisions at their own pace. Remember when you are playing in that next big match in front of a crowd of spectators that you are exactly where you hoped your practice would lead you and that you will savor your time in the spotlight rather than rush through it in a mad dash to get it over with. Finally, we all have work to do to get our skills up to the level of our favorite professional players however we can begin immediately to honor our own games by playing with the same care that they display.

