

Follow Through

Lately I've zeroed in on something that we all know about, but astonishingly, too many of us lack. Naturally I see the problem with beginners, but to my amazement, it also shows up in some pretty fine shooters, players who can run balls and maybe win tournaments. I used to joke with an old girlfriend saying, "I don't feel like teaching pool tonight; why don't you go in for me?" To which she unfailingly replied, "I don't know anything about pool." And my stock answer, "Sure you do, it's like every other game. Just tell 'em, 'keep your eye on the ball; it's all in the wrist; and follow through.'"

Follow through. Show me a pool player who's never heard those two words and I'll show you a guy who hasn't changed the battery in his hearing aid since before Doris Day became a virgin. A budding player does not get past day one without hearing those words at least a dozen times. The ignoramuses who jump up to slobber on women while they "help" them know the words. The cuckoos who "paid their way through college playing pool" can recite the mantra. Even the "experts" who say, "If you want the cue ball to stop, hit it in the center," will remind their hapless students to follow through. I know that you know that we all know it but we know a lot of things, don't we? We know the golden rule but that doesn't mean we practice it.

Set up a long, straight shot with a piece of chalk next to the cue ball. With your eyes on the object ball, shoot the shot hard with draw and then, after the object ball hits the pocket, move your eyes to see where your tip is. If it is not at dead rest and, at the very least, six inches past the chalk, you may have to check *your* hearing aid.

If we want to draw the cue ball like Mike Massey, or maybe just the length of the table, we must learn to stroke with strong follow through. To achieve long, straight follow through we must understand a couple of things about the stroke. The famous instructor, Jerry Brieseth, calls the pool stroke a beautiful throw and I can't imagine a better description. When I first heard that a few years ago I recalled my father's agitation during my early training when he saw me pushing the cue. He never told me to throw it but he taught me the concept. The best way to understand a pool stroke as a throw is first to think about one that is not. Most players tend to stroke with a movement that ends the stroke before the tip hits the cue ball by tightening their grips just before the moment of impact and thus decelerating the tip. Despite the natural impulse to tense up when we want power, tightening the grip in that critical moment only stops the flow of energy, keeping most of it in the tense hand when it should be flowing into the cue ball. Many grabbers tense up so much that they pull back and finish with their tips behind the spot where the cue ball was. A powerful stroke, on the other hand, reaches its maximum energy in the moment that the tip is about to hit the cue ball, where the shooter's hand finishes the stroke with a slight release of pressure to allow all of the energy to leave the hand and transfer to the cue ball through an accelerating tip. It's that perfectly-timed, subtle release of tension that produces a beautiful throw.

When learning to release tension it's best to begin without any balls on the table. Get into your stance, take the cue back until the tip is at your bridge and stop it there. With your cue stopped at the farthest point in the back swing, feel for some tension in your shooting hand on the cue. It's not a tight squeeze but it is the point of maximum potential energy and tension, the tension that you will now release. Your hand must be behind your wrist at this point. Now, in one sudden burst of movement, send the cue forward, more with your hand than your arm as you subtly release your grip on the cue. That is the first release of tension to get the cue moving. When your forearm gets to where it's perpendicular with the floor, your tip should be about two inches from the cue ball. Now is when the energy transfers from your arm, through your relaxed wrist and into your relaxed hand, which is passing your arm to finish in front of it. That moment, where your hand finishes the stroke, is the moment of power and the time that your hand lightens up once more, releasing all of the energy to send your tip screaming through the cue ball.

If you think that your timing is good without shooting at balls you can then practice hitting some. Line up all sixteen balls along the head string and begin shooting each one, by itself into a far corner pocket. Shoot them with good speed and feel your hand letting go. If you are holding on you will know it. You will feel your hand gripping the cue when your tip hits the ball and the hit will sound weak. As you learn to release the energy, the hit will sound strong and solid while you will see the balls rolling faster with less effort. After each shot look down at your shooting hand to see if the second knuckle on your index finger is pointing forward and leading your arm and hand. Check your follow through to see how far past the head string your tip has moved. Practice this exercise until your tip is coming to a stop at least one diamond segment beyond the head string. Such long follow through results from a complete release at impact.

Time spent on focused stroke work leads to improved accuracy and control more rapidly than any other practice. Recently I acquired a Stroke Trainer, a device ingeniously designed to teach muscle memory for a long, straight, powerful stroke. It's set up on table 19 at Shakespeare's and is available there for anyone who wants to practice with it. Finally, remember Steve Mizerak's immortal words, "Stroke it; don't poke it." And always remember to say that with a Jersey accent.

