

## Choices

Sometimes it can be a little frightening to think about pool and the precise demands that we continually face to play the game well. When played at its best, the game looks so simple as we watch professionals shooting one easy shot after another. And, that's probably what stops professional pool from breaking through to mainstream television coverage—the fact that average players can tune in to see so-called champions pocketing balls that nobody would miss. But then when we try it, things don't seem to go as smoothly as they should, leaving us to wonder if we'll ever get the hang of this crazy game.

When we watch the best players at work, the element that usually stands out most obviously is their exact cue-ball control. And it's easy to wonder how they can handle that white ball so consistently with such perfect speed and direction. The answer to that question is twofold. One, they're simply great players and, from years of practice and play, they've refined their strokes to manage position play with the sharpest accuracy. The second answer, one that may not be so apparent to an observer, lies in the choices they make, very subtle differences that we may not see, but ones that offer a wider margin for error to help ensure good position for every shot.

In the diagram we have a straight-pool setup with four balls left on the table and that striped ball sitting next to the rack in perfect, break-shot position. This layout illustrates a very standard pattern to the break shot. Most players would identify the solid ball on the left side of the table as the key shot, or the last shot before the break shot, since a stop shot on that ball into the side pocket gives ideal position for the break shot. So, we would shoot the solid ball on the right side of the table into the side pocket, then the striped ball near the right side rail into the corner to land straight-in for the stop shot on the solid ball into the side—a simple three-ball run to the break shot. How would an experienced player then handle this simple layout? There are no real position challenges in this layout, but in order to get that break shot and open the next rack, we must get to a straight-in or nearly-straight-in angle on the key shot. And reaching that goal with ease depends entirely on how we play the first shot in the side pocket. Let's examine three choices for position on the second shot, the striped ball into the corner.

The obvious choice is to play a soft stop shot on that first ball and allow the cue ball to drift over to position A for an easy straight-in shot on the striped ball into the corner. A slightly firmer hit would move the cue ball to position B, and again an easy shot afterwards. Or we can stun the cue ball a little further to position C, which leaves a cut shot on the striped ball. Which is best?

A, probably the popular choice, offers an easy shot on the striped ball but one that requires drawing the cue ball straight back to the X for the necessary position on the key shot, perhaps not so easy as it sounds, especially under pressure. Under drawing the cue ball would leave an angle on the key shot that moves the cue ball away from the break shot thus making it longer and more difficult. Over drawing the cue ball past the X, even slightly, would be disastrous since the angle on the key shot from there would move the cue ball toward the break shot and likely make position for it extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Position B for the striped ball is definitely the worst of the three because of the slight cut angle it offers on the striped ball, an angle that's just enough to move the cue ball toward the cushion, maybe freezing it there, but would require a very firm hit to bounce the cue ball away from the cushion, all while trying to draw the cue ball to a spot near the X.

The savvy player would look at this layout and opt to stun the cue ball over to C. From C, all that's required is a stop shot to move the cue ball on the solid line off the cushion and toward the key shot. Position C gives the shooter a two-foot margin of error for speed with a cue ball that's tracking right on the line for the desired position angle. Also, the cue ball does not have to fall exactly at C to achieve that result. A cue ball that falls short of C by three or four inches or rolls past that mark by the same margin will still allow for easy position on the key shot with nothing but a small speed adjustment, depending on where it lies.

This one example gives us a nice look at the kind of thinking that makes the best players look so great. When we watch professionals play and admire their perfect position play, we can do so now with an eye for the choices they make to achieve such impressive results. A good question to ask is what kind of shot would that player have if he or she had hit the previous one a little harder or softer? Very often the answer will be "a good one" because of a smarter choice.

