A Very Tough Safety

One of my favorite topics is analyzing the choice between simple and complex options when trying to play the best pool shot. And since the rule of thumb in that area states that simple is always best, I often like to present situations where the choice that appears more complex turns out as the more effective option and easier to execute. This month however we'll examine a shot where many players might opt for the more complicated selection, adhering to another rule of thumb for safeties, thus overlooking the power found in the simplest choice.

Whenever we face a shot with no shot we must immediately begin to consider a safety. And from our experience with safeties, including memories of some of the good ones played against us, we know that the best move almost invariably is to put some distance between the cue ball and object ball, ideally leaving one or both of them in a tough spot. The main reason that we employ that tactic is that, on those occasions when we fail to hide the object ball, the extra distance almost guarantees that any shot we do leave will be a tough one. It makes sense and works to win a lot of games.
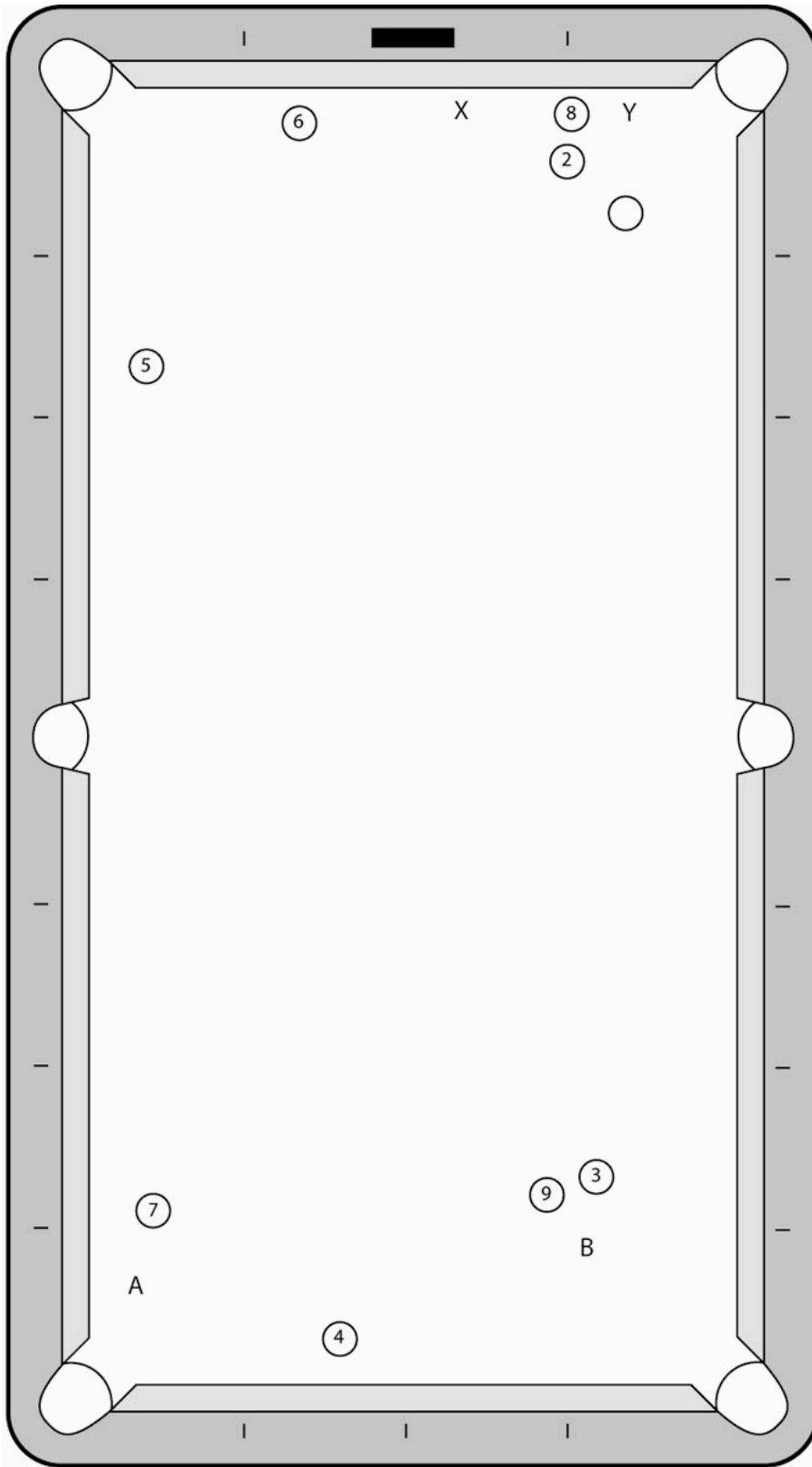
Following that methodology with the shot in the diagram, where the 6 blocks the corner pocket for the 2, we begin looking for a good safety play. One good shot that we might remember from similar situations is cutting the 2 into the 6, which should stop it near the middle of the short rail. At the same time some right-hand english with good speed can spin the cue out of the corner to go four rails and land at point A, behind the 7 ball. Another option is the same thin cut toward the 6 without english to stay on the right side of the table going three rails and rolling up to point B, behind the 3-9. Both shots are excellent plays and probable game winners. And, if the 8 ball weren't there, a sharp defensive player would likely choose one of them. If the 6 ball stops the 2 ball near the middle of the rail and the cue ball comes all the way down table, the outcome is a difficult leave, regardless of whether the cue ball hides.

With the 8 ball where it is however, the best shot happens to be the simplest. Our only reluctance to see it when faced with a situation like this comes from the instant compulsion we might feel to separate the cue ball and 2 ball with as much distance as possible. If we can set aside our memories of what works best in most situations, we will see that the most powerful possible safety here is also very simple. The best shot is to cut the 2 slightly left to point X while allowing the cue ball to drift naturally over to point Y.

In this case the very fact that the two balls are so close to each other is precisely what makes the safety so wicked. With the cue ball at Y and the 2 ball at X it's hard to find a possible way to hit the 2 without playing some kind of unpredictable massé shot. n the current situation the two best options for answering this type of safety are blocked. The 3 and 9 balls block the simple up-and-down, one-rail kick, while the 7 ball nicely blocks any two-rail attempt out of the bottom-left corner. But even on a wide-open table,

this safety is always a difficult hit and one that almost always serves up a shot, even on those occasions when the incoming shooter does hit the object ball.

As with any new shot you should spend some time practicing this safety in various set ups. Although visualizing the result is very simple, sometimes certain set ups present very delicate speed challenges. Bad speed when the two balls are left so close to each other will transform a brutal safety into a heartbreaking sell out. It's worth noting that the same shot can be very effective on a side rail too. Going across the table to hit the object ball may be a lot easier than going up and down, but the shot still incorporates the difficulty of kicking safe back. Learn to identify and execute this simple yet devastating safety shot.