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## The Cue Ball and Shot Making

Although most avid shooters never make the transition, the greatest step in a pool player's career occurs in the moment when that person learns to aim the shot and then get down. Prior to then, we all apply the technique that we used from the beginning, namely get down and then aim the shot, a logical approach we adopt after our first few looks at the table and cue ball. Since everyone initially approaches a pool table with a primary concern for hitting the cue ball with the stick, just as one would focus on hitting a baseball with a bat, it makes sense to form a relationship with the cue ball, and focus on it while making the stance. Unfortunately however, when we make the stance looking at the cue ball, we don't begin aiming until after we're down and will thus miss too many shots.

Last month we worked with forming a stronger connection to the object ball while learning to break any attachment to the cue ball in order to enter the world of more precise shot making. In repeating the process of pocketing balls without even a glance at the cue ball, we can prove that we do not have to consider the cue ball in shot making. A good way to reinforce that reality and to further our detachment from the cue ball is to follow the shooting instructions from last month with an additional step. After connecting to the object ball while standing erect and then forming the stance with eyes locked on it—remember not so much as a glance at the cue ball—we can cement our understanding of the non-thinking process for shot making by trying something a little crazy. If the shot looks good after landing in the stance with eyes locked on the object ball, close your eyes and pocket the ball. Keep them closed and listen for the sound of the object ball falling into the pocket. Practicing shots with eyes closed is a powerful way to eliminate thinking from the shot while learning to relate directly to the shot physically.

If the game of pool were nothing more than making shots, the story might end there with some good advice for making more of them. But we know that there's so much more to pool than pocketing balls. In fact for most of us, it's precisely that complexity which first drew us into our beautiful game and continues as the source of our passion. So, even though ignoring the cue ball will lead to better shot making, it's our skill with the cue ball that we draw from to answer pool's higher callings. And in order to apply those skills we must devote some attention to the cue ball.

We all know that the best players display their expertise most impressively with dazzling position play resulting from sharp attention to the cue ball. But what often stops most intermediate players is not knowing where and when to place that attention. Let's divide the game into its two basic elements, shot making, which proceeds from the

creative mind, and position play, which takes shape in the analytical mind. Pool continually challenges both types of thinking and even the very best players succumb to occasional breakdowns in their ability to manage both sides of the brain.

The common approach to handling both types of thinking is to try and apply them simultaneously, a point often proven when players talk about position play and shot making and their problems with putting the two together. But those who wait for the day when the two will go together have a long time to wait because it will never happen. The trick instead is to learn how separate them and when to address each one in the shooting routine.

Because position play requires thinking, we must handle that part of the shot first. We do that by looking at the current shot and then, after evaluating what's possible with it, making a choice for position on the next shot. A very effective step here is to make an exact choice for position, a dot on the table. After making that choice and determining how to execute it—stroke, speed and spot on the cue ball—we move into the pre-shot routine, which begins in that moment of stillness where we connect with the object ball. From there we make the stance with eyes locked on the object ball until landing in a fully formed stance and confirming that initial connection. “Will I pocket this ball?”

When the answer is yes, the stance is aligned for making the shot. Now it's time for your first look at the cue ball. With eyes on the cue ball, take a few practice strokes to confirm that the tip will hit the spot you've chosen for your desired position. After that, stop stroking with the tip paused at the cue ball and, in another moment of stillness, move the eyes back to the object ball. This moment of stillness, or pause, is the critical moment in pool. With eyes locked again on the object ball and the cue stick paused, you will know if you are ready to shoot. When it's all systems go, you will see an object ball that you know you will pocket with no thinking at all surrounding it. If you're thinking about anything at this point—position for next shot perhaps—you must stand up, address that thought and then begin the routine again from the start. If you see the object ball and you know, without thinking, that everything is in order, take the cue back, pause again in back and then shoot. That second pause helps ensure that the cue is taken back far enough while setting up a more powerful stroke since all motion from then is forward. The rhythm I prefer is a long pause at the cue ball while my eyes return to the object ball and then a short pause in back before pulling the trigger.

Over the past few years we've been hearing more and more about the importance of the pre-shot routine. One big reason has been the dominance of Allison Fisher and Karen Corr, two products of disciplined training in fundamentals and our new paradigms for consistency. Yet we do not see much in print on how to build this important routine. Here are the elements ordered and separated—object ball, stance, cue ball, object ball, shoot. And those are the critical steps around which we are free to form a consistent and uniquely personal routine.