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Proper Alignment

In any sport at any level fundamentals always receive constant attention and coaching. Major leaguers still run through the same drills they worked in little league while a boxer training for a title fight spends as much time as ever skipping rope and working the speed bag among other ingrained practice rituals. My favorite devotee is Tiger Woods, who never stops working to perfect his swing—a strong vote for fundamentals from the man whom many regard as the best golfer ever. While other athletes and their coaches stay focused on fundamentals, a decent pool player may spend a lifetime without giving them much consideration.

Perhaps we tend to ignore fundamentals because of pool's basic makeup and the ease with which almost anyone can walk up to a pool table and begin striking the cue ball with some measure of competence. And because pool is so rich in complex analysis and tactics, we magazine writers usually address the deeper issues in our columns and tend to ignore the basics. So when Ozone asked me to write a series of columns beginning with a thorough discussion of fundamentals, I jumped at the chance to offer in print the same complete breakdown that my pupils receive in person.

One big reason that many of us regard fundamentals casually comes from the progression of a standard pool education. When the game calls us, our eyes are opened for the first time to so many beautiful possibilities that previously lived beyond our understanding when all we grasped was pocketing balls. Upon first glimpsing those wonders, such as learning that we have say in the matter of where the cue ball goes, we naturally begin to regard pocketing balls as secondary in our emergent wisdom since everybody understands that. When a player finally does realize, usually after several years of learning, that the most important thing in pool is making the shot in front of him, he often has deeply set habits that are difficult to break when it's time to shift the education back to the basics. Players who begin with sound fundamentals continue learning throughout their careers and never have to relearn any principles when their eyes are finally opened to the importance of shot making.

Shot making proceeds from a proper setup so let's begin with the elements of an effective stance. Because pool players come in all shapes and sizes it's impossible to dictate one, standard stance. However, if we look at professionals; tall/short, fat/slender, men/women, we see remarkable similarity among their stances and an amazingly consistent application of a pool stance's critical elements.

The first and most important element of a good stance is alignment. The ball goes where your body aims it. In the diagram we see a pair of feet for a right-handed shooter at the table with a cue laid over them, the foundation of good alignment. While standing tall with your feet together and your belly button facing the object ball, lay your stick on the line of the shot and look straight down over the butt of your cue. Then move your right foot until the base of your second toe lies directly under the cue. Any person, regardless

of shape, should be able to make this position. The degree to which that rear foot turns out is not critical and will depend largely on body shape. We show it here with roughly 45 degrees of turnout. The next step is to move forward with the left foot. Here is where most players move their alignment off the shot. It's critical, when stepping forward with the left foot, to move it slightly away from the cue, so it lands shoulder width away from the cue, under the left armpit, and pointing down a line parallel to the cue. That keeps the body on the line of the shot. The common tendency to move the left foot toward the cue and point it to the right shifts the alignment to the right and sets up a stance with the body alongside the shot instead of behind it where it belongs.

With only those two elements in mind, practice making the stance until it lands as drawn without looking down or thinking about what you're doing. Once that is occurring the remaining elements of perfect alignment should fall into place. With the cue and feet in place as drawn, the right hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder should fall onto the same line as the cue. Regarding the head and eyes, some instructors insist that the chin should fall directly over the cue while others say that the dominant eye should. I don't think it matters which but it's critical that the head lands exactly the same every time with the line that connects both eyes parallel to the table. It's nearly impossible to sight properly with a tilted head. For good balance the heel of the right foot must be slightly behind the rear end. Then straightening the right knee and bending the left knee will shift the weight subtly in the direction of the shot.

Practice making your stance in a mirror and looking at yourself from both the front and side views. Check each element of alignment according to the way it's described. From my personal experience with over 4,500 students, I believe that every person, regardless of shape, can easily incorporate proper alignment into the stance. The final picture varies among different people but the specific facets of alignment will be present. If following these guidelines requires a radical change and feels weird, give it a chance. Many changes feel funny, not because they're wrong, but simply because they're new. After learning and applying good alignment to the stance, deadly shot making is only a matter of placing the body's alignment onto the line of the shot. Remember, it doesn't matter how much you know, if you miss the shot in front of you it's your turn to sit down.



