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Running Balls

Usually, when discussing position play, I talk about various techniques for sending the cue ball where it needs to go. What often gets overlooked in those discussions however is the matter of determining the best place to leave the cue ball to make the next shot and continue the run. Moving the cue ball into the best position can pose a definite challenge when the shooter does not know where that best position is. So, let's explore the matter to see if we can uncover the vision needed to look out into the rack and take control of it.

The greatest factor in determining where the cue ball goes after pocketing the object ball is the angle of the shot. Even simpler, the direction that the cue ball moves from the object ball is dictated by the side of the shot on which the cue ball rests. Let's begin with an exercise for leaving the cue ball on the right (correct) side of the next ball to complete a run.

In the diagram we see the 7 and 8 and will begin with the 9 at position A for an easy run out. The 7 ball is straight in with easy, stop-shot position for a straight-in shot on the 8. And right there is where many players get into trouble. A closer look shows that although the stop shot yields an easy, straight-in shot on the 8, that is not the answer here. The stop shot may serve up an easy shot on the 8 ball, but position for the 9 from there is difficult and, because of the possible side-pocket scratch shown with the dotted line, dangerous. If you walk over to the 7 and look at the 8 from there you will see that the best choice is to play a slow roller to move the cue ball a few inches forward to the left side of the 8's straight-in line. From position X you will then cut the 8 ball to your left and send the cue ball naturally to the right for a rebound from the right side rail and toward the 9. Play the 8 ball as a follow shot, perhaps with a little right-hand english, to roll the cue ball one rail through the center of the table and off of the opposite long rail for good, natural position on the 9.

Now look at the same layout with the 9 ball in position B. Straight-in shape for the 8 again leaves the same, difficult draw shot to the 9 with the same threat of scratching. The best way to play the 7 ball now is to draw back about six inches to position Y on the right side of the 8. From there a punch stroke with a touch of left-hand english puts the cue ball onto a natural path of two rails through the center of the table to the long rail opposite the 9. Practice the shot to get the speed and to nail down your feel for going over the table's center dot to eliminate the scratch in the lower, right corner.

Seeing the sequence to complete the rack in the exercise couldn't be much less demanding. Simply play position for a shot on the 8 that yields the most natural roll to an easy shot on the 9. If you can see the connection from the 7 to the 9 in this exercise and can execute the three-ball run out take a moment to consider how your ability to connect three balls can extend to running a full rack. How does a great player look out from the 1 to the 9 and the end of the game?

After examining the rack and deciding to go for the run out, experienced players connect a series of three-ball runs executed in the same fashion as the exercise. They look at the 1 in terms of the 3 to determine the best position for the 2 and continue through the rack in that fashion until it is finished. They consider the 4 when shooting the 2, the 5 from the 3, and so on until arriving at the 7 and the last three-ball run of the rack.

9 ball stands apart from other popular pool games in that it lacks shot selection with no decisions about when to shoot each ball; the balls' numbers dictate the shot sequence. 8 ball and straight pool differ in that the best players are the ones who make the best decisions for selecting the order of shots to run out the rack. In 8 ball the accomplished player will not take the first shot before assembling a complete plan that works for the eight shots required to run the rack. A great

straight-pool player can choose the break shot and visualize a sequence as long as 13 balls to get to that break shot. While those games demand greater decision-making and visualization skills, the execution of the longer sequences is managed in the same way you completed the exercise. Your position for the next shot must connect you to the shot that follows it. So, although the planning process for running balls can be more complex in other games, the plan's execution is still managed with a rolling series of three-ball runs.

To work more with this concept, throw the 7,8 and 9 out onto the table, take ball in hand on the right (correct) side of the 7 and run out from there. Your access to the run out is in your examination of the 8 before playing the 7 and deciding on which side of the 8 to leave the cue ball for the natural path to the 9. When you are completing these run outs repeatedly you can add the 6 ball, then the 5, the 4 and so on until you are running racks in the context of the three-ball run. In doing so you will begin to visualize long sequences broken up into three-ball runs while you play one shot at a time. Because we can't execute what we fail to imagine, the vision that's developed in this practice is the run out's critical element.



