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## Stroke Training

The one aspect of every pool player's game that comes up most often in conversation is stroke. Golfers talk about the purity of the swing and pool players the elegance of the stroke. The word itself is a catchall to describe the condition of one's game with expressions such as "dead stroke" or "out of stroke." Many committed players spend hours every day playing games or working through practice drills to refine their skills and tend to improve their strokes doing so. However, it's rare that any of us will set the game aside for a few minutes to focus on the stroke alone.

One common experience is the difference between the way we can move the cue in friendly games and the way that the same movement feels under the pressure of competition. The level of importance that we assign to a match creates concerns for us, the more important the match, the greater the concerns. Those concerns move into our hands in the form of tension. Though we may never be immune to what is known as pressure, we can take greater control of the pool stroke so that we feel more confident and comfortable with it in pressure situations.

The most fundamental cause for concern is the balls themselves. Most players have the ability to stroke a pool cue very smoothly but will tense up a little when confronted with any shot. A player shooting alone can feel pressure from a desire to complete a practice drill. So to isolate the pool stroke completely from playing, let's work on it away from a pool table. While you're at home take out your cue to spend ten minutes with your pool stroke on the dining-room table. If that bowl of oranges begins to resemble a rack of five balls, you may want to move it. Now, with your eyes focused just past your bridge hand and a light grip on the cue, begin stroking back and forth at a constant speed with no stops in front or back while making sure to keep your cue level. First, you must focus on making your stroke flow, so delete any jerks or up and down action from the movement. Remember that you are stroking right now and not shooting.

Spend some time with yourself and your smooth, straight, powerful pool stroke. After a short while this exercise can become hypnotic as your pool stroke begins to take on a life of its own and move without any real effort on your part. That's when your beautiful stroke will begin to find its way into your unconscious mind or what many call muscle memory. When it begins to flow effortlessly you can employ some visualization to relate it to your game. Imagine a cue ball in front of you with your smooth, flowing stroke moving straight through it. Keep stroking as you do this; do not shoot. Without allowing your thinking to change the flow of the motion, visualize yourself making long shots, cut shots, draw shots, break shots, game winners or any shots you wish. Imagine your most dreaded opponent helpless in the presence of such a gorgeous stroke—much better than imagining your most gorgeous opponent offering to help you with your dreadful stroke. Imagine yourself (remember not to disrupt the flow—same speed forward, same speed back) stroking with élan in the competitive environment. Or don't imagine anything; simply get comfortable and relax with your flowing stroke as it sets

itself in a deep and definite groove. Spend ten minutes a day with this exercise and watch for an elevation in your confidence level to follow. If nothing else, it will relax you and it's free. Call it meditation for the pool player.

On the pool table one way to improve your stroke is to spend some of your practice time shooting with an open bridge. Shoot off three or four racks each day with an open bridge while paying attention to your stroke on the follow through. Does it remain straight and level? For a good practice shot set up a long, straight shot and shoot it repeatedly just below center with firm speed for perfect stop shots. Focus on your long, straight follow through. To go a step further, try the shot that Bert Kinnister recommends for stroke mastery. Place the cue ball next to the diamond halfway between the side and corner pocket with the object ball next to center diamond down the rail past the side pocket. Place the balls about an inch from the rail and make sure that the shot is straight in. Shoot the shot very firmly to pocket the object ball and roll the cue ball forward a ball's width onto the exact spot that the object ball occupied. He believes so strongly in this shot that he guarantees it will produce a great stroke for anyone who shoots it a hundred times a day.

Most players at every skill level have the ability to shoot with a straight, smooth and powerful stroke but often allow tension to get in the way. Since your stroke is the factor that you have most control over, it makes sense to isolate it and spend some time practicing with focus on it. Perhaps the great players make it look so easy because they practice trusting themselves to step aside and allow the stroke to perform.

