

Stroke

Even though we probably refer to stroke more than any other part of the game, we don't see very much written about the elements of an effective stroke. After last month's discussion of grip and the importance of maintaining a relaxed one, our next step is to move forward from there, employing that grip to generate a relaxed yet powerful stroke. Before proceeding to the full range of motion for the pool stroke, I want to break it down into its primary steps to isolate each one individually. The fastest way to learn these steps is to stand alongside a mirror where you can see your shooting hand from the same view we see in the photos.

In the first photograph we see the cue stopped at the very back of the stroke's range, where we must note several important features. 1) At this point in the stroke, the hand is behind the arm. In order to get it back there and to facilitate a more sensitive and powerful motion proceeding more from the hand than the arm, we can allow the ring and middle fingers fall away from the cue. 2) Since a still photo stops action there's no way to tell from this one that the hand should stop momentarily at this stage of the stroke. Although most of us do not naturally employ that pause in back, it's well worth the effort to make that a part of every shot. Pausing the hand in back ends all rearward motion before shooting with a stroke comprised of pure forward motion using only those muscles needed for that movement. Pausing in back also works to ensure that we take the cue back far enough. For most shots, at this point in the stroke, the ferrule should be touching the bridge hand to ensure a natural, and full forward movement. Players often discover, after introducing the pause in back, that their strokes have more power. It's very common, in the initial stages of this new approach, to observe the cue ball moving as much as twice as far as expected owing to more efficient mechanics. 3) The last item to note at this stage is that, while the hand is relaxed, here is where we feel maximum tension. In the moment that the hand begins moving forward, there should be a slight, subtle release in grip tension to help generate acceleration.



The second photo shows the hand in what I call the neutral position. We check this position, hand hanging straight down from a forearm that's perpendicular to the floor, to confirm that we are gripping the butt of the cue in the proper place. At this point in the stroke the tip should be about two inches away from the cue ball so that when the hand, which is moving faster than the arm, passes the arm, the tip lands on the cue ball with maximum acceleration. In this moment, where the hand is about to pass the arm, we must apply a second, subtle release of grip tension to allow the cue to move forward with the desired, maximum acceleration. The natural reaction for many players at this point is to grasp the cue, an action that serves to kill the acceleration and possibly move the cue off line to cause a miss.



In the third and last photo we see the end of the stroke and must examine the important



elements of this position. 1) The hand has passed the arm, ideally reaching maximum acceleration in the moment of contact with the cue ball. Note that the index finger's second knuckle leads everything forward. 2) These photos of my stroke confirm to the trained eye that I learned the game while the old timers still held the secrets. A careful look reveals that the butt of the cue has slid about six inches through my hand, a motion sometimes called a slip stroke and one that guarantees a long follow through and smooth, uninhibited acceleration. One may argue that this motion adds complexity to the stroke but I would insist that the old-time, straight-pool players developed strokes more sensitive to the delicate changes of a more demanding game. Whether the cue slips through the hand or not, the basic throwing acceleration of the pool stroke should occur on almost all shots, even ones with a very short stroke and short follow through, such as a snip draw for example. On those shots we learn to throw the cue a shorter distance instead of trying to shorten the stroke by holding it back.

Breaking down the pool stroke into these three stages and stopping the hand at each one in a mirror will help you learn the motion quickly. Begin with your eyes on your hand and shape it at each stage to match the corresponding photo. Then with your eyes on the table, move the cue into each position before looking at the mirror to check the hand's alignment. From there you can begin to move the cue back and forth through the range of the stroke while watching your hand. Since the sight of balls tends to scare us and cause tension, spend some time practicing the motion with no balls on the table. Finally, try some shots with a cue ball and a long, smooth powerful stroke with a long follow through—twelve inches or more. Pay attention to your hand in the moment that it meets the cue ball. Many players, in the moment of contact, feel the collision and reflexively pull the cue backwards. Mastering these steps with a relaxed grip will eliminate any such movement as you learn to throw a screaming tip *through* the cue ball instead of moseying up to push a weak tip at it.

