

Pocketing Balls with English

Among informed pool players, who often disagree on just about any topic discussed, there is universal agreement on one point—the danger of using english. And it's a guarantee that, despite one's skills, the longer someone has been playing, the more shots that person has missed because of english. But, even though we all know how much difficulty english can bring to a shot, we also know that some shots demand it for position and success often depends on our ability to manage it.

Following last month's basic introduction to english and its effect on cue-ball direction, we can now proceed to pocketing balls with english. In the diagram we see two relatively simple shots, one on the striped ball and the other on the nearby solid. If the shots appear too easy, that's a good thing because we're going to use repeated success to build confidence with english. One of pool's inherent problems is the fact that anyone can make the most difficult shots occasionally, and so most players are tempted to practice with shots that are too far beyond reason. We grow from success, not failure, and the last thing we need when tackling english is discouragement.

First, set up the shot shown with the striped ball and mark the balls' positions so the shot remains the same throughout the exercise. Now, with your tip slightly above center for a naturally rolling cue ball and no english, shoot the ball in about five times, following the object ball to the pocket with your eyes and noting where it hits the pocket. Take care to shoot each shot, all by itself, as if it were a single shot in a tournament match. Aim it every time while standing up and keep your eyes fixed on the object ball throughout the entire process of stepping forward, reaching out and bending over into your stance. Many players rush through practice exercises like this one, thinking perhaps that hitting the most possible shots in a given period of time is more beneficial. It works much better however to practice in your tournament tempo and to strive for perfection rather than speed in your practice. With that in mind keep shooting without english until you are splitting the pocket consistently. It won't help much to move on to using english if you're not shooting precisely without it.

Now that you know the shot and know that you will not miss it, it's time to begin with english. For the shot on the stripe, begin with about a tip of right-hand english, also known as outside english for this shot, which is a cut to the left. With a naturally rolling cue ball, a smooth stroke, and comfortable speed, begin shooting the shot until you are making it consistently. There are a lot of variables at work here, deflection, throw and maybe some curve, influencing the shot. For a shot at this distance, the most operative variable to contend with will be deflection. With outside english you will have to aim to over cut the object ball since the right-hand english deflects, or squirts, the cue ball to the left.

After you're pocketing the ball consistently with outside english, you can switch to inside, or left for this shot. Inside english appears more challenging to most players and I'm not sure why. Perhaps it's because we use outside for the vast majority of shots with english. In any event, begin the same way with a tip of inside and shoot the shot repeatedly. Again, watch out for deflection, which is the problem you're encountering if you are over cutting the object ball to the left of the pocket.

After you're making the shot consistently with both left and right hand english it's time to explore other variables. First, you can change the amount of english you're using. Try some shots with a mere whisper of spin and some shots with your tip all the way out to extreme edges of the cue ball at 3 and 9 O'clock. You should find that any english at all adds difficulty and even a slight amount changes the cue ball's path. Then you can experiment with speed. You'll find that more speed causes more deflection, and that you will have to adjust accordingly for the precise speed you're using at this distance.

Then you can try different strokes. Here is an area where only the best players have a keen awareness of what's happening. What you should find is that the snappy punch stroke deflects the cue ball more than the smooth follow stroke, all other variables remaining equal. Regarding that phenomenon, pay some extra attention to the shot with inside english, where you will see more clearly how much extra deflection results from the punch stroke. Shots that combine a punch stroke and inside english are rarely played, so you will want to devote extra practice to marrying a smooth, languid follow stroke to inside english.

Naturally, after you feel confident with the first shot you should walk around to the other side of the table to set up the second shot with the solid ball. From there you can go through the entire process with the new shot that you will be cutting to your right. We must learn english on both sides of the cue ball to gain proficiency, and you may see that learning one side does not automatically give us the knowledge we need for the other. Above all, remember to play every shot with focus and care as if a tournament were on the line. And most important, as you look at the object ball before making your stance, preview everything you will do before you proceed to the shot. When you are aiming the ball while standing tall, and then landing in a stance with the shot aimed for whatever english you're about to use, with no thinking surrounding the process, you're mastering english.

