

May 2010

Two-Rail Shape

One of the old, standard rules that we follow when deciding how to play position is to look for the least complicated path to the next shot. In other words, keep it simple; don't choose three-rail paths when two will suffice, or two-rail routes when one will do, and so on. Overall it's a good rule and one we see illustrated in the game's apparent simplicity when we watch great players, especially great straight-pool players, who run through racks moving the cue ball short distances for one easy shot after another. However, as with all of the many catch phrases that we hear, it applies best as a general rule of thumb, and cannot address every possibility in a game so complex as pool. When we examine certain shots, we learn that in many cases, the simplest choice may not be the most natural path for position.

Looking at shot A in the diagram we see a very common sequence that requires pocketing the 8 ball in the lower-left corner and coming out from the bottom rail for position on the 9 ball into the same pocket. If we followed the simplicity rule we would move the cue ball directly off the bottom rail to position on the next shot and the game winner. However, that choice has a couple inherent problems. One is that we do not want to move out on a path too close to the 9 ball, which would present harsh speed demands. So we must move the cue ball away from the 9 ball toward the side rail, a shot that, despite its apparent simplicity, also requires precise touch for good position. The biggest problem, since the cue ball is moving toward the side rail, is that it's very easy to hit it a little too hard and leave the cue ball frozen to the side rail for a difficult shot on the 9 ball.

My rule of thumb for shots like this is, if the cue ball is moving toward a rail, the best choice is to bump that rail and bounce off of it. Too often we allow the cue ball to drift toward a rail and, because of a bit too much speed, cause it to land on the rail. It's much better on shots where the cue ball is moving toward a rail to add enough speed to hit that rail and rebound away from it. So in this case, the experienced player will play the two-rail shape shown with the dotted lines. It's a more natural path with a wider margin for error. Use a below-center hit with a touch of left-hand english and a slightly firm stun stroke. An 8 ball that lies past the nine, near the X for example, might offer simple one-rail position with straight follow for a shot on the 9 ball into the lower-right corner. However, when the angle looks a little too straight for that type of position, the better choice is usually follow with right-hand english to move the cue ball two rails for the shot on the 9 ball in the lower-right corner.

Looking at shot B we see another common position shot, pocketing the striped ball on the left, side rail and moving across the table to the striped ball on the right side rail for a similar angle to move the cue ball away from that rail. Again the simpler path would be one rail to the desired spot for position. However, we encounter the same problem we saw with the first shot regarding the cue ball's movement toward a rail. Experienced players tend to play this shot two rails to avoid landing on that second rail and winding up straight in on the next shot. A big danger on this shot with either choice is the possible scratch in the side pocket. The scratch will occur more often when we attempt to play position without hitting the second rail since we must move the cue ball on a wider track from the first rail to land far enough away from the second ball. In the two-rail scenario, the cue ball keeps moving away from the next ball after bouncing off of the second rail. The best way to avoid the side-pocket scratch is to play the shot with a straight, below-center hit, ignoring the temptation to apply some left-hand english.

A game so varied as pool logically comes with a lot of guidelines to help us stay directed. But because of its complexity we must be careful not to buy into clichés as hard and fast rules. While the common rules work to keep us on course much of the time, we should not lose sight of

the value in veering from them when it feels more natural to solve the problem at hand with a little disobedience.

