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Tempo for Consistency

At any skill level the greatest challenge facing players is consistency. Some days we feel like we can beat Johnny Archer while on others it seems that we can't get the balls into the pockets our hands. Not only can we change from day to day, but sometimes we can look like different players from shot to shot. After studying myself and other players for more than a few years I've concluded that the key to consistency lies within all of us and that consistent play largely springs from consistent tempo, a quality we can practice and maintain for competition.

What you will do is set up a shot that is not too difficult but one that you might miss under a little pressure, marking the balls' positions so it is the same exact shot every time. The shot in the diagram is only a suggestion but one that works for most players. Now line up nine more balls on the other side of the table along the far rail. Here are the rules for the exercise, and you must follow them strictly. Brush your tip with the chalk and set the chalk down carefully on the rail top up. Look at the object ball before you get down until it looks like a ball that you know you will pocket. Make your stance with your eyes locked on the object ball. Then go through your normal routine before pausing with focus on the object ball and absolute certainty that you will pocket it. If you are not 100% certain that you will make the shot, stand up and repeat the above steps, starting with the chalk.

Shoot the shot with follow through and track the object ball's path to the pocket with your eyes. Meanwhile keep your body and tip in place (no pulling back or picking up) until the cue ball stops rolling. Whether you make the shot or miss it you may not touch a ball that is rolling. Would you do that in a game? Also, there is no slapping balls around with your cue to set up the next shot. Instead you will walk around the table to where your nine balls are lined up; pick up your next ball; walk to its position and place it there. Then walk to the cue ball; pick it up and place on its spot. You will repeat all of steps described every time to pocket the same shot ten times in a row.

This exercise offers a lot of freedom and has many applications. I use it to work on a particular shot that is giving me trouble, so I am always changing the shot I use. You can practice it with a friend, competing to see who gets through it successfully more often. In this context you will begin to transcend competition to immerse yourself in playing. While working with a partner you can have that person talk, while you shoot, about the things that most often distract you when you compete. Let the person talk and talk until the talking dissolves around you while you engage yourself in shooting amid the noise.

From this exercise you will get a handle on many critical elements of shot making. One, you will learn how it feels to know when you will pocket a ball and the distinction from shooting at one without that knowledge. Two, you will learn to make every shot matter. Often a shot is missed when the shooter takes it for granted and shoots without focus. Three, you will learn that each shot is only that, a shot. Many players do fine with this exercise until they miss the tenth ball because they were thinking that it was the tenth ball, thus giving unnecessary meaning to the shot and causing a distraction. You will learn to shoot the last (game?) ball with the same focus and intensity as the others but without giving it any meaning unrelated to the shot itself.

The ultimate and most important result is that you will find your tempo as you go through the routine of the exercise. Great pool is routine and repetitive. You will find your tempo and begin to lose yourself in it, enjoying your time at the table. Here lies consistency. Consistent play is the result of consistent behavior. Watch some top players such as Allison Fisher and Karen Corr with an eye for tempo. The best champions never vary their tempo whether behind or ahead, playing well or poorly. With your new eye for tempo see if you can tell when a player is about to miss. You may sense a disruption, albeit very slight, to the routine of that person's behavior. Pay

attention to yourself. Do you speed up when you're playing well? Do you drag a little when things aren't going your way? If you ignore these influences and keep your tempo, in practice as well as play, you will see the variations in your performance shrink as you play your best game more often.

