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Rail Shots

Some shots occur repeatedly to cause problems for the novice while it seems that experienced players handle them consistently with precision and confidence. Such expertise with commonly recurring shots can come from playing the same shot thousands of times in thousands of games over many years. Great players however do not wait years to master common shots but will practice any shots that arise repeatedly and present a challenge.

This month we will work with a shot that recurs often in all pool games and can appear several times in a row in the same rack—cutting a ball along a rail with precise cue-ball control. Place an object ball about an inch from the rail and a half ball width past the first diamond from the side pocket as shown with the solid ball in the diagram. Begin with the cue ball at point A to master the first important technique associated with this shot.

Place an object ball at point X on the opposite rail for your next shot, the ball for which you will play position. First, with no concern for position, practice pocketing the object ball to get a feel for the shot itself. Remember to shoot the object ball for the pocket facing on the short rail rather than for the pocket. When the shot is played properly the solid ball does not touch the long rail on its way to the corner pocket.

Now you can add cue-ball control with your first position objective, moving the cue ball straight across the table on a track perpendicular to the long rail for a shot on the ball at point X. The potential side-pocket scratch nicely illuminates the importance of precise control. Your ability to move the cue ball straight across or straight up and down the table is critically important in many situations, a skill that must be mastered. Note that a cue ball that's tracking exactly perpendicular to a cushion cannot scratch or veer off of a clear path to hit another ball. For now play the shot with a slightly snappy stroke and no english. Experiment near the center of the cue ball to find the spot that matches the required speed for one trip across the table to a good shot on the ball at point X.

After you are hitting your target consistently place your next ball at point Y and play the cue ball twice across the table on the perpendicular track to get a good shot for your next ball. With the extra speed you can employ the same stroke and hit the cue ball slightly higher than before, again with no english. With two side pockets in play, the importance of keeping the cue ball on the perpendicular track now becomes more critical. Note that with the cue ball traveling twice as far as it did on the previous shot, any deviations from the perpendicular track are magnified by the time it reaches its destination.

When you are hitting the shot confidently from point A, repeat the exercise from points B and C. Still using no english, note how the spot you need to hit on the cue ball changes for the different shots. You will find that from point B where you are cutting the ball less, slighter variations in where you hit the cue ball will produce greater changes in

its path. Conversely, when you are cutting the ball thinner from point C, you have a wider margin for error in your hit on the cue ball. You may also find from point C that you can execute the shot more easily with a rolling cue ball. You can experiment with english from all three cue-ball points. Try a higher hit with a little right-hand english and note whether this technique is easier or more difficult to control. For the double trip across the table I find it difficult to keep the cue ball on track with english.

After you are moving the cue ball on the perpendicular track across the table with consistency you can begin moving it up and down the table in the same fashion. Place a striped ball one diamond from the corner on the foot rail at point 1 with a second striped ball, your next shot, one diamond away from the opposite corner on the same rail at point 2. Place the cue ball on the foot spot (F) and cut the first ball into the upper-right corner while moving the cue ball straight up and down the table to return to point 1 for a shot on the ball at point 2. This is an eighteen-foot trip for the cue ball, so the slightest deviation from the perpendicular track can send it far enough out of position for a scratch or no shot at all on your next ball. Does this shot look familiar? You will see shots like this one fairly often in games, so practice it until you are hitting the perpendicular track with ease. When you can move the cue ball up and down the table on that track consistently you will begin to greet rail shots with the same calm confidence that we see in the very best players.



