

## One Pocket Spots

by Bob Jewett

If you have been following this series of columns on one pocket, you now know the rules, some theory, some strategy and some tricky moves. If you have gotten into one-on-one competition, you have discovered an important part is missing: how to handicap a game so that a newcomer can compete with an old hand. Because a single game might take half an hour, spotting games on the wire in a race to, say, seven games is often not practical. A range of spots that works within a single game is needed, and there is a great, steaming pile of such spots.

The most straight-forward kind of spot is to adjust the winning count within a game to something other than both players needing eight balls to win. That will be covered in detail below, but let's consider other kinds of spots first. In general these more exotic spots can be -- and usually are -- modified by standard ball-count spots.

The break is usually considered to be the equivalent advantage of starting with one or two balls. Of course this depends on the skill of the breaker and how the balls are breaking. I've had days when my break costs me a ball or three. Against some opponents it seems that there is rarely a good response to their break and if you get out of it giving up only two balls you feel lucky. Statistics sometimes say otherwise, and a recent long match between two top players evidenced only a small advantage for the breaker. Usually the break alternates, so if a player gets all the breaks as a spot, he is really only getting a spot half the time.

On tables that slope to one side, the weaker player can get the good side. Tables where one pocket is played generally seem to be better kept these days but this used to be a significant factor. Because one pocket shots are frequently played just hard enough to get a ball to your pocket, any tilt is quickly noticed.

"N-and-stop" is a standard spot at straight pool that keeps a very strong player from running out and allows the weaker player more time at the table. At one pocket it works one of two ways. A spot of "N and stop" means that the player leaves the table after running N balls, where N might be one, two or three. "N and safe" is similar, but the player has one more shot to play a safety at the end of each N-ball run. That extra safety shot is a huge reduction of the spot as the spottee will likely find himself frozen to the back of a ball each time he comes to the table.

"A pick" after your break means that you can take any ball off the table right after your break as if you had made it. This is very valuable if your break tends to leak a ball over in front of your opponent's pocket. A spot of "the hit and a pick" means that you break all games and get to pick one ball each rack. If you already break well, this spot will allow you to break a little harder to move more balls since you have one ball of insurance. For a smaller spot, instead of scoring the picked ball, you can just spot it to take it out of immediate play.

"Fouls don't count" is a huge spot for someone who knows how to use it, but such a person is unlikely to get it. A typical use would be to simply roll the cue ball to the side of the rack for a safety without any cushion contact when stuck for a good legal safe.

"Nothing I do counts." I have tried this spot, but not for long enough to work out all the strategy. It would be a good spot to alternate with a friend. If you make a ball in your pocket, it doesn't count, nor does any ball you make in your opponent's pocket. If you foul, it doesn't count. The only way for you to score is cluster all the balls near your pocket and force your opponent to pocket them for you. This spot will definitely have both players thinking. The "nothing" player will also need a ball spot, such as 10-4, if the players are evenly matched normally.

There are various ways to adjust the pocket assignments, such as five pockets to one and a back pocket to a front pocket. I have never seen this kind of spot played but it also seems like a mind stretcher.

There are many other exotic spots designed to liberate the funds of the unwary, but now let's turn to the standard ball spots. A typical spot might be "nine to seven," meaning the better player has to get to nine balls before the weaker gets to seven. If the total of the two numbers is 16, then the players can end up battling for single winning ball. If the spot is something like 10-4, there will be more than one ball on the table when both players need one more to win. If the sum of the numbers is larger than 16, the better player begins the game owing balls and they are spotted to make a single final ball possible. For a spot of 12-7, the stronger player begins owing three balls and after that debt is paid the game is like 9-7.

Ball spots are fairly easy to compare at least theoretically. If you assume that the players make balls at different average rates, you can calculate fair spots for various relative strengths. The math turns out to be very similar to the working of the Fargo rating system, and that allows comparisons of the strengths of various spots and comparisons of players who have never played each other but have had common opponents.

As an example of this last point, imagine that Alex plays Bob giving a 10-6 spot and Bob plays Carl at 9-8. Assuming those two matches are fair, how should Alex play Carl?

The idea is to find the equivalence of a rating difference that corresponds to the spots in the two matches we know of and then find the rating difference between Alex and Carl. The complete math is complicated, but Table One makes it easy. If you find the row for a match of 10-6, you see that Alex is 77 rating points over Bob. In turn, Bob is 18 points over Carl as indicated by their 9-8 match-up. From that we can see that Alex is 95 rating points over Carl, and a match of 11-6 (91 points) would be about fair.

You can also see from the table how much stronger one spot is than another. For example, going from 9-8 to 8-7 is a miniscule change (two rating points), while going from 9-8 to 10-8 is quite a large step (15 ratings points).

As with the Fargo rating system, this table is constructed so that two players 100 rating points apart score in a ratio of two to one. Note that a spot of 10-5 which is a ratio of two is not exactly 100 rating points because in a short race the weaker player has a small advantage compared to a very long race with the same ratio.

In the table the spots that are shaded in green are the more commonly used ones with no more than one ball owed at the start and no more than one extra ball on the table at the end. A spot like 3-1 or 20-8 is possible but they change the nature of the game so much the theory is not going to apply to them very well. At 3-1, you will never see a normal end game and at 20-8 the stronger player has plenty of time to arrange the balls so the weaker player is always in trouble.

A standard way to temper the standard ball spots is to alternate between two spots, for example 11-6 when Carl breaks and 10-5 when Alex breaks. That roughly gives the average of the two spots. The possibilities are endless.