

A Little Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing

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Like many other people interested in pool, I sometimes buy books in hopes that the secrets therein will help my game. Over the years, I've accumulated a small library on the subject. Mosconi, Fels, Bryne, Koehler, Mizerak, and Capelle—the list of authors reads like a Who's Who of pool instruction. So why is it, I asked myself, with the benefit of all this knowledge, I still shoot like a chump? The answer suggested itself immediately. I've read the books, but I haven't organized them in my mind. The facts are there but are so jumbled I can't retrieve the ones I need for a particular shot.

I decided to test this hypothesis by selecting a fairly easy shot, making note of the comments of each author regarding that shot, and applying those comments, sequentially, at the pool table. For this experiment I concentrated on those aspects of the shot that demanded knowledge, rather than technique. I did not deal with stance, stroke production, follow through, etc., but with the physics of colliding spheres—how balls behave when struck.

The shot is a cross-corner bank in which I must use right English to get the cue ball out of the path of the rebounding object ball. I line up the shot, select the aiming point on the object ball, address the cue ball and look at the notes on the table beside me.

1. Squirt. When you use english (right hand in the case of my shot), and strike the cue ball right-of-center, it will not move directly toward the intended point of aim but will take a path slightly to the left. This will cause the object ball, when struck, to move further right than I intend. The books call this “squirt” or deflection. Some authors say a stiff shaft reduces deflection; others make a persuasive case for just the opposite. I side with the latter and presume my squirt will be significant. So I adjust my point of aim on the object ball accordingly—a little bit to the right. Now, ready to fire, I consult the notes again.

2. Throw. With my cue ball spinning from the right English, friction between cue ball and object ball will cause the object ball to be pushed to the left. To correct for this, I

readjust the point of aim to the left once more. But how far? Perhaps the effects of squirt and throw off-set each other. I move the point of aim back to its original spot. To the notes again.

3. Friction. Looking at other balls on the table, I see that several are covered with fingerprints and dabs of unknown substances. I conclude that friction will be operating at full strength. That being so, throw will trump squirt. I move the point of aim further to the left. Once again, I address the ball and glance at the notes.

4. Collision induced English! Not only will my cue ball affect the path of the object ball, but it will also impart a slight degree of spin to the object ball. This spin will, in turn, affect the angle at which the object ball comes off the rail. Squirt will make the object ball go to the right; throw will push it to the left; collision with the cue ball will put right English on it, and the angle off the rail will be widened. I readjust my point of aim once more, taking into account this troubling new information. A little bit further to the left should do it. I glance again at the notes.

5. Table conditions. The age and condition of the rails will dramatically affect the angle of rebound for any bank shot. I know that the rails on this particular table were installed during the Eisenhower administration. This means that the collision induced English may be nullified! I, therefore, move the point of aim back to the right. At this juncture, I am experiencing lumbar spasms and slight tic in my right eye lid. Nevertheless, in the interest of science I push ahead. I stroke the ball as smoothly as my stiffening muscles will permit, and the object ball goes into the corner pocket. But not the one I was aiming at! I cut the ball so thin that it goes three rails into the corner pocket at the other end of the table.

I slowly assume an upright posture, fold my notes, and, in solemn ceremony, cremate them in a nearby ashtray.

It was a discouraging experiment, and my hypothesis proved to be flawed. But I did learn why I can't shoot. It's because I know too much.