

Close to Your Work

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Many players have a hard time with shots where the cue ball is quite close to the object ball. Aiming is one problem, but avoiding a foul is also hard to do when the balls are separated by less than an inch.

Let's see how well you can do to start with on "short stroke" shots, and then we'll make you twice as good. Put the object ball near the head spot (the middle of the headstring or "line") and just over the line as shown in Shot A. Put the cue ball five inches away so they are pointed straight up the table.

The goal is to make the object ball hit the far cushion without the cue ball going over the line and shooting more or less straight up the table. From five inches back this should be no problem at all—just hit the cue ball firmly and a little below center. Of course you can't use a full follow-through, or you'll hit the cue ball a second time and send it down the table. For extra credit, can also you make the object ball hit the far rail and then come back to the head rail without double-hitting the cue ball?

Once you're confident shooting with a five-inch separation, put the balls only one ball apart. Can you get to the far cushion without a foul? Gradually work the cue ball closer to the object ball until a foul is guaranteed.

If your best distance is already under half an inch, I'm guessing you've practiced this shot a lot. Here are two ways to improve your distance. The first is a sort of trick that doesn't work in all situations, but does work here. Use a firm, short closed bridge, have the cue stick riding right down on the cushion, and move your grip hand forward so your index finger will run into the rail just before the tip reaches the cue ball. The idea is to run your stick forward, lightly smash your hand into the table, have the tip hit the ball, and then the stick will quickly recoil due to the springiness of your hand. This sounds horrible, but it's actually not too painful. Start slowly. Adjusting the position of your grip hand is critical—it will not be in your normal grip position. Again, start from a ways back and work up to a small separation. You should be able to consistently play the shot with less than a half-inch separation.

The second method will work in most situations. Simply move your grip hand so far forward that your forearm is parallel to the floor at the moment of tip-ball contact. For most players, this will be a grip position forward of the wrap on the butt of the cue. The idea is to be out of stroke just as the tip hits the ball—let your forearm close completely so that your grip hand hits

your chest. In a standard stance, your grip-hand forearm is perpendicular to the floor (straight up and down) at the moment of tip-to-ball contact, so this grip will feel very, very unusual. If you perfect this technique, you should be able to easily drive the object ball two table lengths with just a chalk-width between the object ball and cue ball. Also, in the position in Shot B, you should be able to draw the cue ball back to the side cushion with no problem, even with just half a ball space between the balls.

These close-ball techniques have to be practiced to work well. They both depend on a very precise set-up before the shot so that the mechanics will start slowing the stick at just the right time.

