

Cause the Pause

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You've probably heard talk about "the pause" at the back of the backswing. It's often promoted as a good thing, a change worth making. But when you look around the poolroom, you don't see it much. Let's take some of the mystery out of the pause, consider the pros and cons, and look at how to actually do it.

For those of us who aren't pros, in other words, almost everybody, our quest should be to develop the absolutely simplest stroke possible. The less extra stuff that happens in the stroke, the better. Any extra movements or flourishes present more opportunities to go wrong. You have to *do* those extra movements—they don't just *happen* as part of a good, natural stroking motion. Using muscles or joints your stroke doesn't need can also lead to unnecessary complexity of motion. Complexity makes it difficult to be consistent. And of course, consistency is the foundation of improvement in pool.

If we can agree that simple is good, and that fewer muscles and joints we have to use, the better, we can make a case for two big fundamentals: 1) not using the shoulder joint (in other words, not dropping your elbow on the hit stroke), and 2) pausing slightly at the back of the hit stroke. We'll focus on the pause for now.

Let's think about the primary muscles we use to stroke the cue. The triceps pulls the cue back. The bicep pulls it forward. (For those unsure which muscles are which, the bicep is the one you're pumping up when you "make a muscle." The triceps are on the other side of the upper arm, behind the bicep.) So, the bicep really does the business of the hit stroke—the forward motion.

Now, what happens when you stroke *without* a pause is this: the tricep pulls the cue through the backswing. To get the cue to change direction and swing forward, we fire the bicep before the cue gets all the way to the back of the stroke. The bicep, acting against the tricep, pulls forward, slows the backswing, and eventually overcomes the backward motion and the cue moves forward. In other words, your bicep is *fighting* the tricep. Both muscles are engaged.

What's wrong with this approach? Consider the players you see using a fast backswing. How do they get the cue to change direction and move forward? They use their bicep to overcome the backward motion of the tricep. The faster the backswing, the more "fighting" it takes to change to the forward stroke. The slower the backswing, the less fighting. Does this fighting in the stroke strike you as a good idea? The more fight, the more opportunity to come off the stroke line or lose your speed touch. How do you throw a baseball? Do you take it back faster to throw harder? Of course not. There is no fight in your ball throwing. What if there was no fight in your pool stroke?

If we take the cue back with one primary muscle, and come to a natural stop at the back of the stroke, our musculature automatically sets up to fire the bicep and move forward. A slight pause allows this shift to occur without fight. Then, we stroke forward with bicep only. I think we can agree this is simpler, and should be easier to control.

OK, it's simpler. Our problem, though, is this is hard to learn if we've played a long time without the pause. Here's the trick. The biggest obstacle to incorporating the pause is the fact that most players start the backswing from *motion*. As they do their warm-up strokes, they check aim, cueball contact point, and stroking comfort. When everything seems right, they hit. Instead, what if you started the backswing from a full stop at the cueball? Take your warm-up strokes, and when you feel ready, **come to a full stop with the tip close to the cueball**. Check your tip position, check your aim, know you're ready and then **slowly draw the cue back to the pause position at the back of the stroke**. To learn the pause, hang out at the pause position for a full second or so. It will seem like a long time. **Focus on cleanly firing the bicep to deliver the hit**. The feeling should be that you're accelerating through the cueball. The hit stroke motion is forward only—no sense of pulling back. The forward stroke stops because the cueball slows it down and the stroke runs out of energy or because you've stroked as far as your physical form allows.

The rhythm of this will seem all wrong, at first. That's because it is wrong. We're exaggerating, to learn a new skill. Once you start to get the feel of the pause, it probably won't be nearly as long or as noticeable. In fact, if you pause too long, your muscles will set in the paused position, and you'll feel like you have to *do* something to move out of the pause. It has become natural. Like pulling a trigger, you fire without jerking into motion.

Here's a wonderful image from Zen archery. There is a pause with the arrow fully drawn. The student wonders when to release the arrow. The master smiles and says "As snow accumulates on a pine bough, at the right moment, the branch bends and the snow slides off." Try not to be too self-conscious about releasing the hit stroke. The right moment, the natural time to hit, is something you will find through (yeah, you guessed it) practice. Pause and try it.

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