



The Mental Game

FIGHTING JITTERS

When the legendary player, Ronnie Allen, was asked by an amateur, "how do I get over the jitters when playing in a league or tournament?", Allen advised: "I think of the nervous energy as a positive thing that is gearing me up to play. Start looking forward to the pressure and enjoy the competitive situation. Playing in a tournament (or league) is your chance to show what you can do."

PLAN BEFORE GETTING DOWN

The time to plan your shot is before you get down to shoot. Standing erect at the table gives you a complete view of all the balls and their paths to various pockets. You cannot see this layout when you are in your stance.

PRE SHOT ROUTINE IDEAS

- A) Be prepared to Step into your shot;
- B) Focus only on the task at hand;
- C) Shoot with confidence and authority;
- D) Picture the entire shot taking place;
- E) Commit to your plan of attack.

PLAY SMART!

Quite often, some amateur players would rather play a high risk shot when a sure fire safety is readily available. This especially seems to happen a lot in league 8-Ball, where safeties are overlooked and sometimes even looked down upon. To many players, it is not so much about winning as it is about how they look. PLAY SMART and use the strategy that will get you a victory. That's how the professional players approach the game and you should do the same.<>

DEAD STROKE

Experienced pool players speak of a state they call "dead stroke", in which every shot is effortless and true. After the basic skills of the cue sports are achieved, the difference in performance between two players of equal ability is often decided by their mental state.

One of the first steps toward reaching the proper mental state (which is the only way to achieve "dead stroke") is to keep a level head. This means don't grieve over bad shots and learn NOT to rejoice over the good ones. Keep your emotions level and your performance will reflect your attitude.

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Sometimes the first shot we see looks like it is so obviously the right shot, we don't take the time to look over the whole table layout. If you take your thoughts Beyond The Obvious, you might see a better way to win the game by taking a less obvious route. Look beyond the obvious in your next match or practice session and you might just be surprised as what you will see.

CONCENTRATION CAN BE PRACTICED

Most players practice the mechanical aspects of the game in shot-making, position play, etc. However, they often pay little attention to practicing concentration.

Practice to maintain the mental picture of the game you are playing, visualizing your shots and the paths the balls will take. You can even practice to maintain the mental picture of the game away from the table. Sports psychologists call this imaging. By seeing the shot executed correctly in the mind, when faced with the same situation in competition, top players are able to call upon the image developed during practice.

BRICK BY BRICK

A mental error made by many amateur players is to view each rack of 8-Ball or 9-Ball as a table they must run, and the enormity of the project immediately dampens their confidence. If you were told to move a building, you would see it as impossible and throw up your hands in defeat. However, a skilled construction crew would assess the situation and go about doing it brick by brick.

Assume a pro player it as the table in a game of 9-Ball. He or she has broken the balls, made a ball, and the table layout affords a shot. The task is now to make the one ball while playing careful position on the two ball so it is easy to get to the three. Then focus on shooting the two while getting good position on the three so it is easy to get to the four, etc. At no time do the professional players clutter their minds with thoughts of winning the game, the match, or the tournament. The immensity of those thought is too much to handle while focusing on the task at hand.

The old saying, "big jobs get done by performing a lot of little jobs well" applies to the cue sports just as it does in all aspects of life. Try it, you'll like it.

FROM YOUR CHAIR

Watching your opponent play is not only critical to judging the playability of the table, it can also key you in on strengths and weaknesses in their game.

While sitting in the chair, study both your opponent and how the table is reacting. Pay special attention to the break.

If you are playing a very good player, their runs can also psyche you up to do the same thing. Even when you are not shooting, it is important to stay involved. The bottom line is, take the time stuck in your chair to learn more about the table, your opponent, and even the game.

GOOD PLAYER VS. GREAT PLAYER

One of the key elements that separates a Good Player from a Great Player is making the correct decision about which shot to take. And the correct decision is not just an automatic response. You must be honest with yourself about your own capabilities and know the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent.

There are many times that going for the win in a difficult situation is the right thing to do. But, more often, opting for the safe is a much wiser decision.

Being able to concisely make the correct choice will move you toward becoming an even BETTER player.

AIM IS MEMORY

On any shot you attempt to pocket, you will only have one of three results: 1) It was successful; 2) It was overcut; 3) It was undercut.

When you miss a shot, REMEMBER which way you missed it. Was it overcut or undercut? If you are missing the same shots the same way, practice them until you have MEMORIZED how the shot has to be hit.

Hall of Fame player and former World Champion, Nick Varner, once said: "The most important aspect in my aiming game is a lot of memory."

RULE OF THUMB

One of the "rules-of-thumb" in almost all the cue sport disciplines is:

"Never go for a difficult shot that you CAN'T win the game with - especially if you stand a good chance of losing if you miss! However, when your chances of winning the game are high if you make the shot, go for it."

INSTINCT AND FEELING

Sometimes the mechanics and physics of the game can become a problem for a player because of all the variables that have to be calculated on each shot. In example, when using english one must consider compensating for squirt, curves, throw, etc. If you get too locked up in focusing on all the reactions, you will never free yourself up to play naturally.

It is important to understand the physical aspects of the game, but in the end, a player has to play each shot with FEELING.

Much of pool is based on INSTINCTS, and the sooner you begin to trust your feelings, the faster your game will improve.

SELECT HIGH PERCENTAGE SHOTS

In order to consistently play any game of pool well, you must not only conquer the basics, but you must be focused on selecting high percentage shots. Amateur players often give in to the urge to play that "crowd pleaser" shot when an easier but "boring" shot is available.

A lot of very good pro players are very "blah" to watch because they almost never do anything out of the ordinary. They maintain their "pro player" status by "keeping it simple" and selecting high percentage shots.

SCAN YOUR MEMORY

Here's a neat trick that most professional players know. The next time you are in a tough situation, try to remember back when you were in a similar situation and got yourself out of it successfully.

Seasoned players don't just bend over and shoot. They do an instantaneous search of every other time they found themselves with a similar problem and then proceed accordingly.

Basing your decision on a positive thought will add to your confidence and your success.

MOMENTUM

It is often said that conservative play wins tournaments. However, players must be prepared to take the offense when the opportunity presents itself.

One great opportunity is when your opponent, who is leading by a couple games, fails to win a game they should have. You should look at this as a two game swing if you can win it. This is one of those great opportunities to take the chance to grab the momentum. If you get out, you have swung the momentum to your side. If it doesn't work, your opponent will only feel fortunate that they got another chance to win a game they should have in the first place.

DON'T RELAX

The one time you don't want to relax when playing in a match is when you are sitting in the chair and your opponent is at the table. You have to stay focused on the game. Relaxing in the chair will only make you mentally unprepared when you come back to the table.

Make your chair time profitable by continuing to play the game while sitting. You can learn a lot from the chair if you study your opponent and the table. Look for table rolls, the best spot to break from, and even what shots your opponent may shy away from (which may give you great safety information later on).

PMA

A Positive Mental Attitude (PMA) is essential to playing good pool.

Avoid negative thoughts and statements. Complaining about the rolls, the speed of the cloth, etc., will cause you to linger on them.

Being positive helps you block out distractions while negativity causes distraction.

AVOID BURN-OUT

Yogi Berra once gave this advice to his son who was starting a career in professional baseball: "You must have enough rest. You can't play tired."

The same holds true for pool players. Excessively long sessions of practice and competition can sometimes be followed by: loss of concentration; irritability; and boredom, or, more commonly called BURN-OUT!

If you feel you are losing interest during your practice sessions, take a break. Divert some energy to activities other than pool. Some players find that every once in a while they need to take one, two or even more weeks off from the game. Then, when they come back, they find the game is even more enjoyable.

MAKE THE BALL

See if this sounds familiar: "You approach the table and look at your target object ball. Then you visualize where the cue ball is going to go naturally. Then you plan what you need to put on the cue ball (side-spin, follow, draw, stop, etc.) to get to where you need to be for the next shot. You keep all this in mind while shooting and miss the ball."

Well, don't feel alone. It's a common error we all make. What we should have done after assessing what we wanted to do, was put our complete focus on making the ball. We should make all our decisions before we shoot, but then pocketing the ball become key.

It really won't matter what your plans were if you miss because it won't be your shot anymore.

BUILD SELF CONFIDENCE

Experienced players who have succeeded in competition are more likely to have the belief that they can succeed again.

Self-Confidence can only do so much, but without it a player cannot perform to his or her skill level or potential.

To develop your self-confidence, praise yourself and accept the praise of others after a good shot. Take credit for your good shots, decisions, and position play. Don't say it was just luck. When you make a mistake, admit it and then forgive yourself. Avoid your own harsh criticism.

PLAY WITH COMPOSURE AND WIN

Composure Means:

- 1) Having the ability to generate concentration and confidence.
- 2) Being in control to the point where easy shots are never missed.
- 3) Not jumping to quick decisions and wrong game plans.
- 4) Playing your best when in the lead or from behind.
- 5) Focusing to the point where nothing distracts you.

PLAY POOL LIKE CHESS

Competitive pool takes the same kind of patience to be a winner that it takes to win a chess match.

In many other sports, impulsiveness, aggressiveness, and quick responses are attributes. In pool however, the player that can sit back, plan, think, and take advantage of the big opportunity, is often the one most rewarded.

A BACKWARD PLAN

If you find yourself having trouble planning a run in 8-Ball, 9-Ball or even Straight Pool, try working backward.

Start by determining where you want the cue ball to be to make the last ball in the run (the eight ball in 8-Ball; the nine ball in 9-Ball; or the breakball in the game of Straight Pool).

Then look to find the best spot for your cue ball to be to make the next to last ball for easy position on that last shot. Now repeat the process on the third to last ball, etc., until you have worked your way back to the shot you want to shoot first.

Playing the rack backwards in your mind often gives you a very clear picture of what has to be done. Remember, don't hesitate to repeat the whole process if you get out of line. The top players always take time to revise or make a new plan whenever necessary.

PLAY WITH PICTURES

Top players in every sport say you can play better when you visualize your performance before executing. Rather than instructing yourself with WORDS, use PICTURES.

Actually try to see everything that you want to happen. Visualize the ball being made and the cue ball traveling to the exact desired position spot. Then rehearse the shot in you mind using the pictures. Then shoot.

PLAY BY THE RULES

A top golfer once remarked that he lost in a Super Ball Blitz Charity golf tournament because he didn't know the rules. Obviously, the event promoters had installed a few rules of their own for the event.

In the cue sports, especially in local 9-Ball Tournaments, 8-Ball Leagues, and even at different clubs in different areas of the country, it is always good to find out the rules that have been instituted for the events, the leagues, or are just locally accepted.

Knowing the rules can often give you an important edge, while not knowing them can put you at a great disadvantage.

BLEDNING CONCENTRATION AND RELAXATION

Baseball legend, Joe DiMaggio, when describing the characteristics of a good performer during competition said they included, "Mental concentration and physical relaxation..."

He went on to explain that it's not difficult to accomplish one or the other while competing, but it takes something extra to excel in both at the same time. And that "something extra" he spoke of is only gained through competitive practice.

Find a way to combine your practice with competition by getting a practice partner. Ideally this person should have skills and ability at that game that are equal or close to yours so you will be challenged at the table. If your partner is better, or if you are better, be willing to give or take a handicap to equalize the competition.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO LOSE

Some players worry so much about missing a shot or losing a game that it affects their ability to execute properly. Losing and missing are all just parts of the game. Without the risk of losing, you wouldn't have the chance to win. So stop being afraid of a missed shot or a lost game.

By eliminating this fear you will greatly increase your chances of success. When you are free of fear your mind can focus on making the shot and getting position. And even if you do miss or lose, you will definitely have increased your enjoyment of the game.

POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE

Not every day or every match will produce great pool playing for you. Even the pro players are often heard saying, "this wasn't my day."

The important thing is to keep a positive mental attitude if you want to get good at the cue sports. The game offers many opportunities for failure and it will be your positive attitude and determination to learn that will get you past the tough spots.

EXPERIENCE BREEDS CONFIDENCE

When you are confronted with unfamiliar situations while playing, it is common to experience some degree of panic.

The more situations at the table that you successfully encounter over and over again, the less likely that you will be nervous when you face them again.

League players always start the season a little nervous but gain confidence in their ability to perform in front of their team members as the season goes on. Each time they play a new team, however, that nervous tension sometimes returns. Being aware that it is a normal reaction for most players will help you take it in stride and shoot with your usual confidence.

NOT ALWAYS YOUR FAULT

You feel that you have a straight and accurate stroke and you have confidence in it. But you just missed an easy shot.

Don't be too quick to blame yourself because it may not be your fault. Look for something else that may have effected the shot first.

Could it have been chalk on the table; a mysterious skidding cue ball; or that devil called a "table roll"?