



The Basics

MOST IMPORTANT BASIC

The legendary Milwaukee player, Willie Munson, was once asked by a fan, "Which of the basics, such as Stance, Bridge, Grip, Stroke and so on, is the most important?" Munson told the fan that, "They all have to be used together. A steady bridge with a bad stance is worthless. When playing pool, we get to use all God's gifts; eyes, hands, legs and mind. You have to use all the basics together. You would put yourself at a disadvantage to do otherwise."

SHOOTING WITH A LEVEL CUE

You have been taught, and correctly so, to keep your cue as level as possible during the execution of most shots. There are times when you cannot do so, such as jacking up over a ball or when you are shooting away from a rail that the cue ball has snuggled up to. There are also times when you elect to elevate the butt of your cue, i.e., jump shots, masse shots, etc. Another instance is during a power break, such as in 8-Ball or 9-Ball.

During a power break you want to pocket object balls and control the cue ball. A forced stop shot is quite effective on controlling the cue ball, causing it to bounce off the head ball, jump up slightly and settle near the center of the table. If your cue is too level during a power break, it becomes very difficult to apply a forced stop shot. Instead the cue ball tends to run around the table getting knocked about. Too elevated a cue butt results in the cue ball jumping toward the rack and bouncing off the head ball in any direction.

Experiment to find a happy medium for your cue, somewhere between level and a little elevated, keep your muscles loose, and you will find immediate improvement in your power break shot.

STROKE DRILL

Throw several object balls onto the table. Next, attempt to pocket each ball by starting with the cue ball on every shot. Use a center ball hit on the cue ball and try to follow through naturally.

If you are stroking correctly, your cue tip will end up four to seven inches past the center of the head spot down toward the table. If your cue tip stops at the head spot, you are jabbing at the cue ball rather than stroking it. If your cue tip ends up to the right or left of the head spot you are steering your shot.

A BETTER STROKE

A smooth stroke can be described as a nice backswing, followed by an acceleration during the forward swing.

Good timing in your stroke is developed by letting one set of muscles finish before engaging another. One set draws or pulls the cue back, and another set throws the cue forward. If that back stroke is not completed when the forward begins, they clash, resulting in a jerky stroke.

Good timing imitates a pendulum stroke; flowing to a smooth stop in the back swing, with a slight hesitation prior to your forward stroke. The legendary Hall of Fame players Buddy Hall and the late

Cisero Murphy were both good examples to watch because they both exaggerated the hesitation a bit (Murphy actually came to a stop and a pause).

The key is to experiment with your stroke (eliminate all tendencies to jab, jerk or panic), stay loose, and let yourself have the pleasure of feeling that new graceful stroke which is now a permanent part of your game.

STOP STEERING DRILL

Sometimes a player can get into the habit of "steering" the cue ball. This is often caused by a jerky stroke or unsteady bridge. Here's a drill that can help break the steering habit.

Set up an object ball for a makeable cut shot at one end of the table and place your cue ball near the headstring (about 3/4 of the table away) on the other end of the table. Now place two object balls behind, and on either side of the cue ball, forming a passage that your cue tip must pass through to hit the cue ball. Leave about 1/4 of an inch clearance on either side of your cue stick's tip between it and the guarding object balls.

Now take a couple warm up strokes, stopping your cue tip at the cue ball without touching the guard balls. When you feel you are comfortable and can hit the ball without rubbing either of the side object balls forming the passage, shoot straight ahead with a medium to slow stroke, using a 4 inch to 6 inch follow. Try to pocket the object ball without letting your cue move to either side and hit the guard balls.

Once you have accomplished the drill, try it at varying speeds. You will discover that the harder you hit, the more difficult it will be to keep from steering, but with practice you will conquer the habit and improve your shot making tremendously.

LEGENDS ON STANCE

Not all top players use the same stance. Even the legends of the sport had different opinions about this basic. Mosconi said, "Set your weight evenly on both feet".

Meanwhile, Cochran's advice was, "Settle back on your right leg (right handed players) and keep most of your weight there".

The legendary Snooker Champion, Joe Davis, advised, "Your left foot (for right handed players) and the left knee take the weight". But almost all top players do agree on one thing. Your stance should be BALANCED and COMFORTABLE. So, with balance in mind, do a little trial and error experimentation, and find what works best for you.

NATURAL STRENGTH

The legendary One-Pocket and 9-Ball player, Wade Crane, maintained that ALL top players POCKET balls BETTER either to their right or to their left. He also believed that even though a player might be better at cutting balls to the right, the same player may bank better to the left.

Crane said, "Most players (even some of the great ones) are completely unaware of this fact. But once you become aware of your NATURAL STRENGTH and NATURAL WEAKNESS, and the strength and weakness of your opponent, you can use it to a great advantage."

LAST LOOK

A question that comes up every now and then is, "when I am shooting, which ball should I look at last, the cue ball or the object ball?"

Some years ago the question was put to the legendary pro player, David "The Giant Killer" Howard, and he answered it this way:

"You should glance at the cue ball on your back swing. I always do it on my next to last stroke. As I pull my stick away from the cue ball, I glance at the tip to make sure that it's coming off straight. Then I look at the object ball as I'm stroking through. Sometimes, when I have to elevate the butt of my cue, I'll look at the cue ball last to make sure that I'm hitting it dead center."

KEEP YOUR EYES LEVEL

An old TIP that has often been credited to the legendary Eddie "The Knoxville Bear" Taylor, is the importance of keeping your eyes level during the shot.

The essence of Taylor's tip was in the eyes being level to the table; and the head being up facing the target, not down looking at the cue ball. The idea was simply that a player should trust that their hand and cue would deliver the cue ball to the place their head and eyes were looking (hand-eye coordination).

One of the sports most respected instructors, Don "Preacher" Feeney", once seconded the notion by adding: "An occasional downward glance is necessary to reassure that the cue tip is correctly placed, but if the eyes are not level, this glance will not be straight down, but slightly off line, giving the brain a confusing signal."

DON'T MOVE

To improve or develop an accurate stroke, concentrate on pocketing balls WITHOUT MOVING any part of your body except for your forearm in its pendulum motion. This means don't move your head, upper arm, shoulders or anything else.

The goal is to deliver the cue ball to where you are aiming. Everyone can aim, but being able to deliver the cue ball to where you are aiming is key.

Your ability to stroke the cue ball accurately, in a smooth manner, is a foundation that all your future improvement will be built on.

SHOOT THROUGH THE BALL

Two very common excuses heard after a player fails to execute a shot are: "I didn't stroke the ball", or "I just jabbed at it."

The offending players voicing these opinions knew that they didn't stay down and follow through with the shot. They either raised up or pulled away from the shot or both. Remember, it is important to always SHOOT THROUGH THE BALL.

Failure to execute a correct stroke will surely cause a rapid decline in your game.

A COMFORTABLE STANCE

Checked up on your basics lately? Here's a quick tip that provides you with a comfortable stance.

Keep your feet at least 18 inches apart. Keep your back leg straight and your front leg either bent or straight, depending on your personal preference. Make sure that your body weight is distributed evenly on both back and front legs. Being balanced will make you feel comfortable.

Your grip hand on the cue should be only 2 to 3 inches from your hip, and your head should always be directly over your cue, whether you are bending over a little or a lot.

5 KEYS TO FOLLOW AND DRAW

1) The most common mistake in applying follow or draw to the cue ball is not having a level cue stick, which can occur when you are standing incorrectly or when your back arm is positioned incorrectly.

2) Make sure your elbow on your stroking arm is lined up with the shot and not sticking out away from your body, or pulled in toward your body.

3) Your forearm should be the only part of your body moving during the stroke, so be sure not to raise or lower your elbow.

4) Do not clench the cue tightly with your grip hand when stroking.

5) Now the trick to follow and draw isn't about hitting the ball hard... it's all about following through.

FIRM BRIDGE

ALL players should develop a tight, firm bridge from day one. However, a firm bridge should also allow for unrestricted and consistent movement of the cue stick when stroking the ball.

95% of all miscues are the result of a LOOSE BRIDGE.

KEEP YOUR EYE ON IT

It is VERY IMPORTANT to keep your eye on the object ball when you start the final movement of your shot (your forward stroke), and keep your eye on it as you deliver the shot.

This is critical at all levels of your game. Check yourself and make sure you are keeping your eye on the object ball.

SHOOT THROUGH, NOT AT...

A good way to develop a smooth follow through, or bring you back to your proper follow through, is to execute with the thought of shoot through the cue ball. not at it.

Concentrate on your cue tip going through the cue ball on every shot and soon you will be doing it automatically with immediate positive results.

STAY DOWN

This is one of the elements of your game that you will have to work on forever. Making sure nothing moves as you deliver the shot. The greatest players sometimes will have a tendency to "raise up" or "pull away" from the shot, therefore not completing it.

Getting up off the shot usually happens on shots that you are not sure of, or shots that you fear. It is easy to do this because you cannot see it happening, and don't realize that you are doing it.

Someone on the side line, a coach or a friend, can be very helpful here. Also, video of yourself playing once in a while is a good idea when you want to discover bad habits that might be unknowingly creeping into your game.

STROKE LEVEL AND STAY STILL

Try not to have too many stroke thoughts as you execute the shot. In other words, you can't be focusing, all at the same time, on: a) how you are standing, and b) how you are gripping, and c) how you are moving your arm, and d) what position you want, and e) how to stroke the cue ball to get position, and f) how hard to hit the shot, and g) how to adjust your aim for your English, etc., etc.

However, having a positive stroke thought or two are quite beneficial for providing the confidence that you will need to play your best. The next time you are practicing or playing, focus on only the following two stroke thoughts while executing a shot. Give it a try and see if your game doesn't show some improvement in consistency instantly.

1) Concentrate on using a level stroke.

2) Keep still - there should be no movement after the shot until you've watched the ball fall into the pocket.

STROKE THOUGHTS

Visualize your stroke as being STRAIGHT and FLUID.

During the stroke the forearm should swing smoothly, and it is the only part of your body that should be moving.

CAUTION: You should not swing your arm into or away from your body.

BRIDGE WORK

We recently told you that the first thing that you should conquer during your learning process, and especially when you are reviewing your basics, is your stance. If there were an actual pecking order as to the importance of the basics, your Bridge would probably be second.

A good bridge can be defined by two separate statements:

1) Your bridge should be firm.

2) Your bridge should allow consistent movement.

Pay attention to mastering ALL the bridges required for different shots, i.e. a closed loop bridge, an open bridge, a bridge for shooting off the rail and even the use of the mechanical bridge.

Now, once again, even very good players hit a slump now and then, and, they can usually identify the cause by reviewing their basics.

STANCE IS FIRST

The first thing that you should conquer during your learning process, and especially when you are reviewing your basics, is your stance.

Make sure that you are perfectly balanced and that your body does not interfere with you delivering the cue in a straight line to the shot.

Even very good players hit a slump now and then and can usually identify the cause by reviewing their basics.

BRIDGING OVER AN OBJECT BALL

Here's a bridge to use when the cue ball is in front of an object ball and bridging over the object ball is difficult.

1) Place your hand behind the object ball and make a tri-pod with your index, middle and ring fingers. Now add your pinky for support.

2) Make sure your fingers are on their tips and curl your thumb toward the knuckle of your index finger to form a channel for your cue.

3) You will have to jack up (raise the butt of your cue) to shoot over the object ball, but don't let the elbow of your back arm lean to either side. By keeping the upper part of your stroking arm straight in line with the shot while your forearm hangs loosely for the pendulum motion, it will help you stroke the ball easier.

4) Stand tip-toe on your back foot to get additional height if you need it.

THE CLOSED RAIL BRIDGE

The closed rail bridge is good to use when the cue ball is very close to the cushion.

1) Fold your thumb across your palm, as if you were showing the number to someone with your fingers.

2) Place your hand palm down on the rail, twisting your wrist slightly to allow the heel of your hand to lay flat.

3) Your thumb under your hand now keeps your index finger off the rail and provides a space for your cue to slide underneath and between your index and middle fingers.

4) The cue will be partially guided by the back of your thumb.

5) Now keep your cue as level as possible.

THE OPEN RAIL BRIDGE

1) The Open Rail Bridge is formed by creating a channel for the cue to lay in between the index finger and thumb. It is often necessary in order to keep your cue level when the cue ball is close enough to the cushion that it prevents you from bridging on the table surface.

2) Place your bridge hand flat on the rail with the underside of your knuckle joints touching the rail. This keeps your bridge hand down so you will not have to raise the butt of the cue.

3) Rest your cue in the "V" groove formed between your index finger and thumb while keeping your cue as level as possible.

4) Curl your index finger slightly, raising its knuckle, to deepen the channel and keep your cue stable.

MAKING A BRIDGE

1) Place bridge hand palm down, flat on table.

- 2) Lay your cue over your thumb and circle your index finger over the cue shaft to touch your thumb, forming a loop.
- 3) Move your middle finger, which is under the cue, over to contact your thumb and index finger.
- 4) Spread your other fingers on the table; they and the heel of your hand form a steady support.
- 5) Get comfortable. Turn your wrist a little if necessary to feel less awkward. Your index finger can be loosened or tightened to create a more comfortable loop.

GRIP IT LIGHTLY

Calling your hold on the cue the GRIP is really misleading. The word grip tends to have newcomers believe they should hold the cue very tightly. Actually, just the opposite is true.

Players should let the butt of the cue rest in their curved fingers with their thumb lightly touching the side of the cue for support. Gripping tightly locks up the wrist, tightens all the muscles in one's arm, and does not allow for the loose flowing swing that is required to stroke the cue ball.

CHALK UP

There is nothing more frustrating than the dreaded miscue. And, it usually pops up when least expected. And, we all know that one cause of the miscue is not chalking your tip before the shot. Chalk creates the grab or friction between the tip and the cue ball, preventing the hard leather tip from just sliding off the slick phenolic surface of the cue ball.

Some players think they can apply chalk and then shoot several shots without having to re-chalk. If you were able to see a slow-motion film of the cue tip contacting the cue ball, you might be surprised at the large spray of chalk that is knocked off your cue tip.

Make sure your tip is properly scuffed and shaped (there are many tools available from your local pool/billiard supply store or pro shop for the task) and then remember to chalk up before every shot.

WARM UP STROKES ARE NECESSARY

The purpose of the warm-up stroke is to ready yourself for the shot you are about to execute.

- 1) Take a couple full length warm-up swings to loosen, prepare and fully direct your swinging arm.
- 2) Stop, fine tune your aim, take three or four more warm-up strokes.
- 3) Make your final aim check, warm up again, and shoot.

The logic here is to take the time and patience (while looking back and forth to align pocket, object ball, cue ball and cue) to make the necessary adjustments and be moving your arm fluidly before executing the shot.

FOLLOW THROUGH MADE EASY

Make a chalk mark in the center of the table at one end, about 18 inches from the cushion. Shoot the cue ball off that spot into the far corner pocket. Use the chalk mark as a point of measure as to how far your cue tip follows the ball (follow through) after contact.

The object here is to have the tip of your cue go a minimum of 5 to 10 inches past the chalk mark after contact with the cue ball. This is called follow through and forces you to shoot through your shot rather than stopping, jabbing at the ball, or jumping up on your shot.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

It is very easy to let your eyes jump ahead of the stroke and either look toward the pocket or toward your positional objective.

Almost all pro players and top instructors agree that the eyes should stay glued to the object ball throughout the aiming and stroking phases and some say keep looking at the object ball all the way into the pocket.

IN A RUT?

Most often, when pro players are having problems with their game, "getting in a rut," they will go back to the basics to find out if they've developed a bad habit in their physical execution.

If you get in a rut, have an experienced player watch you play. Sometimes it could be something as simple as your head position or a foot turned too far in one direction.

STAND UP AGAIN

Once you are down over the shot you should only be concerned with the stroke you are going to execute and the contact point on the object ball you want to hit. If a new thought about strategy or position intrudes, STAND UP and start over. When you have taken your shooting stance, all those other decisions should have already been made.</>

DON'T RUSH

The stroke should start with a smooth, unhurried (almost leisurely) backstroke, with maybe a tiny hesitancy before the transition to the forward stroke. The forward stroke should have an almost casual beginning leading into a confident follow through. DON'T RUSH any parts of the mechanics of the stroke!

The natural tendency is to be in a hurry to get into the forward part of the stroke and a jerky stroke would be the most common result. A jerky stroke usually produces an inaccurate shot.

SEEK THE EXACT SPOT

It is easy to fall into the bad habit of playing what some call "area position". That's because it is a lot easier to try to put the cue ball in a general area when attempting to get shape on your next shot. The reason it becomes a habit is that one can get away with it quite often.

However, the truth is that you should play position to an EXACT spot on every shot, no matter how easy. The idea is to develop muscle memory, gain experience, get better, and prevent the formation of bad habits.

DON'T LET UP

The stroke should be unhurried and smooth, but once begun should be completed with total confidence and commitment.

Don't let up once your cue tip meets the cue ball. Your follow-through should be firm and complete. This will ensure the cue ball action that is desired and help avoid the tendency to "steer" the cue ball.

SEEK COMFORT

Stance is not only one of the basics of the cue sports, it is one of the most important elements of your game. And one of the most important elements in your stance is that you feel comfortable. Being comfortable means that you are both balanced and in a position to execute the shot while maintaining that balance.

During your normal stance you will find it easy to remain balanced by keeping your weight centered and spread evenly between both feet. However, when you have to stretch for a shot, you may find your stance on one leg with the other stretched out behind you as you attempt to reach for across the table. Again, seek a level of comfort so you can execute from this position.

Some top players change their stance for a power break shot, such as in 9-Ball. You may see them standing a little more to the side of their cue so their body does not interfere with the forward thrust into the break. But even in this situation, and probably even more so than normal, they are seeking balance and comfort in order to execute accurately.

WATCH AND LEARN

To be a good player you have to be a good student. Sometimes being a good student means being a good spectator.

If you have a flaw or fundamental that needs improvement, visit your local room and watch the top players execution in the area you are having problems. You can also tune in to TV and watch the pro players and how they handle the situation you are working on.

After you see what they do, close your eyes and repeat in your mind what you just saw and learned.

Now get on the table and try to repeat what you saw, without hitting the balls as hard as the better player you were watching did. Once you have mastered the flaw you were working on you can begin to hit the shot at normal speed.