

Bad Equipment

by BOB JEWETT



HAVE YOU EVER suspected that the equipment was conspiring against you? It sounds like a cop-out, but maybe you were right. Here is a rogues' gallery of inanimate enemies you may find on and near the table. Fore-

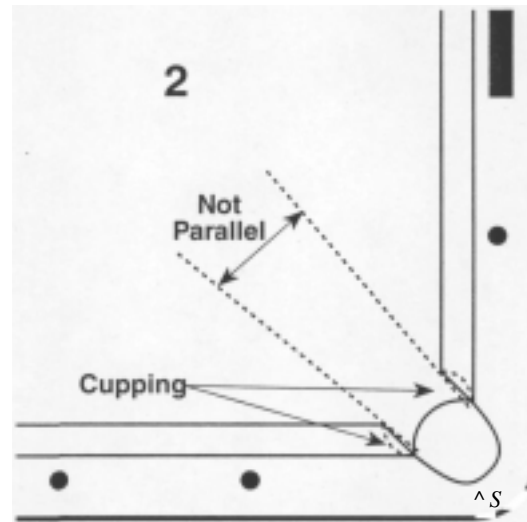
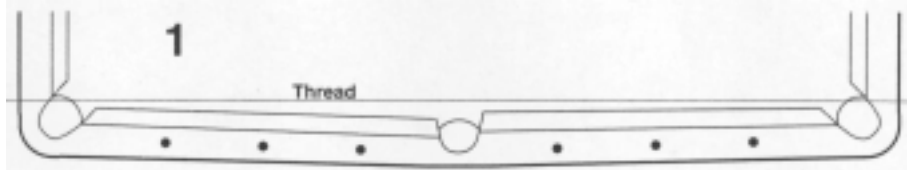
warned is forearmed.

Defects in the rails can make some apparently easy shots impossible. A common problem is rail misalignment, which can be checked roughly by sighting along the noses of the cushions. For more precision, stretch a thread just in front of the nose of the rail as shown in Figure 1. (The error has been exaggerated to demonstrate. This figure is based on a table I play on frequently, and only recently checked carefully.) The pair of cushions is badly tilted. If a ball is frozen to the left cushion, it is almost impossible to make it in the right corner pocket since it is bound to hit the protruding corner of the side pocket. Playing a frozen ball from right to left along the rail has no such obstacle.

Since it's impossible to set up a table without any error at all, we need to know how much misalignment is too much. A simple test is to place three balls frozen together on one side of the side pocket and see if the combination gets past the side unscathed. Be sure to try the shot in both directions and at various speeds; the slowest is most likely to have problems.

The cushion rubber may have come unglued or the rail bolts may be loose. These will result in a "thud" or "clunk" when a ball hits the rail at speed. There may also be a delayed "thud" if the nose of the cushion is so low that it makes the ball hop.

One of the first rail deficiencies I learned about the hard way is the rail groove — the gutter in the cloth formed where the ball is forced down under the nose of the cushion. It is more pronounced on thick, nappy cloth than on thinner, napless cloth. Not only does the groove work to freeze up any ball that comes too close, it will suck in any ball rolling down the rail just



off the nose. This can be beneficial, providing object balls a trail that leads them straight into the corner pocket, unless the extra friction from the nose stops the ball before the pocket. For the cue ball, this unexpected deflection can ruin the aim.

Everyone has played on a table that wasn't quite level. This can usually be fixed with shims under the legs, but this must be done uniformly to avoid twisting the table. A good level gets you close, but the final test is whether balls roll straight. Faster cloth magnifies any slope; conversely, covering with burlap will hide tilt.

Several things can go wrong with the slate. It can be "hump-backed" or "sway-backed" such that balls roll towards or away, respectively, from both side rails. Slate is formed from layers of mud and sometimes in a defective piece the layers will start to come apart, or de-laminate, perhaps aggravated by very dry conditions.

The two joints between the three pieces of slate can be misaligned, often resulting in strange rolls when a ball is rolling right along a joint (about two-and-a-half dia-

monds from each end rail). Usually a line will appear on the cloth where the balls bump against the raised joint.

If the plaster between the joints is broken, it can work its way under the cloth and produce amazing hops and rolls. Beeswax as a joint filler avoids this problem. Some very expensive tables are machined so accurately that their joints are left bare.

Pockets are ready targets for player hatred. My own pet peeve is the angle between the facings in the corner pockets which tends to reject near-perfect but fast shots. This problem gets worse when worn facings get "cupped" as in Figure 2.

When the ball hits the bottom of the pocket, the fun is just starting. The ball returns in the 1977 World 14.1 Championships were "spring loaded" with the ball-return guide wires extending right under the pocket opening. More than one perfect break shot jumped back onto the table. "Drop pockets" also can have this feature, but lack any obvious mechanism. It helps to have a ball or two in the pockets to act as shock absorbers.

Defects in balls are many and varied. Many balls in play are the wrong size, having gradually worn out of tolerance. The cue ball gets smaller from wear the fastest. To compare balls, freeze three in a line on the rail — say, the cue ball between two stripes — and place something flat — triangle or cue — on top. If the all three balls are the same height, each should touch the object.

A more accurate measure is a go/no-go gauge, a sheet of metal with two round holes drilled in it. The holes should have the diameter of the largest and smallest diameters permitted for pool balls (2.255 and 2.245 inches). Each ball should drop

through the larger hole but not through the smaller, no matter which way the ball is turned. A go/no-go gauge is also a much better test than calipers, which just measure diameters.

At one tournament where I had such a gauge, a third of the brand-new balls were within tolerance, a third were too small, and a third were too large.

Another problem with balls is bulging eyes. The eye — the usually white circle where the number is — is made of a separate batch of plastic resin than the body of the ball, and frequently it noticeably sticks out of the surface of the ball. Where will such a ball go when hit near the eye? Hard to tell.

Some cue balls have a hidden problem. They may be perfectly round and the right size, but they are lopsided none the less. When I first started taking pool seriously, I had to have my own cue ball, just like the local pros had, and it had to be the brand that was unanimously considered the best. Practicing lags one day, I noticed that the ball would roll off first to the left, then to the right. The difference was a whole diamond of sideways travel. It turned out that the ball was heavy on one side and would roll towards where the weight happened to be. Years later I saw a cue ball of that brand broken open, and it had an off-center weighted core. Today you see the same problem with some metal-loaded cue balls for coin-operated tables.

There are two problems that manufacturers should have solved years ago. Some triangles refuse to keep the three apex balls together. Simple geometry, but it eludes some triangle makers. To get a tight rack, temporarily remove the head ball as in a 14.1 rack, and carefully replace it after removing the triangle.

More defective manufacturing is found in metal mechanical bridge heads where flashing — that thin, sharp edge made in casting or molding — is routinely left where it will put horrible gouges in your shaft. Although some of the modern plastic designs are better, some also have sharp edges. Some local pool halls have carefully glued felt to the bridge heads. Elsewhere, players spare their shafts and use house cues for all bridge shots instead.

Has your game ever suffered, or have you seen a remarkable shot missed because of equipment irregularities? Send it in, and it may be in a future installment of "Excuses for those who need them."

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