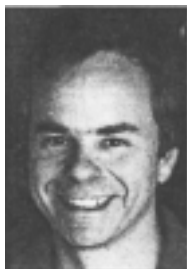


Collective Wisdom

It seems they've heard all the questions, but the pool players on the Internet still have no consensus about cues.

by BOB JEWETT



DO YOU LIKE to hang around the pool hall and discuss important topics over a beer or a cup of coffee? Subjects like what kind of cloth is best, Efren Reyes' latest miracle shot, whether inside English makes the ball

hug the rail, where the best action is in L.A.... When a pool hall isn't handy, you can get your pool-chat fix in the Internet newsgroup rec.sport.billiard (r.s.b for short). If you happen to find yourself in cyberspace, drop on by.

There is a standard practice in newsgroups called a FAQ list, for "Frequently Asked Questions." Once online for a few months, you'll find that each crop of newcomers tends to ask the same questions. A

list of those questions with answers is compiled by many volunteers to avoid some of the repetition. It helps the newcomers get up to speed without boring the old hands, having to answer the same question again and again. The FAQ is updated as newcomers bring up questions that haven't been asked before.

Some of the answers on r.s.b.'s FAQ are just pointers to other resources on the Internet, such as the BCA's web page that has the rules for the major pool games, or the E.J. Riley page that has not only snooker info, but covers other cue sports as well. Mark Avion, an r.s.b regular, has assembled and maintains a list of over 300 online links to pool, billiard, and snooker pages. Another, Ira Lee, has illustrated instruction of three-cushion — within a couple of clicks you'll see how to avoid that pesky five-cushion kiss-out you always get.

The two most common sorts of questions

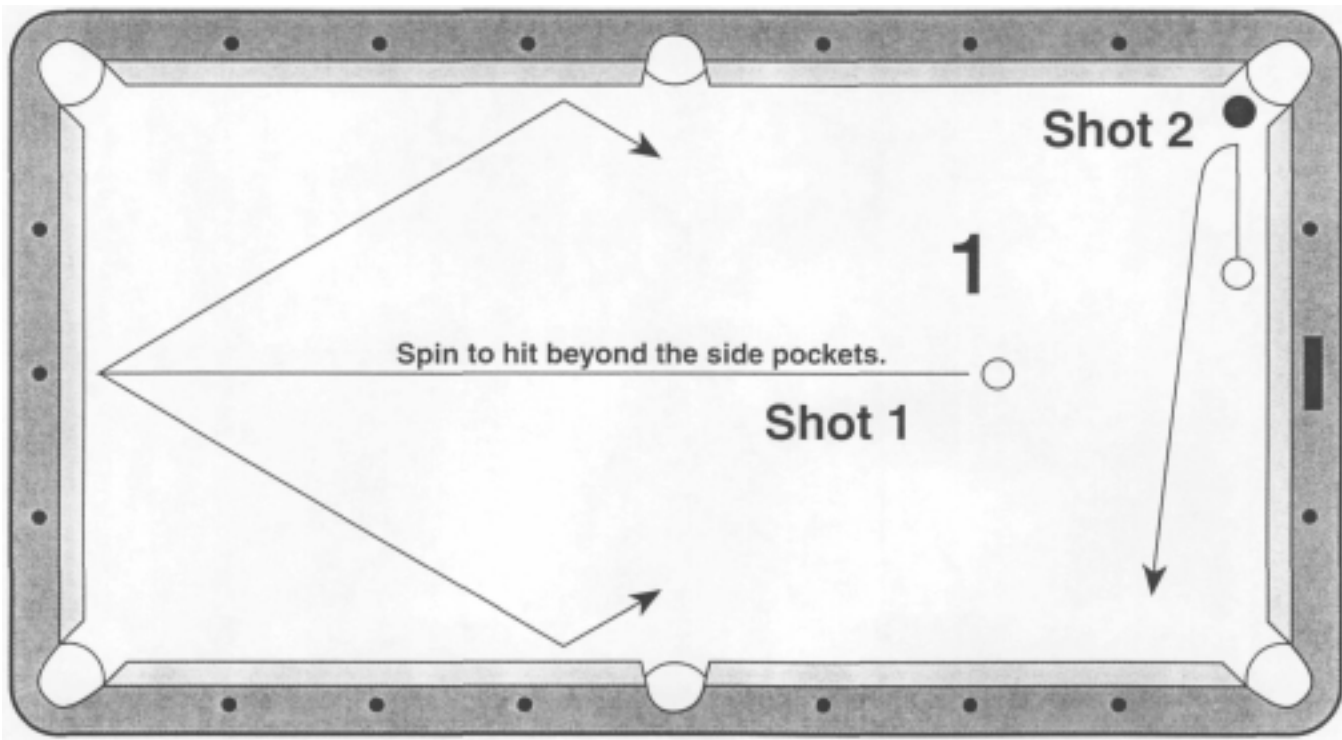
are about rules and cues. The FAQ briefly lists rules for 11 games, and suggests the purchase of a real, physical, paper rule book. I'll go into cue selection farther below, but first let's look at some of the other questions (with abbreviated answers) from the FAQ.

Q: How can I make my own table and cue?

The intrepid handyman is directed to articles in *Fine Woodworking Magazine* for plans, the July/August '86 for the cue, March/April '89 for the table. (Call 1-800-477-8727 for info). An r.s.b contributor, Bob Stantley, has a story online of how he built his own table between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Q: How can I learn about pool physics?

Besides the books by Jack Koehler and Wayland Marlow, there is a 60-page mini-



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dissertation available online by r.s.b'er Ron Shepard with discussion, equations, and diagrams covering many aspects of sticks, balls, and cloth. Also, two books in French are available: a reprint of Gustave Coriolis' 1835 master work, and a recent book by Regis Petit.

Q: How much room do I need for a table?

I'm amazed by how many people want to jam a pool table into a 12-foot by 15-foot room. Briefly: leave at least 64 unobstructed inches around all sides, or be ready to shoot with a cut-down cue. To find your personal elbow room needs, place a piece of plywood near a pool table like a wall, and move it back until you are comfortable shooting near it. You may want chairs and such in the room as well, so be sure to leave room for them.

Q: What is the "Diamond System?"

It is hard to describe any of the many diamond systems FAQ since it lacks table diagrams, but an example of the corner-five system is illustrated using text characters to draw the table. The reader is then directed to books by Robert Byrne, Eddie Robin and Walt Harris.

Q: My shaft has a dent. What now?

Eight different methods are discussed in a page and a half, ranging from just rubbing with a glass rod to steaming with a wet cloth and a soldering iron. Try a stream of steam from a tea kettle directed through a small hole punched in aluminum foil. Disclaimer: neither *Billiards Digest* nor I will replace your shaft if you ruin it.

And finally...

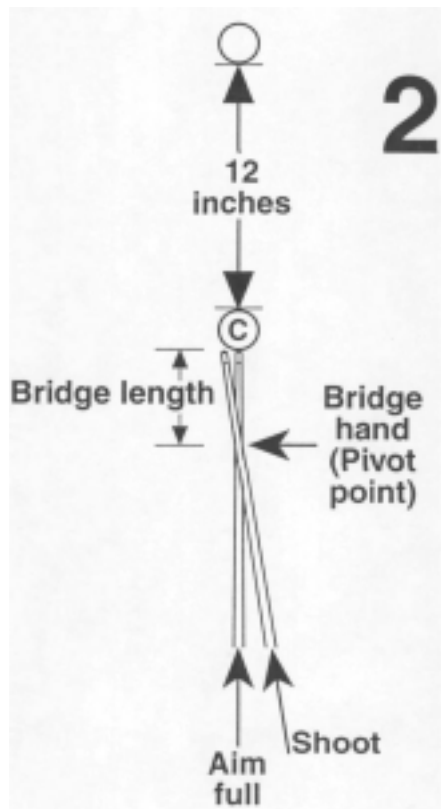
Q: What kind of cue should I get?

If opinions were pennies, r.s.b would be rich beyond compare. Someone might mention that his Williams Swash-buckler hits the ball great, and the next person will call him an idiot for owning such crap. When you get into personal things — religion, sex or cue sticks — on the Internet, be prepared for "strong interactions," as the physicists say.

Before buying a stick, you might ask whether you're ready to own one. There is a huge variation between sticks available today, and if you're a relative beginner, your game and style may still be evolving. Trying different house cues will let you find a type that fits you now. When your style has settled down some, and your game — especially the spin part — has developed

to the point that the stick becomes important, buy your first stick.

Here's a quick test to see if you'll benefit from cue ownership. In Figure 1, Shot 1, shoot the cue ball straight up the middle of the table with side spin. Can you consistently hit the side rails beyond the side pockets? In Shot 2, can you consistently bring the cue ball clear across the table with just draw? If so, it's time to buy a stick, carefully.



Q: Which brand?

It is pointless to suggest a particular brand, since sticks within a single brand often hit the ball very differently.

You need to play with a cue for a while to see if it is right for you. If purchasing at a retail store, ask to shoot with a variety of sticks, and include the test below. If the store refuses to let you chalk the tip — a common problem reported in r.s.b — go elsewhere. If you buy by mail order, ask about the return policy. The stick must be able to spin the ball properly.

Some basic properties of the stick are obvious — diameter, length, weight, balance — all of which you should sort out during your "house cue" phase. In a jointed cue, you also need to select the joint, wrap

and decoration.

Q: What about joints, wrap and decorations?

There are lots of opinions about joints. The problems, like the cues themselves, is that there seems to be nothing but opinions, so the FAQ isn't much help when it comes to joints. For the wrap, get something that doesn't let your hand slip even on hard shots, unless you feel the bizarre urge to develop a slip stroke. For decoration, realize that you're buying style rather than playability.

Suppose you have a stick in hand, ready to test. What shots should you try? First, just shoot straight over the spots, like Shot 1 but without spin, at various speeds. Is the stick solid or does it have a click, rattle or buzz? You should only hear the quick thud of tip on ball. Next, try the shots in Figure 1 to see if the stick lets you spin the ball up to your usual standard.

The last test is a little more complicated. It measures the single most important characteristic of a stick: how much it makes the cue ball veer to the side when applying side spin. This is known as "squirt" or "deflection."

As shown in Figure 2, place the cue ball about 12 inches from an object ball (no pocket is involved). Line up as if for a perfectly straight shot right through the center of the cue ball full at the object ball. Now, without moving your bridge hand, pivot the stick for a maximum left spin shot without draw or follow. Stroke and shoot along this new line. Squirt will make the cue ball go to the right of the expected line, and for a very squirry stick it may even hit on the right side of the object ball.

Now for the hard part. Adjust your bridge length so that the cue ball lands full on the object ball, and sits there spinning in place if you don't draw or follow. If the cue ball moves to the left, lengthen your bridge; to the right, shorten.

The distance between the cue ball and this perfect pivot point measures the squirt quality of the stick — lengths between eight inches and three feet have been reported in r.s.b — and longer is better.

This method of measuring squirt can also be used to compensate for it during aiming, provided that you adjust your bridge length to the perfect pivot point. Aim without side spin, and then pivot the cue over to give as much spin as you need and stroke through.

Bob Jewett is the keeper of the rec.sport.billiard FAQ (<http://www.accessone.com/~mavlon/faq.txt>).