



Peeling the Onion

Study all the layers of shot opportunities on the table before you shoot.

Some problems are like onions. You start by seeing the first layer of the problem. Peel it away and there is a second layer. Once that layer is removed, there is a third, and so on. A good pool-shot problem will take you though a large part of your table savvy if you're willing to take the time to study all the layers. The two examples below you have seen before in these pages (Diagram 1 appeared in the June '98 "Solids & Stripes," and Diagram 2 appeared in George Fels' "Your Shot" column in April '98). You probably scanned each quickly, nodded at the offered solution, and passed on. Let's look deeper.

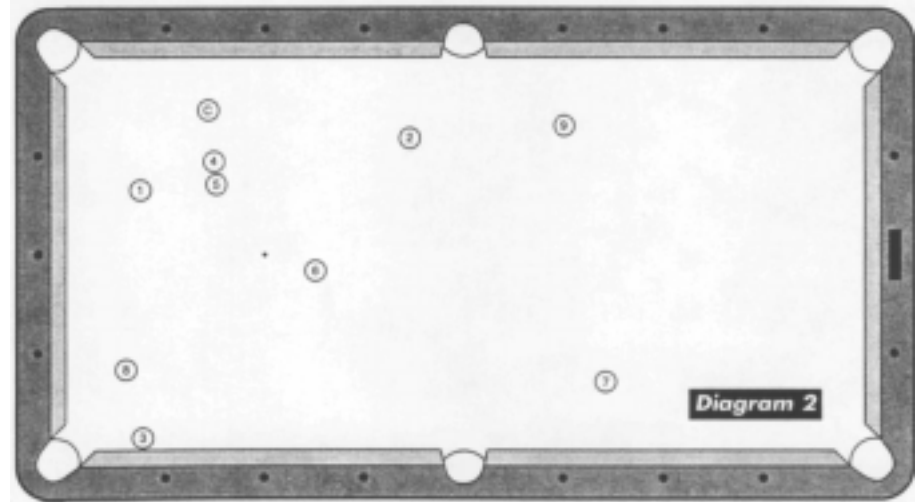
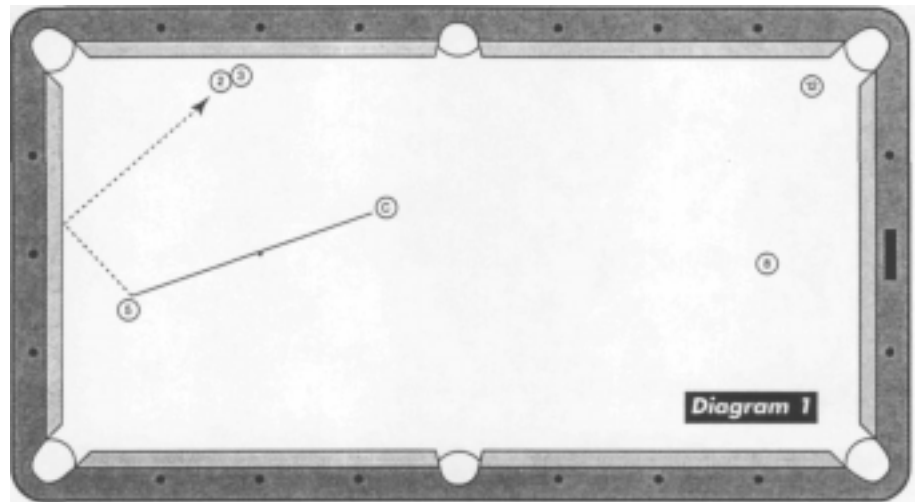
Diagram 1 is an 8-ball situation. With no good shot at your solids, and a plum waiting for your opponent, an aggressive safety is needed. One way is shown. Before reading on, answer these questions: What do you like about the shot? What do you dislike? How much accuracy in angle, spin and speed is needed? Is there a better shot?

The shot has a chance to break up your cluster and to leave your opponent behind the parts. Done well, it will win the game for you, but there are several dangers. What if you land on the near side of the 2 ball? Game over! You also lose if you land on the other side of the 2 ball after two rails with too much speed — the cue ball slides between the balls and the rail and into the clear for your opponent. The angle shown looks like it needs some side spin. Try the shot five times. What's your percentage? Finally, for us short players, the shot is a stretch on a full-sized table; I'd look for something else.

Can you see enough of the 2 ball to play directly at it softly? If so, you can put the cue ball exactly where the two is while banking the 2 just off the rail. Don't shoot so softly that the 2 is left in the path of the three — your opponent will be kicking at the 12 and is likely to leave the cue ball up there. A good spot for the 2 is halfway between the 3 and the 5. That should complicate your opponent's kick.

A danger with this second alternative is that the cue might hit the 3 first. The 3 might then bank back out far enough for the snooker, but not very likely. Favor contact on the left side of the 2, but not so far over that you get the kiss. Try this shot five times also.

Another aspect of shots like this is the



"safe shade" that your blocker balls, in this case just the 3, provide. If only the 12 and the 3 are on the table, where is the safe region to leave the cue ball?

Imagine the 12 is the sun, and look where the shade of the 3 lands. If you can leave the cue ball touching that shade — or better, in full shade — your opponent has a kick, jump or masse next. (This is a simple example; Diagram 2 will be a little more complex.) The most important thing to note here is that the area between the 3 and the side rail about two-and-a-half balls wide is all shady. Is there an easy way to get there that uses the long shape to ease the precision speed requirement? (A similar technique is used to play position — play along rather than across the best line for the next shot.)

Play to hit half of the 2 ball on the left side, allowing the cue ball to roll smoothly on the cloth. There is no scratch possible unless the hit is way off, and the natural angle is off the end rail and into the shade, with just a touch of right side. See if you can't do five good safes in a row. Can you leave the 2 ball by the other corner pocket at the same time?

The importance of understanding the half-ball angle cannot be stressed too much. If you are still unsure of why it's essential for good position and safety play, see the chapter about it in Robert Byrne's "Advanced Book of Pool and Billiards," or take an hour's lesson on it from an instructor. After studying it, you can see how an apparently simple safe can take us into

manifold considerations. A word of advice: If we're in a match and you start to analyze each shot this deeply, I'll have the ref put the shot clock on you. The practice table is the place to work out all these details and learn to recognize the tricks and traps. When in a match, you apply that learning.

Diagram 2 is a shot from a game of 9-ball. What would you shoot? What problems are there with that shot? How would the problems change if the balls were rearranged some? There is no good shot for the 1, so again an aggressive safety is indicated. The 4 is not quite pocketable. If you bank the 1 to the other end of the table, and draw to land the cue ball softly on the 4, you have a good chance to run out with ball-in-hand.

What happens if the 1 falls into the side pocket off one rail — it is close — or the corner pocket off two rails? The planned safety is also safe on the 2 ball. (Exchange the positions of the 2 and 8 balls, and pocketing the 1 on a fluke bank becomes a game-winning bonus.)

Are you familiar with the two-rail banking rule-of-thumb that applies to the 1 ball? If the 1 is sent along roughly a 45-degree angle between the long rail and the short rail — for example, if it is hit full on this shot — it will go close to the upper right corner. If you haven't tried this shot before,

take a few minutes right now. Note how speed, distance from the rail, and distance along the end rail modify the 45-degree rule.

Let's go back to the "shade" idea, to see whether banking the 1 on two rails is a good shot. Considering the 9-2-4-5 as shade balls, what region near the present 1 ball is safe for a "sun" ball between the upper right corner and the name plate? Of course, this depends on exactly where the 1 ball stops if it is missed, but it looks like the upper left corner is a very shady part of the table, especially due to the 9.

Here's the proposed shot: bank the 1 two rails to the corner, while drawing the cue ball back to where the 2 is at least visible, if not a good shot. Nudging the top side of the 4 would be a nice feature, but that would require excellent control. This shot is worth ten tries to get a feel for all the aspects.

Whenever you are driving the object ball to a safety, another thing to consider is how well you'll be set up to try to get your opponent on a second foul and then win with a third foul. If you can send the object ball next to another object ball, or even better, a cluster of balls, a second safety is made much easier, often nothing but a stop shot at a slight angle to leave your opponent frozen

to the other ball. In the case of playing towards a cluster, you may even set yourself up for an easy cluster break if the ball itself doesn't do the job. Another advantage of this tactic is that those extra balls cut off some of the banking paths to the object ball.

One last layer: suppose the 9 is on the far end rail near either pocket, and there seems to be no chance to pocket the 1 on a bank and still get safe. Then strive to leave the 1 ball on the same end rail for an early win by combination.

Both seeing and executing the suggestions above require practice. See the August issue for a structured way to practice banks. Soft, precise draw, like that required for Diagram 2, can be learned on the pool table, but if you try straight caroms, you'll quickly learn speed control of both balls on soft draw shots. The half-ball angle can again be practiced on a pool table, but if you have access to a snooker table, try the great game of English billiards for the best half-ball training available.

Remember — Do your onion peeling on the practice table and your opponent will be the one weeping in the match.

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