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Making Contact

How to effectively play a ball frozen to the rail.

For a beginner, one of the hardest rules to understand is the requirement to contact a rail. Stated briefly:

No-Rail Foul: On a shot that does not pocket a ball, some ball must be driven to a rail after the cue ball contacts an object ball, or the shot is foul.

The main reason to have this rule is to avoid repetitive simple safeties. At 14.1 or one-pocket, you can imagine the players repeatedly rolling the cue ball up to the nearly solid rack.

At 8-ball and 9-ball, the chance for a full-rack stalemate is less likely, but consider the positions in Diagram 1, which could be from either game. In situation A, if no rail were required, the players could shoot softly to just touch the object ball. With a rail required, a more difficult shot would be needed — perhaps skimming the object ball and spinning the cue ball to the far end rail — and it is likely to leave something for the opponent.

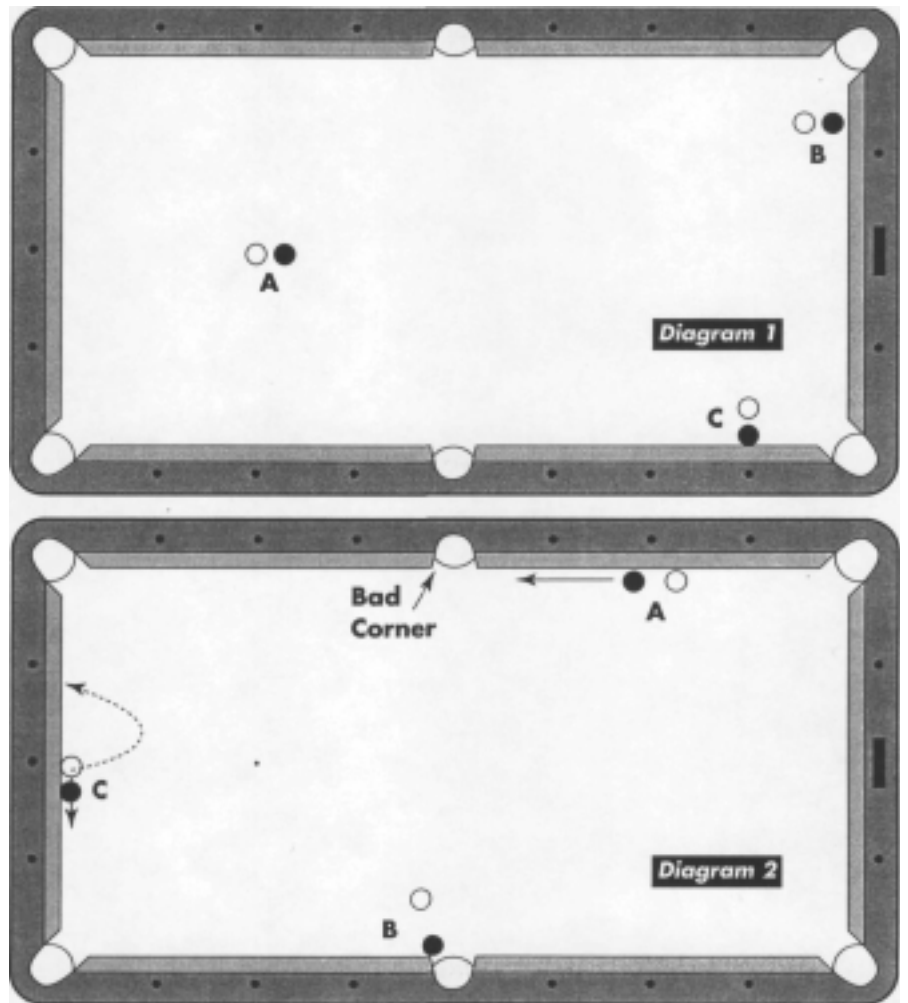
In situation B, which was covered here in October 1997, it is easy to get a rail contact. In 14.1 (and apparently no other game), another rule comes into play: when the object ball is within a ball of the cushion, each player is allowed two simple safes on it, after which the object ball is considered frozen to the rail.

This brings us to another wrinkle, shot C. When the object ball is frozen to the rail, driving it deeper into the rail doesn't count as a cushion contact. Otherwise, the position might well result in a stalemate. One simple way to state this requirement is: A ball is driven to a rail if it is not touching a rail and then touches a rail.

This definition, along with the rule above and the "two shots and it's frozen" rule, covers the problem fairly well. There are a few situations that would not be fouls according to the above, yet are still fouls by the present wording of the rules.

In Diagram 2, suppose the object ball is frozen and you try to shoot it straight into the corner. Unfortunately, the far corner of the side pocket is sticking out, and the object ball hits it and rolls out to the center of the table. Foul. Under the current rules, you do not get credit for the object ball contacting the rail if it starts frozen to unless it leaves the rail, hits a ball, and then returns to that rail, which includes both side cushion selections.

In shot B, the object ball is frozen to the



corner of the side pocket. You hit it too full, and it rattles between the side pocket jaws and doesn't drop. Foul. Since the object ball started frozen to the rail, you again get no credit for contact on that rail even though the ball clearly leaves the rail between contacts. It's not clear what the call should be if you try to force the object ball through the corner of the pocket and it hits the bottom of the pocket and then rebounds onto the table. Probably a foul.

A little more unusual is shot C, where both balls are frozen to the rail and to each other. Suppose you shoot a thin shot with masse to bring the cue out and back to the same cushion. As long as the cue ball gets back to the cushion, the shot is OK, even if the object ball doesn't reach the pocket.

Should A and B be fouls? Clearly the object ball is driven to a cushion on each. Is there any danger of a repetitive safety? Very unlikely. The rule would certainly be simplified by the wording above.

Those who play snooker know that no rail contact is required at that game. How are stalemates avoided? Part of it is that most no-rail safeties are rolled softly up to balls that the opponent is not allowed to hit on his next shot (the colors while reds are left). When it's down to just the colors, the larger table makes playing a shot that separates the cue and object balls the winning strategy.

Knowing what the rules are can often get you ball-in-hand. Remember, though: a frozen ball must be so declared before the shot, or it is not considered frozen.