

Bob Jewett



Practice Session 2000

Cyberspace isn't a bad place to look if you're seeking extra practice.

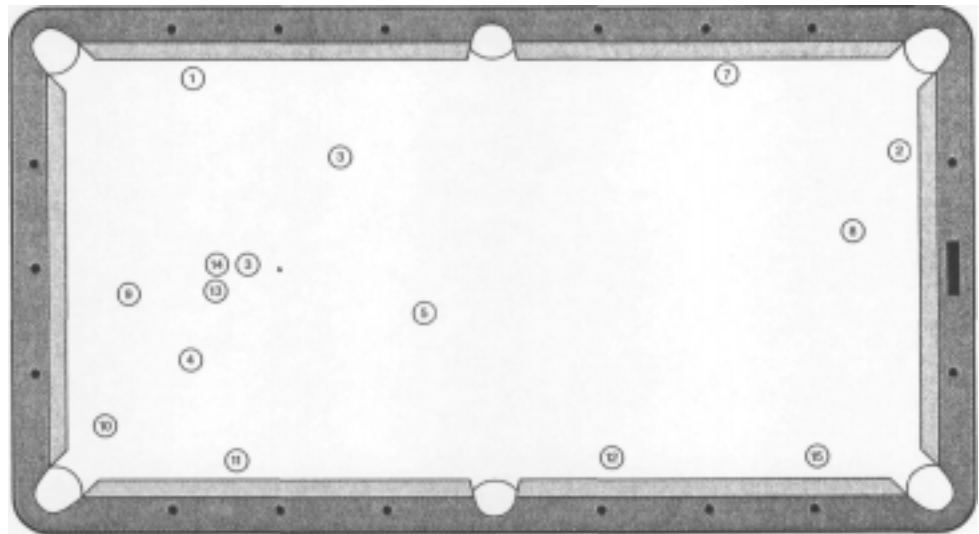
Do you want to put a little pressure into your practice? The following game will give a good test to beginners and experts alike, and if you can analyze your mistakes, you may find what you need to work on.

The game "Fargo" was born on the Internet. It is derived from "Equal Offense" (which had been played by on-line teams) and from Allen Hopkins' "Q-Skill" test, which also had a recent on-line tournament. In "Equal Offense," you smash the balls open and run as many as you can by the rules of 14.1 (straight pool). Your score is the total balls pocketed in 10 tries, with a limit of 20 balls for any one try, so a perfect score is 200. Hopkins' game begins about the same, although there are differences in where the cue ball is placed. There also is an added wrinkle that you have to run the last five balls of the rack in rotation, and there is no 14.1 break shot. Since each of the last five balls count double, it is possible to score 200 here as well.

Here are the main rules of "Fargo":

1. Rack 15 balls in any order you choose, and play a smash break. Scratches and jumped balls on the break don't count against you. Any ball pocketed on the break spots up. Place a coin on the cushion with "heads" up.
2. Take cue ball in hand anywhere on the table after the break, and start running balls as in straight pool for one point each. Shoot any ball in any pocket, but you have to call your shot. Extra balls made on a called shot count, too.
3. When you feel you can make most of the remaining balls on the table in rotation, turn the coin over, and begin shooting the balls in numerical order. The game is still call shot, but each ball, including extras, count two points each. The flipped coin is to make sure you have declared your intention to change to rotation.
4. Your inning ends on a miss, foul (which has no point penalty, but balls made on the foul don't count), or when you pocket all 15 balls of the rack. Start fresh from a new rack, and shoot a total of 10 racks for a competition.

The idea is to change from random order to rotation order when you feel you have



things under control. It is possible to score 300 points if you run out all 10 racks in rotation. Possible, but unlikely, even for Efren Reyes, who warms up for 9-ball with racks of rotation.

If you note where you go wrong in each rack, you will pick up strategy quickly on your own, but here are some general tips.

The best break spreads the balls well without pocketing many. Remember that anything pocketed on the break is spotted, and that adds to whatever cluster remains where the rack started.

The best order to rack the balls in could take a while to figure out. I usually rack with all the high balls in front and the low balls behind, but after a break that really spreads the balls, it's hard to tell what started where. If you want to be fanatical about it, try this: Keep track of where each ball starts and goes to, and arrange for the low balls to end up at the head of the table. This will let you begin your rotation part in a relatively uncluttered area.

How to begin with ball in hand depends on your skill level. If you are scoring less than 50 in 10 racks, you need to concentrate on simply clearing the loose balls off the table, so place the cue ball for the easiest shot possible. See if you can start with three stop-shots in a row. A common mistake is to be careless about stopping the cue ball precisely (perhaps with an inch or two of movement) so that the next shot is also easy. If you don't have the hang of

stop-shots yet, try to find a sequence of three balls that can be made with soft rolling shots. At this level of play, don't worry at all about the rotation phase unless the next several shots are already in rotation order, beginning, of course, with the lowest ball on the table.

As you advance to the next level, you need to consider breaking clusters early in the rack. An ideal time to do this is with the beginning ball in hand; you can get a good angle to break, and usually have a "safety" ball in case the cue ball settles against remnants of the cluster. You may have a few clusters to deal with, but don't get too ambitious. The rotation phase should still be avoided unless you get down to the end and a fairly easy series presents itself.

Once you consistently score more than 100, you're ready to plan the table for the rotation phase. You should be able to solve most of the problems within the first six shots or so. If you can do this, the remaining nine balls should be set up for an easy nine-ball run. Here are some major points to include in your planning:

— Get rid of balls in front of pockets. More generally, get rid of balls that block shots as early as possible. Try for example, if the 14 ends up blocking both the 5 and 7 to a corner pocket, it's got to go. If it were the 5 blocking the same pocket, it's not as big a problem unless you need that pocket to solve other problems on the table.

— Decide on which ball will start your

Bob Jewett

rotation phase and work out a plan to get to it. If the 1 ball is on the middle of the head cushion and the 2 ball is on the middle of the foot cushion, you should consider getting rid of the one early and starting the rotation with the 2, assuming the next ball is close to it.

— Get rid of balls on the long cushions. These are sure show-stoppers if there are two or three on the same rail. At straight pool, the solution is easy. Just leave the cue ball between them, and shoot to opposite corner pockets. The same situation in rotation is far more challenging, since you may have to return to that rail several times.

— Don't get married to your first plan. You will get out of line at times, and flexibility in shot sequence can fix things.

— Let your scores tell you whether you change to rotation too quickly. It is human nature to say, "I could make the 6 in the far pocket and slide over just right for the 7 and then draw back six feet to where I can see the 8..." but five balls at one each is better than zero at two apiece.

In Diagram 1 is an example situation right after the break. From the point of view of each level of strategy above, how would you start the rack?

A beginner should look for several easy roll-it-into-the-pocket shots to begin with.

Play the 5 into pocket A with a little angle and roll up for an easy 7 shot, followed by the 8 and the 2. As long as the cue ball is not left straight in on that ball, getting the cue ball down the table for the 1 looks doable, but don't worry that far ahead.

If your sights are set on clearing the table, the main problem is the cluster near the spot. The 9 ball is a good ball to break with, and if the cue ball ends up against the 13 or 14, the 10 is your escape. Caution! Don't hit the shot so hard you drive the parts of the cluster against cushions or other balls. After the break, the only remaining problem is the 15 which blocks the 12 ball.

If you're going to try for a substantial portion of the rack at rotation, what are the main problems? Of course the cluster is still a hurdle, and the 10 blocks the 4, so beginning as above still looks good. The 15 is a major problem with the 12 where it is, but the 15 could be used to get shape on the pesky 2 ball. Although the 7 is one of two balls on that rail, it is in a perfect location for access to the 8. There is no need to plan all of that, though, until you see how your first shot moves the balls in the cluster. With a good break — move the 3 ball a foot towards the center of the table and spread the 13-14 slightly — you might

take just the 9, 10, 15 and 2 out of order, and then the rest of the balls in rotation. That would score $4+22=26$, which is very good for one rack.

A tournament in "Fargo" has already been held, and the results are available on the Web at <http://www.playpool.com/asp/>. Full statistics are there as a spread sheet. The 20 players shot three sets of 10 innings each, except for one set that was forfeited. The grand average rose five points (or about half a ball per rack) in each succeeding round — from 100 to 110 at the end — which suggests improvement of the participants. In 590 total racks played, there were 30 innings with 0 or 1 points scored. At the other end, there were 20 innings with scores over 22.

I'd like to thank three people who have contributed to "Fargo". The inventor is Mike Page, who happens to live in "Fargo". The name of the game is also a convoluted acronym better not repeated here. The tournament director, webmaster and statistician was Ed Mercier, who runs the Wisconsin State Pocket Billiard Championships in his spare time. Ron Shepard, the author of the on-line analysis of the physics of billiards mentioned in a previous column, contributed to the strategy analysis.