



Into Focus

Concentrate, and bring your aiming system into focus.

In the June issue of *Billiards Digest*, while discussing aiming systems, I mentioned that one practical use of such systems is to help you focus on the shot at hand. All the systems had flaws, some so bad that it is amazing anyone can make a ball while claiming to use them. Below are some better ways to build concentration and focus on each shot.

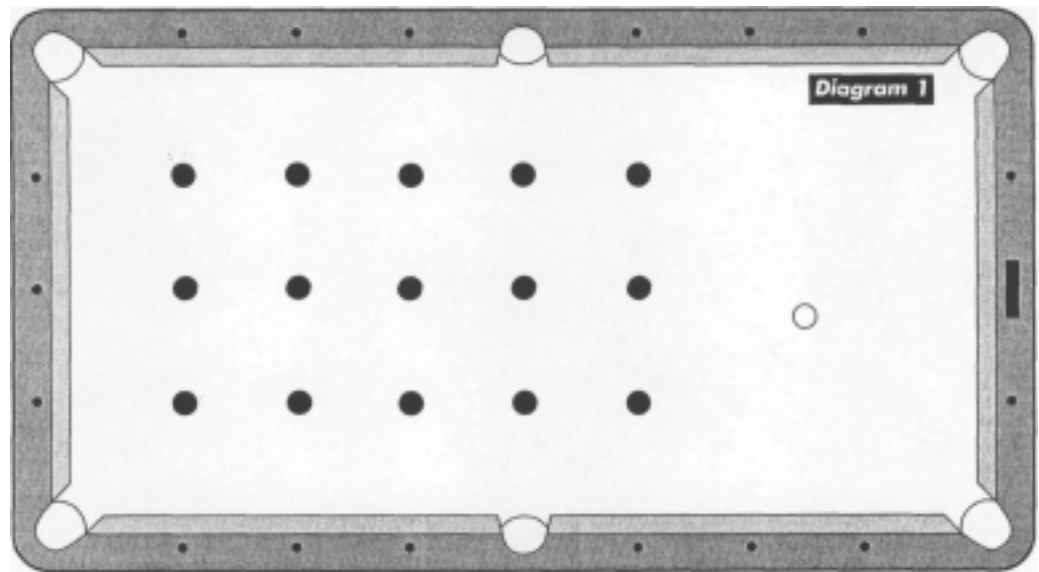
I think a large part of focus is your attitude towards the game. I can't help you directly with this, since I'm not a sports psychologist, but I can recommend a book that helped my own game a lot, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, by W. Timothy Gallwey.

Originally published in 1974, it has recently been revised and reissued in paperback. If you are in the camp that feels you have to hate your opponent, this may be the book that gets your game back on track. While it's not directly about pool, the applicability will be clear from the first pages.

Many instructors teach some kind of "stroke sequence" to use on each shot. This provides a framework to develop your game, and promote rhythm and consistency. It can also help you to focus. Some sequences are as simple as "take three strokes and then shoot," but I think it is better to get all the necessary actions into the routine explicitly. Here is the sequence I teach that is part of many Billiard Congress of America instructors' courses:

1. Plan. Before you even approach the shot, plan what you are going to do. Study the cut angle, and decide on the spin and speed needed to get the cue ball to its next position. This step prevents those embarrassing shots that are missed because you finally decide what to do on the final stroke.

2. Approach. Do not approach the shot from the side. Instead, stand a little back from the table, moving until your head is along the line of the shot. This step ensures that every shot begins with the same physical placement as closely as possible.



3. Stance. Move into your stance, keeping your head along the line of the shot. I'm not going into detail about which foot needs to be moved how many inches and turned which way. I'll assume that you know how to walk without thinking about it. You must, however, achieve the goal of the stance, which is to provide a firm foundation for the stroke.

4. Fiddle. Take some warm-up strokes. The tip should move from very near the cue ball to nearly back to the bridge hand. This allows you to get a better feel for the line of the stick relative to the line of the shot. Of course, your eyes should be switching back and forth between the object ball and cue ball during these strokes to see if the line is still correct. Stop with the tip at the cue ball. Yes, come to a complete stop, with your body motionless.

5. Decide. Make a conscious decision about whether you are ready to shoot to accomplish the plan chosen in Step 1. Is the line right for the cut? Is the spin right to move the cue ball? Do you have a feel for the speed? Does everything else about the shot feel right?

6. Adjust. If the shot does not feel right in Step 5, make an adjustment. If it is a minor adjustment, perhaps hitting with slightly more draw, do it in place. If the adjustment is major, or the shot feels completely wrong, get up and start over. If you

make a small change, go back to Step 4, and repeat the Adjust, Fiddle, Decide cycle until you're satisfied.

7. Shoot. When the shot does feel right, take a final slow back-stroke, and come through as straight as you can to make the shot. It is surprising how many players will do their adjustment on the final stroke, moving the bridge a little, or swinging the butt of the cue to get a little helping spin. All that must be done before — in step 6 — if you want to be consistent. The final stroke needs to be as constant as possible, which means perfectly straight along the chosen line, with only the speed varying.

All of the above is a lot to put into each shot, but if you practice the sequence, it will become automatic. Note that each required part of the shot is accounted for, and the shot isn't triggered until you are sure you are ready. Work on your sequence on the practice table before trying it in a match.

Another kind of technique to focus your thoughts is to add an extra requirement to the shot. If you are having trouble keeping your stroke straight, try the "ferrule focus." Normally you will be watching the object ball on the final, power stroke. On a few shots, you may be watching the cue ball. For this drill, watch only the ferrule of your stick on the final stroke. If you have done the sequence correctly, you will be planted

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solidly along the correct line to make the shot, and with a straight stroke, the shot has to score, even if you closed your eyes. Watching the ferrule will give you immediate feedback about the straightness of your final stroke.

Another added challenge to help focus is to try for a perfect entry to the pocket. This drill will help a lot if you are missing easy shots. On every shot, work to drive the object ball exactly over what Toby Vaughn calls the "Ideal Aiming Point" or IAP. That is the single point in the pocket that is the perfect target for all shots. In the corner pockets, it is where the two rail grooves would cross. For the side pockets, it is the center of the lip of the slate drop. Mark these spots, and do not be satisfied with a shot unless the object ball rolls over the mark.

A more advanced challenge is to play "no cushion" pool of some kind. You have to plan your run so that the cue ball never touches a rail. At 8-ball, this is not too tough if your opponent has obligingly cleared most of his obstructions from the table. At 9-ball, you will need to get a precise angle on each ball to allow a simple stun, follow or draw to get a similarly ideal

angle on the next ball. Note that this is usually the "wrong" way to run a rack of 9-ball, where setting up for one- or two-cushion position allows much larger target zones for cue ball placement.

Diagram 1 shows a practice setup for this drill. The 15 object balls are on the intersections of the diamonds. Begin with the cue ball in hand behind the line, and run the balls off without the cue ball touching a cushion. If the goal seems impossible at first, allow yourself some number of "hand spans," in which you get to move the cue ball a distance up to the span of your stretched-out fingers before shooting the next shot. In the strict form of "no cushion" pool, the cue ball isn't allowed to bump any balls.

Many players seem to look for things to break their concentration. One player I know will notice any minor movement in his line of sight or to his side, or behind him, and will stand up and start over repeatedly. It's amazing to me that he can make a ball.

I saw the other extreme in a practice session of Nick Varner's. Nick was attempting to run as many balls as possible in one pocket (that's another challenge you might

try for focused practice). He had been shooting sets of this for a few hours on the table right in the middle of the pool room, which was chosen because it had the best cloth, although everyone who came in would have to pass it on the way back to the counter.

Two policemen — levis, blue windbreakers with "POLICE" on the back, guns strapped to their hips — came in the front door and proceeded by the table and back to the rear of the building, to round up a teenager who hadn't really done anything, but wasn't where he was supposed to be. I was watching as they got the kid into an arm-lock to move him away from his friends by the pin ball machines. Nick continued to play. As the gendarmes moved towards the door, they stopped right by Nick's table to put the cuffs on for a more comfortable stroll to the car. Nick continued to play. He never mentioned the incident, and I believe he did not even notice that it was going on. The next time you hear someone whine about some minor distraction, you might relate this story. In the meantime, work on your own concentration — Gallwey's book will help — so you won't be the whiner.