



8-Ball Rules

The many different versions of one of today's most common games.

Do you think you know the rules of 8-ball? Unless you check the rule book fairly often, your knowledge is likely out of date. Since an early version of the game appeared in 1925, there have been at least four major revisions and many minor modifications.

Fig. 1 is taken from page 53 of the 1925 Brunswick-Balke-Collender publication, *Rules Governing the Royal Game of Billiards*. It is quite clearly 8-ball, but it is a kinder, simpler form of the game. It is also apparently a marketing ploy, since it requires a special set of balls to play it.

A main theme running through the history of 8-ball is the method of choosing groups. In 1925, if you only made one kind of ball on the break, that was what you got. If you made both kinds, you chose. If neither, your opponent presumably chose before his shot, but the rules are silent on this case.

Scratches had no penalty except giving your opponent ball-in-hand behind the line. In fact, it seems that scratching when making the black ball was not loss of game. The only way that you could lose early was to pocket the black before your colors were gone. Also, there was no requirement to contact your own object ball first, even when playing the black, so all combinations were fair.

The rule for a bad break was a little strange. You had to get two balls to a cushion or pocket a ball on the break, or your opponent got to break and select a group whether he pocketed a ball or not.

The entire 1925 rules for 8-ball are barely a page long. I wonder whether they succeeded in selling any sets of red/yellow/black balls?

In 1945, a brand-new rules publication appeared from a new organization, the Billiard Association of America. This would transform into the Billiard Congress of America in 1948, and the 1945 rule book was carried along with a slightly different cover but identical rules text through the 1963 edition.

This new version of 8-ball was both closer to and further away from the present game than B.B.C.Co. pool. Standard numbered balls were used in high and low groups. These were not referred to as "stripes and solids," perhaps because some sets of balls were not the current solid/stripe style.

The most notable change in 1945 was a

special rule for the 1 and 15 balls. These had to go in the right and left-side pockets, as indicated in **Diagram 2**. Although the rule book said nothing about where those two special balls should be racked — only the eight was specified — I've played in an old-time room where the standard spots were as shown, presumably to keep them out of play at the start of the game.

If you made your special ball in a wrong pocket, it spotted up, and you went on shooting. This rule is actually quite useful to a good player who can continue to make the

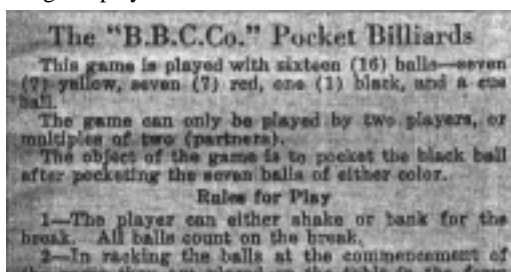


Fig. 1. An early variation of 8-ball from 1925.

ball off the spot, perhaps breaking up a last cluster, and then taking a few shots to get onto the right pocket.

Choice of group, in 1945, was up to the breaker if he pocketed a ball or up to his opponent if not; balls pocketed on the break were irrelevant.

A major addition was a lot of ways to lose with the 8 ball. If you hit the 8 ball directly when playing it, then you had to drive the 8 or the cue ball to a cushion or you lost. This rule was probably mistaken for 20 years, as you would lose even if you had driven several of your opponent's balls to cushions — it had to be the 8 or the cue ball to a cushion. On the other hand, if you were hooked on the 8 ball, and you banked to hit it, you didn't need to hit any cushion afterwards. If you didn't hit the 8 at all, you lost, as well as if you scratched or made the 8 in the wrong pocket.

All combinations were allowed, except when on the 8, so the concept of "hit your own ball first" did not yet exist.

In 1925, you could make the black in some random pocket on a combination and scratch, and you still won the game — or at least that's the way the rules read.

Around 1967, the first changes to the rules in 20 years appeared, and the result was close to the current rules. The special rules

for the 1 and 15 were gone, perhaps because of the growing number of coin-op tables for which it was expensive to spot balls.

Choice of group was determined on the break shot if only one kind of ball was made, or by the first person to legally pocket a ball from a chosen group. The requirement to hit your own ball was in, and if you made balls on a bad hit, you had to spot your own but not your opponent's. Slop was still allowed except on the 8.

1970 through 1974 saw only one minor change: if you didn't drive a ball to a cushion, your opponent got to take ball-in-hand in the kitchen.

In 1977 there was a substantial rewrite, and rules for "The Championship Game" expanded to five pages, largely due to many of the general rules of pool being restated in the 8-ball section. Balls jumped off the table were mentioned for the first time; they were spotted, but the shot was not a foul.

Choice of groups was rather strange. After the break, the table was still open, and then you got whatever you made more of. The rule on needing to drive the cue ball or the 8 ball to a cushion, which had been broken since 1945, was finally fixed. Until 1977, making the 8 on the break had been a loss; then it became a win, unless you scratched. The rule about calling the 8 was tightened up, so that an uncalled 8 ball was loss of game, even if you didn't pocket it.

The penalty for a foul became taking the balls in position, or taking the cue ball in hand in the kitchen. If you were on the 8, you could have it spotted and shoot a spot shot. Presumably this last wrinkle kept your opponent from surrounding the 8 ball to keep you from any shot.

The 1978 rule book had both the "Singles Championship Game" and the "Coin-Operated Championship Game," with minor differences.

1980 saw another major rewrite. In a flashback to 1925, the groups were described as either "stripes and solids" or "bi-colored," and for several years, the BCA used red/yellow/black sets in the National Championships. The corner balls on the rack were specified to be one of each group.

The required open break was now defined as four balls to a cushion; previously it was whatever the referee was comfortable with. If you failed, your opponent could shoot

from the position or rebreak. Making the 8 on the break was a win, but an optional rerack-rebreak rule was listed.

Presumably following 9-ball, three consecutive fouls was loss of game. An optional ball-in-hand, anywhere rule was listed, and these two rules together must have been very interesting — imagine being on the 8 with all of your opponent's balls still up.

Another optional rule listed in 1980 was "last pocket." Under this rule, you had to make the 8 in the same pocket as the last of your group. An exception was that if the 8 was hanging on the lip of the wrong pocket, you could bank the cue ball three or more cushions to play it in that pocket.

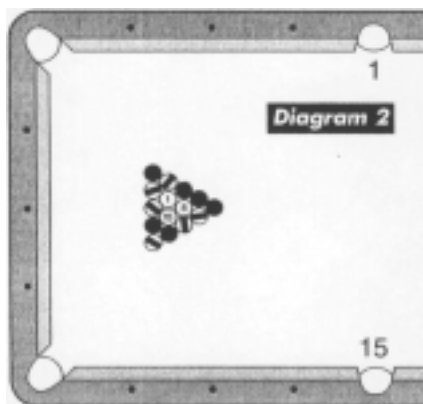
In 1985, making the 8 on the break was a re-rack, but for team play, it was a win. Call-shot was introduced as an optional rule, and if you pocketed uncalled balls, they spotted up, except for your opponent's which stayed down, and on a coin-op everything would stay down. In a surprising change, calling the 8 became a "should-do" for the shooter, and it was the duty of the opponent or referee to ask for a call if none was heard.

Also in 1985, the three-foul rule was stricken, and the stalemate rule appeared. If each player had three turns with no attempt to make a ball, the game was a draw. The idea of "cue-ball fouls only" was introduced for casual play. Sadly, bicolor sets bit the

dust that year.

Choice of groups changed to the first legally pocketed ball after the break. All combinations were permitted on an open table, even using the 8 ball first.

In 1986, call-shot was required to the extent that every ball and every pocket had



to be indicated. An 8 on the break gave a rerack and rebreak, or spot the 8 and play on. Jumped balls were considered a miss but not a foul, and your own balls would spot, but your opponent's would stay down.

In 1988, a scratch when playing the 8 was changed from loss of game to just a foul as long as the 8 was not pocketed. A one-

minute time-limit rule was suggested, and a stalemate was redefined as six consecutive fouls (three by each player).

1992 saw "Gentlemen's Call" introduced, no longer requiring calling obvious shots. Alternate breaks became the standard; before it was loser-breaks or not specified.

In 1993, a "safety shot" was explicitly added, so that you could shoot in a ball and force your opponent to shoot from the resulting position. Jumped object balls became a foul and all were spotted.

In 1994, a special rule for "cue-ball fouls only" was added so that if you moved a near-by ball on a jump or masse shot, it was considered a foul. Stalemate got its third definition, which removed fouls as a requirement but did require exactly three object balls on the table. On an open table, you could still hit the 8 first, but it would be counted as a miss.

The year 2000 saw the last major changes, but the millennium is young. Winner-breaks is the standard, but options are listed. Hitting the 8 first on an open table is now a foul. Jumped balls no longer spot. A stalemate can occur with any number of balls on the table.

So, do you still think you know how to play 8-ball? Come on over and we can play some "B.B.C.Co." Pocket Billiards. I picked up a red/yellow/black set in the 80s — the 1980s. It takes about 30 seconds to learn the rules.