



# 9-Ball Progress

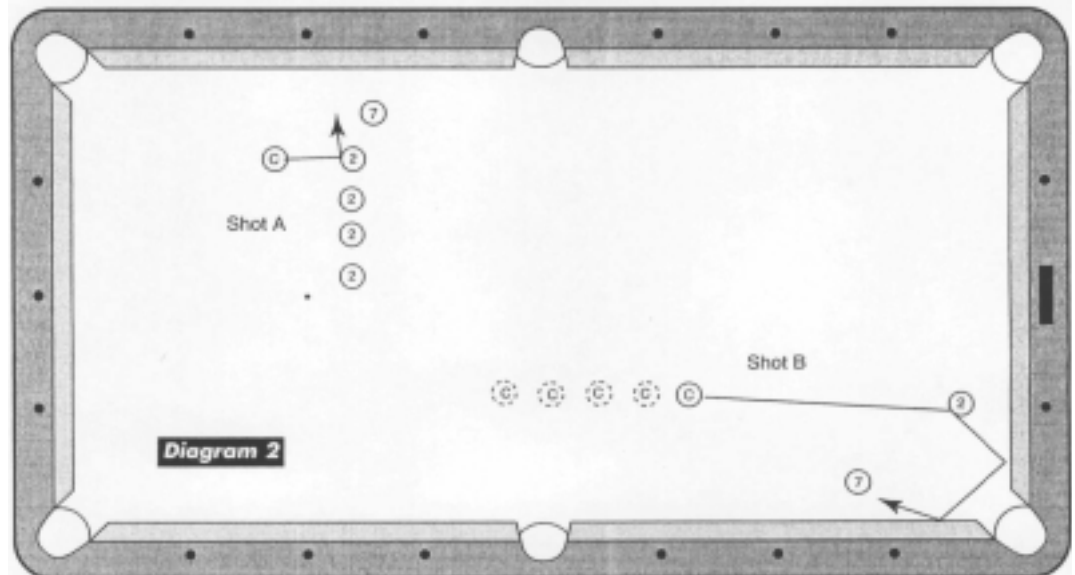
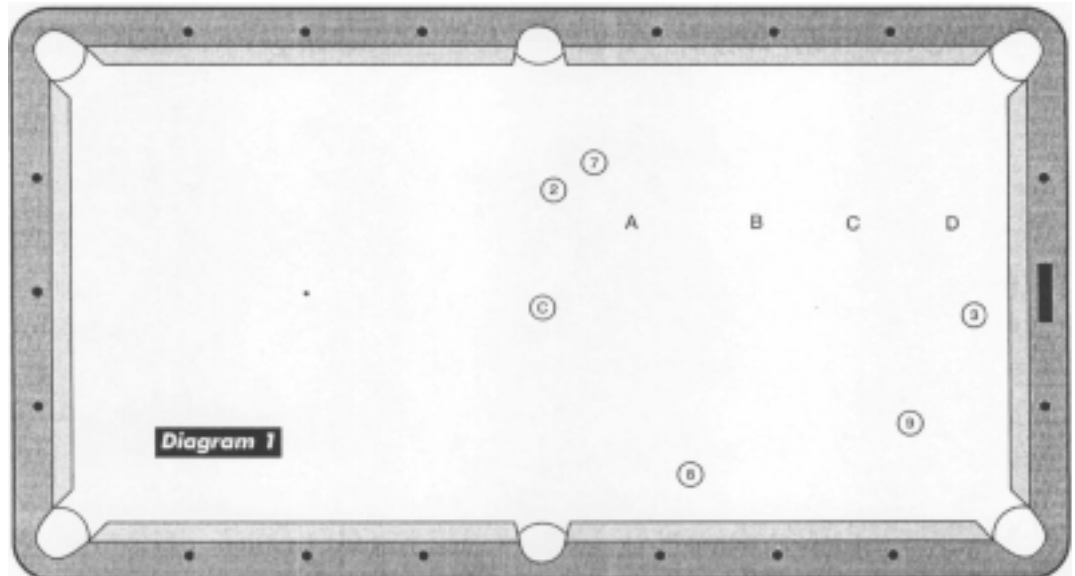
Drills and methods for playing better 9-ball.

**Do you want to play better 9-ball?** Here are some drills that will help your game.

The first drill lets you track your run-out abilities. It is a form of progressive practice that I think was first proposed by Ron Shepard, the billiards-physics writer. Throw out two balls on the table, and see if you can run them in order with ball-in-hand. If you succeed, add one ball and try again. If you run out, add a fourth ball. If you fail to clear the table, subtract one from the number of balls to attempt.

Of course there will be some variation in your success rate according to how the balls happen to arrange themselves, but after twenty or so tries, you should have a pretty good idea of when you have a chance to clear the table. If you're the fanatical type, keep track of the number you get to at the end of each practice session. This will allow you to look back and see how your game is progressing.

Here are some variations on this drill. Instead of throwing the balls out, shoot a normal break shot — it's important to practice that too — and then remove the lowest balls (and a ball from any cluster) to get to the number you're trying for. Allow yourself one extra ball-in-hand in the middle of the run, so when you completely miss position, you can recover. This will bring your attention to the position shots you have trouble with, and maybe you will find alternatives. Instead of changing by a whole ball in difficulty each time, keep track of runs/misses, and adjust the number when you have a



net of three in either direction.

Another very useful practice routine is "playing the ghost." The idea is that you are playing against someone who never misses, so if you miss, you lose. If your name isn't Deuel, you're allowed to take ball-in-hand after the break. Score each rack as a win for you, or as a win for the ghost if you miss. Play to 11 or so, and keep track of your scores. One variation on

this theme is to take an extra ball-in-hand after your first miss or two. Another is to keep a count of balls pocketed in ten racks. Give yourself a point per ball, counting two points for the 9. A perfect score is 100. For this, you can spot the 9 if pocketed too early.

When playing the ghost, you will encounter run-stopper shots. These are a good thing, since they tell you which shots

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you have to practice. An example is in **Diagram 1**, where you have left yourself too little angle on the 2 ball to move easily to the 3. Control of the cue ball requires a lot of power and a very accurate hit on the 2. Suppose you fail to get position on the 3 and you miss the resulting bank, ending your game with the ghost. Turn the shot into a progressive practice right then. Mark the positions of the cue and 2, and try to move the cue ball a few inches towards the final position, say to A (or within a few inches of A). If you can do that, try the same shot to move the cue ball to B, and so on, making the goal harder or easier as you succeed or fail with the shot. Take 10 shots at the drill, or shoot until you're satisfied with your improvement.

Note that although you missed the bank on the 3 originally, that's probably not the best shot to practice. The real mistake was not moving well from the 2 to the 3. Or was it? Maybe you could have left a better angle on the 2, so you might also practice whatever shot led to the too-shallow angle on the 2.

Not all run-stoppers will lend themselves to progressive practice; some will have a factor in the shot such as distance, which can make the shot either harder or easier. In the example above, if you want to prac-

tice the long bank, there is no good way to make it easier, and it may be that you will take a long time to reach even 50 percent on the shot. For shots like this, just play the shot several times, perhaps with the balls remaining from the rack, and go on to the next rack.

Do you ever practice your safeties? You can turn that into a competition by playing 9-ball but only scoring points when your opponent fails to make a good hit. In this game, the 9 itself is worthless. You can also use progressive practice to work on your safeties. In **Diagram 2** are two such drills. In Shot A, assume that all pockets for the 2 ball are blocked, and the best play is to nestle the cue ball behind the 7. As more and more players come equipped with jump cues, it's important to leave the cue ball not just hidden but crowded as well. The basic safety is easy to play, but it's not so easy to leave the cue ball close to the 7 and preferably frozen. I'd say that freezing the cue ball to the 7 and thereby eliminating any easy bank to the 2 is ten times better than just a run-of-the-mill snooker. The progression here is to move the 2 ball towards the center of the table. The goal is to leave the cue ball within a ball's width of the 7. The cue ball is in hand on each attempt. Of course, if you drive the 2 ball up and back

down the table and leave a shot, the safety is a failure.

In Shot B, the goal is about the same, but you need to judge the action off the cushions. You still need to drive the 2 ball to the other end of the table, and you may find that some reverse sidespin (left in this case) will help kill the speed on the cue ball so it dies nicely behind the 7. For this shot, the progression is to move the cue ball farther away. Again, consider it a failure if the cue ball ends more than a ball's width from the 7. For an easier drill, just require a hook, but no close snuggling.

There are two final things you need to do to raise your game to the next level. Play in competition. Some people recommend gambling against better players to sharpen your skills, but I suspect this advice is coming from those better players. Many rooms have tournaments or leagues you can use to test yourself against other players. Next, go see great players. Watch what they do right, but also note what they could do better. While there is some pool on TV, there are lots of things you'll only see by going to a major event, and the players will appreciate the support.

So, if you want to improve your 9-ball game, practice, practice some more, compete, and watch the best.