

Aiming

The Secret of Pool? or Basic Instinct...

Dozens of Top Pros Give Up Their Aiming Secrets

By Shari J. Stauch

Photos By Francine Massey

When I was eleven or twelve years old, I began hitting the balls around on the eight foot home table in the downstairs rec room of our home. Soon after, my father decided to teach me some fundamentals of the game — you know, the stuff everybody's got to get through like stance, bridge, stroke, and yes, aim. For practice, he'd draw up diagrams of shots for me, indicating with a broken line cue ball where the object ball should be hit for each shot. It was in this manner that I learned to aim mostly by what is commonly called the "ghost ball" theory today.

Later, when he opened the billiard club (okay, in 1976 it was still a pool hall), I had the benefit of hearing what many of the great, and not so great, players thought about how to aim. In fact, it was a regular topic of discussion at Harold's, and new theories were tested weekly among the regulars; some plausible, others, well, just plain silly.

But the most interesting thing to come out of listening to all those theories and watching their careful experiments was that everyone seemed to have a slightly different way of aiming that worked for them. Nevertheless, they were all still searching for that perfect method, the elusive "secret of pool" that would magically keep them from missing, ever.

The Secret of Pool

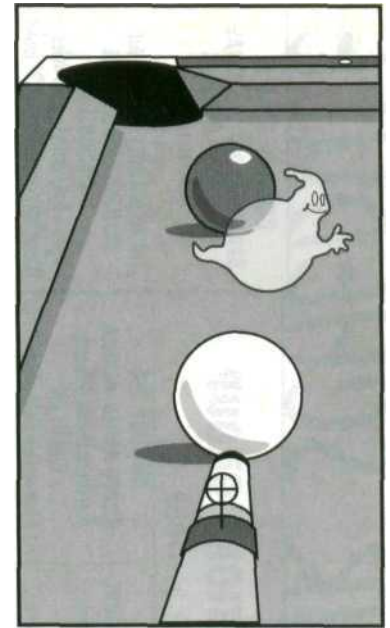
Then one day, my father discovered it. "This, Shari," he said, "is the secret of pool." He carefully explained the new aiming method, simply put; to picture the object ball on a tiny railroad track to the pocket. I tried it, just as carefully following his instruction. It worked. I shot

again. It still worked. It worked for nearly week, then I was back to picturing the ball-behind-the-ball. It wasn't that it stopped working, it was just, well, too much work! And of course, he's since discovered a dozen or more "Secrets of Pool", so...

Today, I still find the best method of teaching a new student is the tried and true "ball behind the ball" or "ghost ball" theory. Several pros agree. Others have completely different theories. In researching this article, I went home and tried what many of the players said they used. I also tried what I've told you I used. I was surprised to discover I don't use it as much as I thought I did, and happy to know that in most cases, instinct had taken over creative visualization. But for most of us, creative visualization is not only fun, but necessary. No matter what your skill level, it's also nice to have something to fall back on — a comfort zone if you're just not seeing the shots that day.

The "Ghost Ball" and other Creative Visions...

It turns out the way I learned as a child is the way many pros learned, and some still continue to subscribe to the theory. **Vicki Paski**, ranked #16 by the WPBA and author of the monthly *Annie* and the Pro series right here in *P&B Mag*, says, "I picture the ghost ball; seeing a ball behind the object ball that I want to replace with my cue ball. This is easier for most people than finding an exact spot on a round object that you must hit with another round object!"



#11 ranked **Dawn Hopkins** agrees. "The way I do it is look at object ball to pocket, and picture the ghost ball, then extend a line straight from the cue ball to the object ball."

Pool & Billiard Magazine player representative and columnist **Roger Griffis**, now ranked #21 on the PBT has a slight variation to this. "I use the ghost ball and dissect the ball into 90 degrees. Both kind of give you a picture of where you hit the ball, then, once you learn it you begin to play by feel."

#24 ranked **Bonnie Arnold** sticks with visualizing where the ball has to hit the pocket. "When I'm aiming, I look at the pocket and I visualize where the ball has to go in the pocket. Then I look at the spot on the object ball, and visualize the cue ball to the object ball to the pocket."

Similarly, Steve Mizerak says, "The way I find the target or contact point on the object ball is to visualize an imaginary line from the back of the pocket through

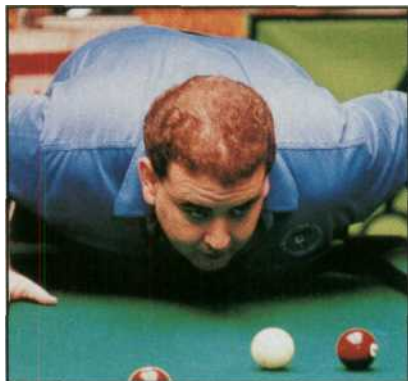


Steve Mizerak - "Pocketing balls is an instinctive skill that is learned from trial and error."

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the object ball. During my warm-up strokes, my eyes move back and forth between the cue ball and the target point. I use one or two low strokes, as if I'm going to draw the ball, on all shots because that gives me confidence in hitting the cue ball correctly — because the bottom of the cue ball is the strongest foundation to build on. I have no special tricks for cutting the ball or shooting a ball down a rail."



Tony Ellin - "...aim is basically trial and error and instinct, using your judgment."

Steve adds that, "It's very hard to tell a person how to aim. Pocketing balls is an instinctive skill that is learned from trial and error. It can't be mastered from playing once a week. Instead of hitting twenty balls to learn a shot, I hit two hundred balls. I haven't found an easier way yet!"



Loree Jon Jones - "Aiming comes naturally for me, where I've always just know where to hit. It's very difficult for me to teach people to aim because of this."

Basic Instincts

Steve brings up a solid point that was repeated by many professionals. Aiming has become second nature, muscle memory has taken over. Trial and error over hundreds of thousands of shots made and missed by top pros over dozens of years of competition — heck, who needs to visualize anymore? According to #16 ranked **Kelly Oyama**, "There is no set way for me. I just look at the pocket and look at the ball and assume I then know where to

hit it. But I'd like to read the article — maybe there's a better way!"

Then again, maybe not, Kelly. There are too many top players in agreement with you. Fellow top player and *P&B Mag* women's editor **Loree Jon Jones** claims that, "Aiming comes naturally for me, where I've always just known where to hit. It's very difficult for me to teach people to aim because of this!"

Mike Massey is a trick and fancy shot artist and an accomplished player, currently ranked #7. He explains, "I've tried a

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lot of systems but mostly you have to play from feel. You have to practice all types of feel, practice all type of hits. To start, you can use the angle of the half ball hit a lot because it's easy to judge. You just build your instincts and your muscle memory — that's what I did."

#11 ranked **Tony Ellin** also relies on instinct. "I would say that aim is basically trial and error and instinct, using your judgment. I may look at the path from the pocket through the object ball, but I hardly do that anymore. You develop an instinct for aiming from playing all the time."

#21 ranked **Howard Vickery** offers, "There's no real way for me to explain it except to hit it with the right impact. Your hand-eye coordination compensates for the difference in the roundness of the balls."

Howard brings up a great point here. Whatever the original aiming method you learned from, does the hand-eye coordination eventually begin to compensate for failings in your method, optical illusions or tired eyes? If so, how long does it take?

According to **Earl Strickland**, cur-

rently ranked #4 and winner of dozens of pro events, "I've played so much that I don't have to think about it. But I also spin the balls in, as I think many of the pros do; they're using so much english all the time. Pros spin the ball in the hole and that's mostly from feel. If you're really going to learn to aim, you have to know better how to spin the ball, and what effect that's having on the object ball. Amateurs who don't spin the ball will have an easier time with straight aiming."

Catching up with **Mark Jarvis** at the Sands Regency, now ranked #27 by the PBT, he says, "I aim by portions of the ball, I don't aim at one particular spot — but then again, I'm on the loser's side! But seriously, the portion of the ball I'm looking at depends on where I'm sending the cue ball. For me, most of it is feel and memory from shooting each shot many times."

X Marks the Spot

In contrast to a portion of the ball and basic instinct theory is the "single spot." This other favorite theme among the pros

was focusing on a single spot on the object ball that will send it sinking neatly in its designated resting place. #4 ranked **Ewa Mataya Laurance** offers the most detailed explanation of this theory. "Aiming is a four-step process. First, draw a line from pocket through the center of the ball to find the spot you want to hit. Then make up your mind, before you get



Earl Strickland - "Amateurs who don't spin the ball will have an easier time with straight aiming."

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down on the shot, as to whether or not you need to apply english. Find your new exact spot and just keep your eye on that. Once you're down on the shot, move your eyes back and forth between cue ball and object ball. Everybody says look at the object ball, but that's not enough, look at that tiny spot. If you miss then, it could be a problem with your mechanics, not your aim."

#7 ranked **Nikki Benish** explains, "This is how I learned, but I doubt if I use it anymore because when you're a professional every shot you see you've seen and shot at least a hundred times before. On the toughest shots I was taught to try to pick out a spot on the object ball, combined with the imaginary cue ball method. By finding the spot, I mean like if the object ball was a stripe ball, maybe I could mark my aim spot as right at the edge of the stripe and the white on the ball, or say to myself, on this one, hit just to the left of the number."

Allen Hopkins finds the spot, but in the end relies on feel. "I aim at a spot on the object ball with center cue ball. A lot of it is feel, when you play as often as I do,

you start finding that spot real easily. Occasionally I'll aim the cue stick toward the pocket through the ball to find that spot."

George Breedlove, ranked #20, finds a spot too, but not on the face of the object ball. "I know when I'm shooting, I'm looking at the object ball when I pull the trigger, but I find my spot on the ball on the table, looking at the base of the ball where it touches the table, not at any actual spot on the ball."

Tommy Kennedy, winner of the 1992 U.S. Open 9-Ball Championships and currently ranked #17, has another variation. "I look at the object ball straight ahead, and then look little by little to the right or left of the ball. I keep going until I see the spot where it's going to hit the bigger part of the pocket."

#14 ranked **Michelle Adams** opts for moving her body rather than her eyes. She explains, "I stand behind where the cue ball and object ball are in a straight line, and then I move to where I know I have to hit it. Somebody explained this to me once, and I thought it wasn't very smart, but it works!"

Combining the theories mentioned so far is #1 ranked **Jim Rempe**. According to Jim, "First of all you have to aim differently with different cues, because some cues deflect more than others. A cue also deflects more or less depending on how hard you hit the ball.

I play with a Meucci, that doesn't




Nikki Benish - "...when you're a professional, every shot you see, you've seen and shot at least a hundred times before."

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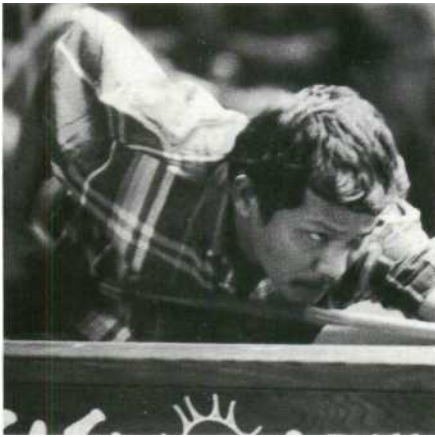
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Efren Reyes -- "When you put a lot of english on the cue ball, you adjust a little bit... it very much depends on my next shot how I will aim."

deflect, so I aim directly at the contact point. I also use the ghost ball theory, but it's more repetitious in your mind when you play a lot. In other words, I don't really visualize the ball anymore, it's automatic."

Belinda Bearden, currently ranked #8 by the WPBA, agrees that deflection

can play a part in the spot finding aiming process. "I pick out the point on the object ball in line where the pocket must be struck. Depending on the angle, you can tell which part of the cue ball must hit the object ball. But any time english is applied, a slight adjustment for deflection must be made. Depending on the amount of english applied, you will be aiming with a different part of the cue ball to hit the object ball."

Aiming with Whitey

Belinda touches briefly on the part of the cue ball that hits the object ball, which brings us to yet another theory, aiming with the cue ball.

#12 ranked **Nesli O'Hare** explains what she was taught. "The technique I use was taught to me by Efren Reyes. According to Efren, there are three kinds of hits on any object ball. First, there's looking at the center of cue ball to the point of aim if the shot is a full ball hit. If not, you can divide the object ball into four quarters, sighting your cue ball edge to the point of aim. When using inside english with a medium-to-hard stroke, you don't

change the point of aim. With outside english, you aim a sixteenth of an inch fuller on the object ball than you normally would. But, all bets are off when using a soft stroke, because of deflection, etc."

Efren Reyes, ranked #5 and winner of last month's Sands Regency title, further explains. "When you put a lot of english on the cue ball you adjust a little bit, often aiming exactly at the contact point of an object ball. So it very much depends on my next shot how I will aim."



Reed Pierce - "I just pick the spot in the center of the object ball and aim towards that."



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Sammy Jones, pro player and husband/coach of Loree Jon Jones, agrees. "It depends on the shot itself. When aiming at a straight-in shot, you're aiming both balls directly in the center. If aiming at a thin cut shot, you imagine the edge of the cue ball hitting the edge of the object ball."

Offering a more detailed explanation is new *P&B Mag* instructional guru **Ray Martin**, a BCA Hall of Fame player with three world titles to his credit. According to Ray, "I use parts of the cue ball. In other words, if you were to have a straight-in shot, you're aiming with the middle of the cue ball to the middle of the object ball. Now let's say the object ball stays in the same place and you move the cue ball six inches to the left. Now you're aiming with only a part of the cue ball. If you've got a real thin cut, now you're aiming with the edge of the cue ball. I'm not going to stress 1/2 ball, 1/4 ball here, because that's way too broad — the difference could be two degrees or a sixteenth of an inch! The important thing to remember is the spot on the object ball never changes. It is a constant."

On Cue

Moving backwards from the object ball and cue ball, we have our group of players that aim with the cue stick itself, but with a great deal of diversity in their methods. The PBT's #7 ranked **Reed Pierce** says, "I take the cue stick and try to line it up in line. I just pick the spot in the center of the object ball, and aim towards that. Even if you need to cut a ball real thin, you just still need a square hit, so you aim for the contact point with your cue."

The WPBA's #2 ranked **Robin Bell** adds to this. "When I line up on the cue ball to the object ball, I first visualize the actual location on the object ball where I need to hit it. Then I put my cue down towards that spot. When I'm down shooting I'm sending the cue straight through the cue ball to that spot on the object ball. Picturing it that way allows me to always follow through."

Fellow WPBA pro **Mary Guarino** offers a new slant. "I aim with the shaft of my cue stick. If you're hitting a straight-in shot, obviously, your cue is in the center. I imagine the cue ball is in quarters. In

example for 15 degree cuts, you split the quarter. For a thirty degree cut I split the edge with my shaft and 45 degree cuts I use the edges of my shaft."

If you can do that, then you'll have no problem with #14 ranked **Nick Varner's** words of wisdom. Nick explains, "What I do is use parallel lines. The first line I see



Jim Rempe - "...you have to aim differently with different cues, because some cues deflect more than others."

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is a line from the edge of the cue ball toward the contact point on the object ball. I keep my shaft on a parallel line to that and if you're cutting ball to left that line, it will be on the right. But if you're using left english, it will be the same line, and with center or right english, it will be parallel. Once I shoot, my eyes are actually focused on the contact point on the object ball."

Yet Another Angle

Aiming with angles, that is. Loree Jon, who earlier explained that she most always just sees the shot, also admitted that she occasionally checked out the angle on her shots. "Sometimes I look at the angle between the cue ball, object ball and pocket, and stroke through to that spot, looking at the object ball last."

And **Jeff Carter**, ranked #21, says he also looks at angles. "Every shot angles to the right or left, right? I look at those angles to aim.. If the shot is straight in of course it's a straight line, but most shots will have an angle."

Look Away...

Jeff Carter continued his explanation by explaining which ball he looks at last, which brought up a whole other topic of discussion, one that most pros had a definite opinion on. According to Carter, "What you look at first or last, the cue ball or object ball, varies from shot to shot. On a long shot, of course I'm going to watch the cue ball go up to the object ball. Let your eyes do what they want to do naturally, but keep your head down, that's what's most important."

Michelle Adams leans towards the more popular theory of looking at the object ball last, "except on the break shot, or a masse or jump shot, when you need to pay more attention to where your cue tip will contact the cue ball."

Sammy Jones opts for honesty. "I wish I knew! I'd lean towards looking at the object ball last, but I have never figured that out. What's interesting to note is that when the top pros line up, Buddy Hall is a good example, the cue tip is the distance of a razor blade's width from the cue ball."

Loree Jon then explains that this only

proves the object ball-last theory. "It's like that trick shot where you line up, take the cue out of your bridge hand, slide it back in, look away and shoot. Once you're lined up, you don't need to see that cue ball, a top player is going to know they're there."

Summing up the more commonly heard theory is **Allen Hopkins** who says, "I look first at the cue ball, then object ball, then back and forth from cue ball to object ball, always looking at the object ball last."

The Final Secret

There you have it, the secrets of aiming from dozens of the top players who do it best. But then again, is the secret really out? #2 ranked **C.J. Wiley** offers that you must aim before you get down on the ball by lining up correctly, of course, but adds that as far as his aiming method itself, "There are certain things you don't tell. Last time I wrote anything about aiming, somebody copied it and started selling it."

I considered Chinese water torture, but I don't think he would've cracked.

I guess the secret may still be out there... somewhere. •

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