

Close Quarters, Part II

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By Bob Jewett

In the last issue, I described a system for aiming when the cue ball is close to the object ball. I forgot to mention an obvious extension: when two object balls are close, the system can be used to aim the combination.

This time, I want to suggest some stroke techniques that will help you to avoid hitting the cue ball a second time when the object ball is near.

In Shot 1 is a proposition bet which I've heard was a favorite of Luther Lassiter. The cue ball and the one ball are on opposite sides of the line and a quarter inch apart. The goal is to make the one ball hit the end rail without the cue ball going over the line. You must use a level stroke.

First, see how short a stroke you can develop. Start with the cue ball four inches back -- hitting the end rail should be easy, and if you use draw, the cue ball should come back without any forward motion after contacting the one. Start the cue ball gradually closer to the one ball. I find that by the time they are half an inch apart, my arm hurts from the unaccustomed effort of suddenly stopping the cue stick. Try this drill on a table now.

At this point your arm should be sore, you have developed a special stroke very close shots, you've grown to hate the sound and feel of a double hit, and you're ready to bet that the shot's impossible when the balls are only a quarter inch apart.

Now for the trick.

Place the balls for Shot 1, make a firm closed bridge with a little draw, and with the tip about half an inch from the cue ball. Let the back end of the cue stick rest on the rail. Without moving the

stick, slide your grip hand up until your knuckle is pressed against the edge of the rail, and take a very firm grip on the cue. Take a short back swing, keeping the stick rubbing on the rail, and stroke softly forward, banging your knuckles on the rail. Your hand will stop the cue stick quickly enough to avoid a double hit. You may need to adjust the tip-to-ball starting distance depending on the springiness of your knuckles and how hard you're willing to hit the table. Old fashioned square rails give a better stop than modern rails that slope away from the cushion.

The bad news: this shot is not generally useful. The good news: there is another technique that can be used in many close situations. For Shot 1, you can make the one ball hit the far rail twice and still not drive the cue ball over the line.

I first saw the technique when Rene Vingerhoedt, the great Belgian billiard fancy shot artist, gave an exhibition in the room where I was just beginning to learn the game. He first shot standard artistic billiard shots, like doubling the rail with follow and draw, kiss-back around the table with reverse, and the nine-cushion lag. He announced that he was going to change to his masse cue for the second half of the show, but first he would shoot the "Spanish Dance." He placed the balls just like Shot 1, and took a tremendous stroke, smashing the cue ball into the red ball. The red took off at a million miles an hour, but the cue ball just sat where it started and spun. And wobbled -- that was the "dance" part. And spun. Vingerhoedt got out his case, took his cue apart, and screwed his masse cue together. The cue ball was still dancing.

How did he do that? With a technique that is well known in Europe but is still a mystery to most U.S. players. It's called a whipping stroke. It's rather difficult, so let's start with something simpler that gives some feeling for the shot without having to master the strange whipping motion.

In Shot 2, the idea is to find how close the cue ball can be to the object ball on a half ball cut and still

avoid a double hit. The two ball is placed so it would be touching a ball on the spot, and the three and four are placed on the diamonds. The three ball is there simply to help you place the cue ball on the dotted line. Aim through the center of the cue ball at the edge of the two ball and slightly into the edge of the three. Neglecting throw, the two ball will be driven straight across the table and the cue ball, if cued on the equator, will hit the four ball.

Shoot the shot with a normal follow through, and moving the cue ball closer and closer to the two ball until a double hit occurs and the cue ball hits the end rail on the far side of the four.

Next try the same progression using extreme left english on the cue ball. You'll probably find that the cue can start much closer to the object ball because the cue ball starts moving to the right just after the collision which makes room for the stick to pass. If you use draw with the english, you should be able to land the cue ball on the near side of the four. If the draw takes quickly enough, this technique could be used for the proposition in Shot 1.

Finally, try the shot with outside or right english. This will result in a double hit even when the balls are an inch or more apart because the cue ball will be moving into the path of the stick after the collision with the two ball.

Try the same setup for a fuller shot on the two ball, and you should get similar results; left english will help you avoid the foul.

Whipping stroke uses a similar idea, but it is mostly the stick that's moved to avoid the second hit. Instead of using a straight follow through, the cue is swerved to the outside of the shot during the final stroke.

In Shot 1, set up for a lot of left english with the cue stick aimed towards the four ball. On the back swing, swerve the butt towards you (if you're a right-handed player) and on the forward stroke

swerve back, so that at the end of the shot, the cue stick is pointed towards the three.

This motion is difficult to master, since it goes against the standard ideal straight follow through. It's not easy to have the tip come back to just the right place on the cue ball after having been pulled clear to the other side of the cue ball.

Once you've got the timing down, you'll be able to shoot straight towards the one ball in Shot 1, leaving the cue ball spinning in place. With a little draw besides the english, you can bring the cue ball straight back to the end rail.

There's one more facet to this shot -- whip without english. The purpose of swerving the cue stick is to get it away from where the cue ball is going to stop. Swerve down is nearly as good as swerve to the side. Aim straight at the one ball, starting near the center. On the final stroke, raise the butt of the cue so the tip dips down to the cloth after hitting the cue ball with draw. The needed stroke is very short, like in the first drill, since the cue ball will be drawing back soon after the hit and you need to give it room.

Don't be too discouraged if you can't get the action right away. It took me twenty five years to get a reasonable understanding and feel after I first saw the shot in 1966. If you can find an instructor who knows this shot, take a lesson.

In the third and last article on "Close Quarters," I'll go over the difficulties of rules and referees when the balls are close.

