

Shut up and practice!

by Tom Simpson © September 1999

Most of us don't have the raw natural talent to become great players without working at it. If you're good, you practice. If you want to be good, you practice. You won't be getting better if you're not practicing. And meanwhile, somebody else, who may beat you in the future, is putting in that practice time.

If you actually want to get better, you'll make time for practice. 15 minutes of concentrated practice will do more for your game than *hours* of play.

"OK. I practice. I drill a few straight-ins, shoot a coupla spot shots, try a cross-side bank, and I'm ready to play," you might say. I'd say this is all useful, but it's not practice. It's checking out the equipment and your stroke.

Many players practice by throwing a few balls on the table and trying to run them out. Other times, they shoot low percentage shots. This is fun stuff. When you succeed, you look good and feel good. When you fail, well, it was a low percentage shot, what the hey? This type of practice is getting you nowhere.

If you only practice what you're already good at, you'll look great, but your game will not improve. **Practicing what's easy is too easy.** On the other hand, don't spend your practice time on extremely difficult shots. You're going to miss them and not know why. You won't get better, and with all that missing, you won't be building your confidence. **Practicing failure is not a good idea.**

What types of things should you practice? **Practice the things you do worst.** This is obvious, but how many players actually do this? How else are you going to get better at them? **Improving your worst things will raise your entire game.** How about practicing that shot that cost you the match, that angle you always see wrong, shooting softly, shooting hard, getting position when the object ball is hanging in the corner pocket, drawing more accurately, remembering to plan at least three balls ahead, checking where your tip is actually hitting the cueball (vs. what you believe), experimenting with controlling sidespin, jumping, curving, rail shots, kicks, banks, etc. There is enough to keep you engaged for a lifetime.

So, there's banging balls around the table, and then there's practice. BCA Master Instructor Jerry Briesath says "Perfect practice makes perfect." He means you get better not just because you practice, but because you practice the right things, in an effective way. I say "**Practice makes permanent.**" You have to "burn in" your improvements, or they will fade away.

Often, the most effective way to practice is what's called "progressive practice." Billiard Digest columnist Bob Jewett promotes this method, and I've seen it yield wonderful results. Here's how it works. Pick a shot or skill to work with. Let's say it's medium speed spot shots. The usual practice method – setting it up and having a whack at it 5 or 10 times – is not going to help much if you're only making it 1 time out of 5.

The trick to progressive practice is to **start with the easiest possible version of the shot**, instead of starting where you're already having trouble. So, for our spot shot example, spot the object ball, and then move the cueball forward along the line to the object ball until it's only a diamond or so away. Shoot the shot. If you make it, move the cueball back a diamond or a half diamond for the next try (making it progressively harder). Shoot 15 or 20 times. If you miss, move forward to the next easiest shot position. When you make it, make the next one a little tougher. This type of practice quickly shows you where your trouble begins, and keeps you working right near the edge of your current ability. Try it. Make progress.