

Runnin' Down the Rails

by Tom Simpson © March 2001

Freeze an object ball to the rail and suddenly it becomes a "special" shot. Many players are afraid of rail shots. You hear all kinds of theories from other players:

"You have to hit the rail and the ball at the same time." **Wrong.**

"If you use inside english on the cueball, the object ball will have inside english as it runs down the rail, and inside english makes the ball hug the rail." **Nope.**

"If you use outside english on the cueball, the object ball will be thrown a little off the rail, so it doesn't bounce out away from the rail and miss." **Sorry.**

"Shoot 'em with draw." "Shoot with follow." **Doesn't matter.**

Yes, rail shots are more difficult than normal, open-table cut shots. For one thing, those corner pockets are at their narrowest from that angle, and because of that you are also more likely to jaw the ball. But here's the really important difference: If the object ball is cut *into* the rail even a tiny bit (as opposed to cutting it *down* the rail), the ball is going to bounce out from the rail. Undercut, and you'll miss.

There are three possibilities:

1. Hit the object ball (OB) *before* you hit the rail. In this case, the OB always bounces out.
2. Hit the OB and the rail at the same time. This is **The Big Myth**. Countless players believe this is what they should do, and believe this is what they are actually doing. If you are sinking these shots, you are not hitting ball & rail simultaneously. If you do, the OB will throw into the rail every time. And if it goes into the rail, it's coming out from the rail. This means you will miss, unless you are close to the pocket, or the rail gutter (the gully worn in the cloth next to each rail) is helping you.
3. **Hit rail first.** Believe it or not, this is what you actually have to do. The cushion is made of rubber. The cueball (CB) sinks into the cushion until it strikes the OB. Wait – doesn't this mean we're overcutting? Yes, it does, but the fact is, the collision causes throw, which corrects for the overcut.

There are two ways to hit rail first and make the ball, so let's go a little further. In the first case, as described in #3 above, the CB hits the OB on the way *into* the cushion rubber. If you hit the rail a little too far from the OB, you *will* miss by overcutting. However, if you hit a little farther up-rail than that, you may make the ball! This is because the CB is sinking into the rail and then hitting the OB on the rebound. In other words, in the second case, the CB hits the OB on the way *out* of the cushion. This is useful knowledge.

Let's summarize. There is no margin for error on the side of hitting OB first. All of the room for error is on the rail-first side. Don't hit ball first or ball & rail together. Rail shots are difficult because if you undercut, you miss.

OK, what about english? The players that are making a high percentage of their rail shots with inside or outside english are actually delivering the CB to the rail first. There is no such thing as "rail-hugging" english. They may be aiming to hit ball & rail together, but several effects – cueball squirt, swerve, spin-induced throw, and perhaps the effect of the spin coming off the rail – combine to produce the desired result, and the ball drops in the pocket. It's useful to be able to shoot these shots with whatever english you need. However, the purpose of english is position. If you always shoot your rail shots with inside follow, for example, what do you do when position play requires something else? Sidespin complicates shots. Doesn't it make more sense to learn to shoot these shots in a neutral fashion – no english – and then use english as necessary to get shape? Hint: yes.

Here's a great drill to practice rail shots: Freeze OB's to the rail at every diamond, until you've placed all fifteen balls. With cueball in hand, begin shooting. Shoot until you miss, or until your cueball hits an OB other than the one you're shooting. When you miss, set them up again and start over. Do this drill for 15 minutes. You'll improve. Do it for a half hour, and you'll be fearless and impeccable.