

Looking for Trouble

by Tom Simpson © September 2003

It's a good idea to stop and check some basics from time to time. We tend to drift into old habits and go into slumps, unless we're vigilant. When you're having a slump, or when you're trying to help someone learn the game, the following are ten of the most common problem areas that cause us trouble, and some simple suggestions for dealing with them.

1. **Doubt:** Don't shoot in the Thinking Position; don't think in the Shooting Position. Don't go down on a shot until you have a plan. If you go down, and feel you should change your plan, stand up, back away, chalk up, and start over. If you shoot with doubts or without committing to your plan, you're likely to get what you had in mind – doubtful results.
2. **Tip & Chalk:** Some players don't maintain their tip adequately. If your tip is too flat, you will not get as much spin as you expect, and you'll miscue more easily. Keep your tip rounded and shaped the same all the way around. Chalk the *edge* of the tip. That's where it really is needed, and where you will miscue. Actually *look* at your chalk job before hitting an extreme spin shot.
3. **Vertical Axis:** Many players gradually develop a habit of using english on every shot. When you hit the cueball anywhere on its vertical axis (in other words, no sidespin whatsoever), it goes straight, in precisely the direction you aimed. Hit even a millimeter to the left or right of the axis, and that cueball is going to squirt and curve. If it hits the target, it's because the squirt and curve happened to exactly cancel each other out at that distance & speed. And of course, there is also spin-induced throw and transfer of spin to the object ball to deal with. Master the vertical axis. Get off the axis only when there is good reason, and you know you're making the adjustments. It's a lot easier to deal with a cueball that's going where you aimed.
4. **Undercutting:** Because of collision-induced throw (a friction phenomenon between balls), most misses are by undercutting. For example, how often do you see someone miss a table-length, close-to-the-long-rail shot to a distant corner pocket by overcutting and hitting the end rail? Rarely. In fact, I call this "missing on the pro side" because most of us *undercut* and miss by hitting that side rail. The real fix here is to gain a clear understanding of the "rules" of throw. But since we don't have space for that here, plan on cutting a little thinner. The softer you're going to hit the shot, the further it is from the pocket, and the closer the cut angle is to a half-ball hit (30°), the more throw effect you'll get, and the more you'll need to compensate. Overcut a little.
5. **Elevation:** Because we have knuckles, and because pool tables have rails, we can never get our stick completely flat. It's important to get as close to flat as practical, though, because as we elevate the butt of the cue, we risk unintentionally causing the cueball to curve. If we strike the cueball with any sidespin whatsoever, it's going to curve. The more sidespin, and the more elevation, the more curve. Try to keep your stick within a finger thickness of the rail, unless you have reason to elevate. When you must elevate and hit straight, focus on hitting the vertical axis.
6. **Unstable bridge:** The purpose of the bridge is to provide a solid foundation that will guide the cue to your *precisely* intended contact point on the cueball. If your bridge is not a rock, your plans are not going to work. Do not move your bridge side to side. Try anchoring the bridge to the table. With an open bridge (no loop over the shaft), press your forefinger firmly into the cloth. With a closed bridge (forefinger looped over the shaft), press your middle finger into the cloth.
7. **Unstable stance:** If your stance is moving, you're not going to be aimed where you think you're aimed. Settle into the floor. If you're not comfortable, or if you have to twist or move to get aimed, get up, chalk up, and try again.
8. **Finishing:** One of the most common problems is not finishing a shot. Not following through, poking, and jumping up all lead to missed shots and inconsistent ball action. Get your stick *through* the cueball, and allow it to follow through as far as its momentum takes it.
9. **Staying down:** Coming up before the shot is complete is a common problem. Your body knows you're going to jump up, and that affects your stroke. You need to *plan* on staying down, so your stroke will complete without interference. When possible, stay down and watch the shot until the balls come to a stop. Down until done.
10. **Pocket speed:** The harder you shoot, the smaller the pockets become, and the more you lose control of the cueball. Pocket speed is the speed that sinks the ball, but without hitting the back of the pocket. Less speed, more control. Shoot only as hard as necessary for the current shot, position requirements, and equipment – and understand the trade-offs.

Far more games are won or lost on these kinds of basics than are won or lost with tricky, advanced shots. In fact, with better basics, we don't get in trouble and need those fancy shots nearly so often. Simple is good.