

Just Hit the Ball

A change of focus to learn new skills.

by Bob Jewett

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Recent I had a student who was continuing to have a lot of trouble with speed control and especially with soft shots. I have several drills that can help with that, but they are not good at keeping the student interested and focused. Here is a solo game that worked well. Maybe it can help you or someone you are helping to learn the game. It comes in several levels of difficulty, so if it seems too easy at first, read on.

Rack balls 1-6 on the spot with the 1 in front. Break them as usual. You don't need to make a ball on the break to continue and if you scratch, you lose that rack, so be careful. The goal is to play the balls in rotation -- you have to hit the lowest ball on the table first -- and eventually pocket all of them, but you can take your time. The only requirement on each shot is that you hit the lowest numbered ball first. You don't have to send any ball to a cushion. If you scratch or fail to hit the lowest ball first, the rack is over and you have lost.

An example start is in Diagram One, Shot A. There is no clear pocket for the 1 ball, but it's pretty easy to work out a path to Pocket A. I would start by banking the 1 ball softly to about the X on the table, leaving the cue ball near where the 1 hits the cushion. Under the rules of this game, it would be a mistake to try to pocket the ball immediately on the bank as it might end up on the other side of the 6 ball with a somewhat risky kick shot. Remember, if you fail to hit the ball, you lose.

For my next shot I would move the 1 ball a little closer to the pocket, hoping to leave a nice shot to pocket A but also an angle so the cue ball will go closer to the 2 ball after I pocket the 1. In effect, you are making your own position.

Let's suppose I make the 1 ball and the cue ball rolls back to the original starting point. I now have Shot B. I could bump the 2 ball down towards pocket C, but that could turn into a big mistake. If I leave the cue ball near pocket C when pocketing the 2 ball or even at that end of the table, I have only a kick shot at the next ball, the 3. It's a pretty easy kick but I want to avoid even that much risk.

A better pocket for the 2 ball is pocket A. If I leave the cue ball near A as I pocket the 2 ball, I will have an easy hit on the 3 and once I get the 3 ball clear of the 4 ball, I can choose a pocket and start working towards it.

I need to turn the shot around. One way would be to bank the 2 off the end rail, but that could go wrong. Instead, hit the 2 ball thin and drive it straight to the side rail and back out a little while the cue ball moves on to position Y. Now the balls are pointed in the right direction and after a few more shots I can pocket the 2 leaving a sure shot at the 3. One possibility would be to bank the 3 towards pocket A-- softly, softly, softly -- and bump the 4 ball up the table.

This first level of the exercise is pretty easy so even beginners should be able to clear a rack most of the time. It will take a little time to see the strategies to avoid any risk, but the shooter is going to get a lot of practice at shooting softly and controlling both the cue ball and object ball.

Once you have mastered this first version, start adding additional requirements. The first is to call the pocket for the current ball before you take your first shot at it (not counting the break shot). This puts a large penalty on shooting too hard which tends to put the object ball at the wrong end of the table. Pocketing the ball in the wrong pocket is a foul and ends the rack.

For the next level, play with 10 balls in rotation. At this version you are going to get a lot more practice at kicking during the first part of the rack. Remember that you don't have to get to a cushion after contact, so playing softly onto a ball you are kicking at is a good way to avoid being hooked again.

The next level is to require each shot to be legal according to the usual rules of pool. Some ball has to get to a cushion after the cue ball makes contact with the object ball. Diagram Two shows a typical position after the break shot. You have a shot on the 1 ball to pocket A but that would be a mistake. That shot lets the cue ball loose and you may end up hooked on the 2 ball. Instead call pocket B and play the shot shown. You now have the cue ball and object ball without interference around them and you can arrange a shot that lets you get a clear shot on the 2 ball as you pocket the 1.

If you get bored, there are lots of variations. Play all of the balls into a single pocket (6 balls, no rail required). Play them into each pocket in order around the table. I think you will find that the side pockets are pretty challenging. Play this as a competition with a friend to see who can complete the rack in the fewest shots. If you are mismatched with your friend, you could instead play the rack as scotch doubles so the stronger player will have some more difficult shots and the weaker player will be getting advice.

Diagram Three shows some related practice shots. In Shot A the goal is to pocket the object ball in the side pocket but to take as many shots as possible with no rail required. You could cheat at this by walking the ball clear around the table with a million soft shots so let's say on each shot you have to hit the object ball towards the called pocket. Four shots should be easy for everyone. Can you take 10 before you pocket the ball? Again, if you fail to hit the ball, you lose.

Shot B is similar but a cushion is required on each shot. Bump the ball long the rail several times before pocketing it. If that's too easy, bump it along the rail until it gets close to the pocket, pass the cue ball across the ball to turn the shot around and bump the ball back to the other corner.

Finally in Shot C the idea is to play the 1 ball into pocket C by taking it through the three blockers. Rail contact is required. You could go around the blockers by shooting the 1 ball to X and then bringing it back down the cushion, but let's say it has to stay pretty close to the end rail.





