

DRILL BABY DRILL

Turn off your analytical mind with repetitive practice.

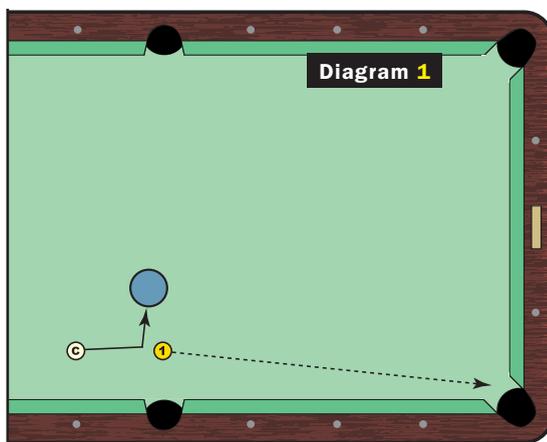


SINCE IT'S nearly impossible to avoid the new spirit of unity that we are enjoying in a country about to be transformed, I thought now would be a good time to reach across the aisle, as they like to say on TV — over and over and over — to acknowledge a friend at another magazine. His name is Dominic Esposito, also known as the “Drill Instructor” for his endless library of repetitive practice drills on the pool table. A few years ago, Dom found me on the Internet while looking for instruction and initiated an ongoing and rewarding correspondence that, at times, has great impact on me. In his humble yet powerful manner, Dom sometimes credits me with helping him come back to pool after years of letting his cue collect dust. And because he's so generous with his praise, I've never had the heart to tell him that I was no fan of structured drills.

When asked about the value of drills for practice, I usually point out that, since I've never seen a rack of balls distribute itself across the table with geometric precision, I fail to see the point in mastering runs with balls laid out in such precise arrangements. In real play, every break scatters the balls randomly, and so it's always been my belief that we should work on skills to prepare ourselves for infinite random layouts. Recently however, after watching a student practice one shot over the course of a couple hours with noticeable improvement, I remembered two things. One, repetition leads to improvement. And two, I like shooting my mouth off about the beauty to be found in pool's tedium and repetition.

On several occasions here, I've discussed the strange affinity that musicians seem to have for pool and the speed with which many of them learn the game. One theory is that they are accustomed to practicing elements of their craft broken down into exercises such as scales. And through hours of repetition, they hone the skills that will carry them through complex musical compositions.

So finally, it dawned on me that drills on the pool table serve the same purpose by eliminating all the analysis required during play and therefore addressing the student's execution skills more directly. Going a step further, although I never thought about a particular assignment I once devised as a drill, in reality it's the simplest one imaginable. And it led to one of my favorite coaching experiences and stories to tell.



While working in 2002 with Jackie Broadhurst, now Karol, in her training for the 2003 BCA Women's Open, I gave her the shot that we see in **Diagram 1**. “Can you pocket the 1 ball in the corner?” I asked. “Of course,” came the reply. Then I asked her if she could hit the shot perfectly. Naturally, she asked what that meant, and we discussed precise control over the object ball and the cue ball. We determined that on a perfect shot, the 1 ball could not touch the bottom side rail on its way into the pocket, while the softly stunned cue ball would come to rest in the circle. Finally, I asked if she could hit the shot perfectly a hundred times in a row, and she said that she would get to work on it. Ten days later, she reported that she had hit the shot perfectly 141 times in a row. I replied, “Beautiful! Now forget about it.”

When I realized I was working with someone who had the focus and discipline to shoot one shot continually for

10 days, I knew I was in the presence of limitless potential. Jackie went on to win that BCA tournament we set our sights on, walking through a field of 497 players by winning almost all of her matches with scores of 4-0 or 4-1. Her opponent in the final was the first to win two games from her. Unfortunately, we did forget the shot and move on to other things, so we never discussed what benefit she thought she gained from such an insane exercise.

As we see in **Diagram 1**, the setup for this shot is very simple. Place the cue ball and object ball one diamond apart from each other and both balls about a half diamond segment from the bottom long rail. Make certain that the line of centers for the two balls is parallel to the side rail. For your target, a circle of about five inches should be good. I like to trace a CD on a piece of paper and then cut it out. Make sure that the center of your

target falls on the shot's tangent line (or the line that's 90 degrees to the line that the 1 ball takes to the lower-right corner). Finally, mark the balls' positions and then get to work.

Because pool is so exceedingly complex, we need exercises that isolate the game's elements. At the same time, if we can eliminate the demands that managing the game's infinite randomness places on us, our physical execution skills can dominate the performance to give us the precision and muscle memory we need. Sometimes I wonder if I don't like drills because of my weak discipline and my desire just to play when I was learning pool as youngster. And sometimes I wonder if most of them are too difficult for me. So, though I probably won't talk about it too loudly at the *Billiards Digest* picnic, I'm going to explore some of the Dominic Esposito's work in depth. Then, if I'm feeling really brave, maybe I'll try to repeat Jackie's achievement.