

The Quest for Consistency

One of the first questions I ask my students when they start lessons is, "Why are you here? What is it you want to learn?". Without a doubt, the most common answer is I need to be more consistent. When I talk to the other pool players I meet and ask what they do wrong or need to work on they reply, "I need to be more consistent." It's ironic that both new students, average pool players, and seasoned players all mention that they need to be more consistent. This tells me a couple things. First, our view of consistency changes as we improve. A new player may want to make 2 or three balls in a row. An average player may think that consistency is the ability to run a rack of balls every few games. A seasoned player might think consistency is having a run of a hundred balls in straight pool. It's all relative.

So where do we start? As Earl Strickland once said, "Pool is the hardest game in the world, and world is against you!" Pool is one of the frustrating, mentally challenging, and exhausting games around. Not exhausting like football or basketball. Mentally exhausting. It's like playing chess except you get to walk around the table. It's like golf, except you are always trying to read the green for a 30 ft putt. But it's exactly for these reasons that it's so rewarding. When that eight ball rolls into the pocket for a win it's exhilarating. Where do we start? The same place we should start any challenge. In the ole noggin.

I've written a couple articles about the mental game of pool. It's important enough that I will recap some of that again in this article. Your brain is divided into two parts. Conscious and Subconscious. The conscious deals with hearing, seeing, talking, etc. The subconscious handles all those things that we don't need to think about. Blood flow, breathing, identifying people and scents. It can do things about 30000 times faster than the conscious mind. Also, since the conscious mind is the interface for all your sensory inputs it's easily distracted. Your subconscious just does what has to be done and moves on. Because of these distractions your conscious mind is a terrible pool player. But since your subconscious mind just does things without you thinking about it, it plays perfectly. However, your subconscious does not know how to play pool instinctively. You have to train it and unfortunately, you can't just plug in a memory card and learn you have to use your conscious mind for input. We do this by doing drills that reinforce good shooting practices. Here's the rub. If you don't do the drills correctly all you do is reinforce bad habits. You can teach you subconscious to be a bad pool player. Let me reemphasize the importance of this. The biggest difference between someone who plays weekly on a league and never improves and someone who is winning tournaments every weekend is that the latter has a better mental game. It isn't just talent. His/her conscious mind takes in the lay of the table, his/her subconscious is playing the game.

So, let's apply this to consistency. Let's say we have got all our stroke fundamentals down and they are stored in the subconscious. How do we get in that "zone"? It starts with the pre-shot routine. This is where we do the same thing before every shot. Chalk your cue, walk around the table, take a couple breaths. When we do this, we trigger our subconscious pool player. Your stance and stroke need to become automatic.

Have you noticed that It seems like this article leans toward stroke mechanics and the mental game more than consistency? That's because these two things will do more for your consistency than

anything else. So, let's go into a couple more things I recently found that will help your stroke mechanics. I, as well as many others, have gone over stroke mechanics and how to improve your stroke. The unfortunate thing that happens with all teachers, particularly ones who are at or near professional status, we kind of take certain things for granted. They are so built into our own fundamentals we don't think about them. These are easily overlooked because on the service they are small things. But as I'm sure are aware, it's those small things that lose games.

The first thing I want to talk about has to do with your bridge hand. We all know that your hand needs to solid. The general consensus is that your palm should be on the table and your bridge hand shouldn't move if you push down on it. This is not enough. Whether you use an open bridge or a closed bridge the "V" that you rest your cue on is what needs to be immobile. In a closed bridge your index finger needs to meet your thumb. You might have to move your index or middle finger slightly to stabilize your thumb better. I went through several years thinking I had a good bridge and missing shots slightly to the left. I actually found that I need to turn my wrist slightly on my bridge hand to allow the cue to move smoothly thru the "V". Also, I started wearing a glove. This has several benefits. No. 1. The cue always moves through my bridge smoothly. No. 2 My cue gets less chalk build up, A common test that many instructors use to apply pressure to your bridge hand and see if there is any movement. I suggest taking that a little further and test the thumb. If it's not supported it will wobble and can throw your shot off.

The next thing is how you grip your cue. I had the hardest time softening my grip. The harder I shot the harder I gripped. The problem with that is when you tense these muscles you tend to pull the cue toward your body and you turn your wrist in. You won't hit the cue ball where you intend if you do this. Both these cause the tip of your stick to move and you don't hit the cue ball where you want. Teach yourself to have a loose grip.

The final thing I want to share is the thumb on your grip hand. It should always point down toward the floor. Stand up and let your arm dangle by your side. Note, your thumb is pointing down to the floor. Move your wrist forward and back. This is what happens with your pool stroke. I have seen many players who twist their wrist so their thumb points toward their body. If you are still standing twist your wrist that way and move your wrist back and forth. Note that instead of going up and down your hand is moving left and right. This is what happens to the tip of your pool cue. Keep your thumb pointing down!

So to summarize, today we talked about 4 things to improve consistency. Your pre-shot routine (mental game). Checking your bridge hand, and make sure your thumb is stable. The tightness of your grip and the position of your wrist. Wear a glove. You work on those 4 things and your consistency will go through the roof.