

Three-Cushion billiards is a difficult yet beautiful game. It's like playing an artistic game of chess, the game just flows so nicely and opportunities arise frequently for a competitor to show off their knowledge, precision, or stroke. There are so many principles involved that also translate very well into one's pool game – getting comfortable using side spin, how to blend speed and spin to achieve different hits and paths, learning the angles of not only the cue ball but the object ball as well, diamond systems - the list goes on.

The game would be pretty hard to learn completely on your own, you really need to study the game either through reading or watching and playing with good players. If reading is your thing, for beginners I recommend the series by Byrne, which offer excellent pool instruction in the first half of the books and equally excellent 3-cushion instruction in the second half. Try to strike up a game with some veterans, most would be happy to play and show you the ropes. There is also a ton of excellent content and great commentated matches on YouTube.

The rules are simple – the game is played with 3 balls, a red object ball and 2 cue balls, typically one white and one yellow or one white and the other marked with a dot or similar marking. To score a point, you must strike your cue ball and hit the other two balls, but before hitting the second one your cue ball must also hit three or more cushions. You can strike the balls in any order, or hit one or more cushions first, as long as you strike 3 or more cushions before contacting the second ball.

If you are fairly good pool player with a decent stroke, some basic knowledge of common shots and principles is all you need to be able to enjoy this wonderful game. Without that, most beginners will just whack away at the balls, maybe getting lucky enough once in a while to score a point, and the game quickly becomes frustrating and boring. I will cover some of the basic shots and principles below.



This is the standard opening break shot. The red ball is placed on the foot spot, the opponent's cue ball (yellow in this case) is on the head spot, and you can place your cue ball (white) either to the right or left of the opponent's ball – in this case I chose right as the shooter is looking at the shot.

Most beginners shoot this too hard – the goal is to make the point as shown in the diagram, hitting a little less than half the red ball with right English in this case, sending the cue ball 3 rails around to hit the yellow rather full, ideally driving it toward the corner. With a good hit the red will also bank 3 rails around the table and toward the bottom long rail, and with proper speed control you should be left with another nice natural shot.

You'll hear the term "natural" quite a bit – that just refers to any shot where the cue ball is hit with running or natural English. Doing so causes the cue ball to travel naturally around the table, and the only thing necessary to score the point is to blend the hit, speed, and spin properly to send the cue ball on the correct path and avoid any kisses along the way. A natural can be a 3, 4, or even 5 or more rail shot as long as it continues to strike adjacent cushions. These come up in a lot of different varieties and are a standard part of any good 3 cushion player's arsenal.



This is a common position, where the balls are more or less along a long rail with the cue ball between them. There are 4 obvious natural shots here, and maybe more, I didn't draw all of the lines since it would be too confusing. They are:

- 1) Off the inside of the red with right (running) English, 3 rails to the yellow
- 2) Off the outside of the red with right English, either coming in short off the top long (side) rail to pick up the third rail before hitting the yellow, or long off the left short (end) rail then into the yellow
- 3) Off the inside of the yellow with left English, either 3 rails or 5 rails to the red
- 4) Off the outside of the yellow with left English, 3 rails short or 4 rails long

Which shot you choose comes with experience and is based on target size, kisses that may occur, position play, safety, etc. When starting out, it's important to start to recognize these naturals and realize that in many positions there is more than one alternative available. Once you start "seeing" the shots, the game becomes a lot of fun!



I want to show this shot to illustrate the “big ball” principle. In the previous two shots the target balls were in the middle of the table away from any rails. In those positions, the target is just under 3 balls wide, or about 7 inches. When the object ball is near a rail this target is enlarged, and when the ball is near the corner like this you have the biggest target of all, since you can hit the ball coming in on either side as well as a direct hit. Whenever possible in this position, you should try to hit the other ball first and at least 3 rails before approaching the big ball in the corner to maximize your target.

Just be aware that as the ball gets deeper into the corner, the target actually gets quite small and the shot is typically very difficult, and if it’s out too far from the corner it can give you a false sense of security, as it’s actually possible to go in and around the ball without making contact.



I want to demonstrate two principles with this shot:

- 1) There might be a kiss in this shot, since the red is going in a direction where the white could easily meet up with it. With this and many other shots, you often have the option of cutting or driving the ball. You can cut the ball normally to send the cue ball down the tangent line along the correct path, cut it a bit more and use draw to bend it back into the path, or hit it fuller and use follow and/or more spin to curve into the rail or lengthen the shot out.

I'm not at a table to verify this exact shot, but through experience you will start to "see" the kisses before they happen, and also be able to choose how to alter the shot to avoid the kiss. You may also choose to bend the cue ball into the path for positional reasons, to open up the approach angle off the third rail, or just for personal preference. Just be aware that there are different ways to achieve the correct scoring path.

- 2) When the yellow is in a position as shown, make sure to use a little extra speed. That way if you miss the point going in after 3 rails, you might make it coming back out after 5 rails. There are an abundance of two way shots in this game, and recognizing these can really boost your scoring chances.



This shot is called a “ticky”, basically a rail-first shot when the first ball is near the rail. From this position, the shot is almost automatic, striking it with soft speed and right English, you should be able to send the red in the direction indicated and end up with another natural shot.

Tickies come in all shapes and sizes, and you can get a surprising variety of results by blending the hit, speed, and spin.



Here's a favorite shot of mine, the cross-table. This type of position comes up frequently, although executing the cross table is not always the best shot. As with the tickies, blending the fullness of the hit with speed and spin can produce a wide variety of paths and results.

In this case, you want to cut the yellow almost straight down the rail, and use follow and a bit of left English to go back and forth across the table, hitting the red after 3 rails as shown or possibly even 4 off the bottom long rail. As long as you can blend the hit and English properly, the cue ball will usually keep walking down the table toward the object ball so you can hit the target off of multiple rails – just be sure to not miss it going in and miss it coming back out!



Here's a nice double-the-rail shot. Using inside English (in this case right), you can hit off the red ball and double the rail, hitting the short, then long, then short rail again and spinning into the yellow. These shots don't come up much in pool because of the corner pockets getting in the way, but they do have applications in reversing the cue ball's path or lengthening it out.

When hitting these, try to use as little English as possible to achieve the desired effect, it's easier to judge that way. There is a maximum that can be reached, just under 2 diamonds, so going deep into the corner with maximum English will result in a double-the-rail shot that hits about 1.8 diamonds from the opposite corner. That number is fairly consistent, so hitting say half a diamond from the corner means you can reach about 1.3 diamonds from the opposite corner ($1.8 - .5 = 1.3$). Just a good guideline to know, and you can double that when trying this same type of shot the long way.



This is a nice reverse English shot, again something that wouldn't come up much in pool, although as I said before, once you have the billiard knowledge you might find some opportunities to let your stroke out in a pool game too...

You hit the red fairly full with reverse English (in this case left). The cue ball hits the top long rail, then reverses to the opposite long rail, where the reverse English now becomes running English, and the cue ball picks up speed and spins around the table to score the point. These shots are great to watch, especially when the red needs to be struck fairly full and the ball spins slowly across the table and then picks up speed as it goes.



Here's another reverse shot that's practical. Hit rail first with reverse (right) English, spinning into the yellow. The English then becomes running English, and the cue ball will spin 2 rails out of the corner to score the point. This type of shot comes up in different varieties, always good to be on the lookout for it.

Reverse English is a good tool to have. It can be very touchy, and requires excellent judgement of the thickness of the hit and the amount of spin used. But even just a touch of reverse English can really lengthen out a shot and enable you to reach a part of the table normally not reachable with maximum running English.



This is an example of a spin shot. You hit the first ball very full and use extreme running English (right in this case). The ball is hit full so the spin to speed ratio is very high, resulting in some unusual paths around the table. In this case, a spin shot might be chosen to achieve a very long angle off the third rail, which might help to score the point as opposed to trying to hit a small target just before the yellow.

Of course the spin shots require practice and feel (and a good stroke!) to generate the correct spin and get the proper hit, but they are beautiful shots to watch. The cue ball starts out slowly, and as it hits each rail it continues to pick up speed around the table thanks to the fast cloth and more responsive rails of the carom table.



When the balls are close together, often the only option is to shoot a bank shot, where you hit 3 or more rails before making contact with both balls. Knowledge of the standard Corner-Five diamond system is very helpful for these shots. Here, the cue ball is coming out of the corner (5), and we want to hit track 3 since that will take us to a spot about 1/2 to 2/3 of a diamond from the corner. $5 - 3 = 2$, so we aim through diamond 2 in order to send the cue ball on the correct path around the table to score the point.

You have to know your table, whether it plays short or long, learn the tracks and be able to calculate how the paths differ from different parts of the table. All of this is explained in my series of kicking articles; see those for a more detailed explanation of this and other kicking systems.

Speaking of systems, there are probably 100 or more different variations that can be used in the game of three-cushion. I have over 20 that I like and use fairly often in both 3 cushion and pool. Some are more of a guideline approach, and some are very accurate. Some players choose not to use any systems at all and play entirely by feel. Ultimately feel is a component no matter what, as each table plays differently and everyone's stroke is also a little different. But with a little practice the systems can really help you map out a shot and build up your accuracy and feel for that type of shot, and this will help not only in three-cushion but also when kicking or banking in pool.

Lastly, I want to mention two more principles – position play and defense. I already mentioned a few things about position play – in general, it's good to shoot naturals as opposed to having to really power the ball or manufacture a shot or send the cue ball on an unnatural path. It's generally good to have all three balls in the middle of the table, you typically have multiple shots and options available. Having all three balls along a long rail with the cue ball in between, as shown in the second diagram above, is also an ideal position, especially if one ball is near the corner. Least favorable are shots where the object balls are along a diagonal, or in the middle of the short rail, or where there is a long distance between the cue ball and object balls, or when the object balls are close together. As you gain experience you will learn to choose the correct shot and use the proper speed to enhance your chances of attaining a good position after the shot, doing so will allow you to achieve a long run much easier than relying on random chance.

Defense is really just the opposite of position play – you want to do the things that leave your opponent a poor position. If shooting off your opponent's cue ball toward the red, whenever possible try to shoot softly. That way if you miss, you will leave your cue ball near the red, leaving your opponent a difficult shot and often only a bank shot. Conversely, when trying to score on your opponent's cue ball, you will tend to shoot a little harder, that way if you miss your cue ball will not stay near your opponent's cue ball and offer them a close hit on the first ball.

Some players emphasize safety play more than others, sometimes even blatantly so. Often these players don't have super high averages, but their play tends to bring down the averages of their opponents. It's the whole defense vs. offense argument. Personally I think a blend is the best option. There is much, much more to be learned in both these areas, but for now just being exposed to the ideas and principles will give you a better understanding of the game.

I could go on and on – I'm pretty enthusiastic to play now just writing this. There are many other types of shots - hold ups, drop ins, kiss-back shots, time shots, jump shots, and masses to name a few - and so much more to learn. But the shots above come up pretty often and will give you a good head start; soon you will begin to recognize these common positions, learn the limits of the various shots, and continue to learn new shots by playing and watching others. From there it's all about practice and imagination.

Enjoy!