

Playing pool well requires excellence in many areas, but two of the most critical are solid fundamentals and position play. I've written about fundamentals before, and will again, but for today's article I want to address position play in a way not often discussed. To quote my friend, fellow instructor, and mentor David "Blackjack" Sapolis – "Crappy position is the grandfather of spectacular shot making". And for most of us, being a shot maker is not a recipe for success.

You've probably seen many articles, drills, and videos on cue ball control, position patterns, etc. In order to try and simplify this complex subject, I wanted to put a different spin on this (pun intended) and share the results of some analysis I did a while ago on common position routes.

I've watched a lot of commentated matches over the years, first on ESPN and Accu-Stats and later on YouTube and live streams, and I always found it interesting that the commentators could predict what the player was about to do (or not do) with amazing accuracy. How could they possibly know that player's style, tendencies, preferences, etc.? The answer – there is often a "correct" way to play a shot that most good players understand, based on percentages learned through trial and error. While the players still have a personal flair and style that may dictate what types of shots and routes they prefer, from a given position the majority of the top players will choose to play the shot in a similar manner.

To analyze this further I watched a number of professional 9 and 10 ball matches with different styles of players and charted the position routes that were taken. I used about a dozen broad categories such as straight (or nearly straight) with no rail, off the long rail and back to center, 1 rail down table, etc. This will make more sense once you see the details below... I was looking to see if there were commonalities amongst players on the types of routes chosen and the frequency with which they used those routes.

What follows is a list of the top 5 most common position routes that were used. Not counting safety battles, kicks, jump shots, etc., together these common routes accounted for 80 - 90% of the successfully executed position shots. It won't be nearly this high for amateurs, since we often choose the wrong route or get out of line and are forced to use more complex routes than necessary, but by understanding the proper routes and learning how to practice these routes we can definitely simplify our position play and as a result improve our consistency.



Position Route #1 – No Rail

This is the most common route used by pros. During my analysis, variations of this type of pattern were used about 50% of the time! I show just a few examples above, as you can imagine the possibilities are endless. The important takeaway is that pros are able to play their patterns in such a way to get close to the next object ball (1.5 – 3 feet) and nearly straight in or with a small angle, and then use a stop shot to stop the cue ball, a stop shot at an angle (stun shot) to follow the tangent line, or utilize a follow or draw shot to move the ball forward or back for position on the next shot.

This type of route is the simplest to use but also requires muscle memory and feel for distance control. Rolling the ball forward 12 inches vs. 24 inches (or sometimes even 2 inches vs. 3 inches!) can quickly cause things to spiral out of control and end your run. But in general these “small position” plays are the bread and butter of consistently simple run outs.

So how do you develop the touch and feel necessary to control the cue ball? First, a solid understanding of cue ball control is needed to know what different tip positions and spins will do (and won't do) to the cue ball after contact with the object ball. With that foundation, you then need to work on your speed control.

There are many drills and sources of information that can be referenced to work on these skills, but two of my favorites I've already covered in prior articles. First, the 15 ball lineup drill, which is not only useful for developing consistency and confidence in your fundamentals, but can also be used to work on stop/stun shots, follow, draw, stun-follow, stun-draw, etc. Next is Bob Jewett's Progressive Practice, which has many levels of exercises to develop your speed control with stun, follow, and draw shots. Click on the links below for more information.

<http://www.mypoolblog.com/articles-and-lessons/15-ball-lineup-drill>

<http://www.mypoolblog.com/articles-and-lessons/progressive-practice>



Position Route #2 – 1 Rail, Object Ball along the Long Rail

Even though I combined the different no rail route possibilities into the singular no rail category above – there really isn't a way to subdivide them other than by distance traveled – I broke the one rail routes into several categories based on the location of the object ball and the type of route chosen. So the next most popular route used, accounting for almost 15% of the shots hit, was shooting at an object ball located along the long rail and bouncing back toward the center of the table or across to the opposite long rail.

This type of route is used so often because it is both easy to control and offers a simple path back to (or through) the center of the table, a key area for position play. Having a decent angle on the object ball is preferable to being nearly straight in, unless the objective is to move directly forward or back or stay more or less in the same area for the next shot. With slight changes in tip position, you can also send the cue ball straight across the table, somewhat forward and across, or somewhat back and across. You can see some of these differences in the diagrammed shots above.

Three key concepts for this type of shot are to leave the proper angle, minimize spin, and hit the ball cleanly, all of which will increase your consistency. If you need to get back to center table or across the table, it's better to have a bit more angle so you can use less speed to achieve the desired result. Of course the opposite is true, if your goal is to stay near the rail after contact, then playing for a smaller angle is best, otherwise you will be forced to shoot a more difficult draw drag shot or go back and forth across the table.

Secondly, when pulling the ball back toward the center of the table or beneath the opposing side pocket, too often amateurs use an excessive amount of outside English to "help" the cue ball get there. On a natural shot the rail will add some outside spin to the cue ball, so just following the natural tangent line or adding a bit of draw will typically achieve the position without using

additional English, which decreases accuracy because of the need to compensate for deflection, curve, throw, etc.

Lastly, hitting the ball cleanly up the rail with the proper speed is critical on tight equipment. It may not be as important on your local bar box or on a standard table, but on professional equipment hitting the long rail before the pocket at anything other than pocket speed will often cause the ball to hang up in the pocket. Practicing these shots and getting comfortable with the angles and limits will help you visualize the correct line to the pocket and increase your pocketing consistency.

The best way to practice these shots is to put a few balls along the opposite long rails, either across from each other or diagonally, and practice going back and forth to or through the center of the table. One such drill is diagrammed below.



In this drill you can work from the inside (1, 4, 2, 5, 3, 6) or the outside (3, 6, 2, 5, 1, 4) to practice going off the rail and achieving the correct angle on the next shot. You can also add more balls in each line as your skill level progresses.

Another good drill is one I devised for myself, although it's similar to another I've seen for practicing with balls frozen to the rail. I came up with this exercise as a way to practice my rail shots, hitting them cleanly down the rails and utilizing different types of position routes. I started playing on tougher equipment and was tired of hanging up rail shots unnecessarily by hedging too much toward the long rail before the pocket opening. Practicing this drill and others like it really helped me to gain confidence on these frequently occurring shots.

Refer to the diagram below:



Place 12 balls on the table, one roughly near each diamond. You can try to place them perfectly, but as you can see in the diagram, I like just getting them close, varying the distance from the rail, even freezing a few to the rail. This gives me a bunch of similar but different shots to practice, that way every time I do the drill it's slightly different.

I start off in the center of the table, and try to make each ball without touching another ball. That's a pretty tough goal, especially on the first few shots, so if I miss or accidentally brush another ball on the table I just move it back and continue. By doing this drill you will get practice with a variety of angles and distances and will also improve your 1 rail, 2 rail, and even 3 rail position.

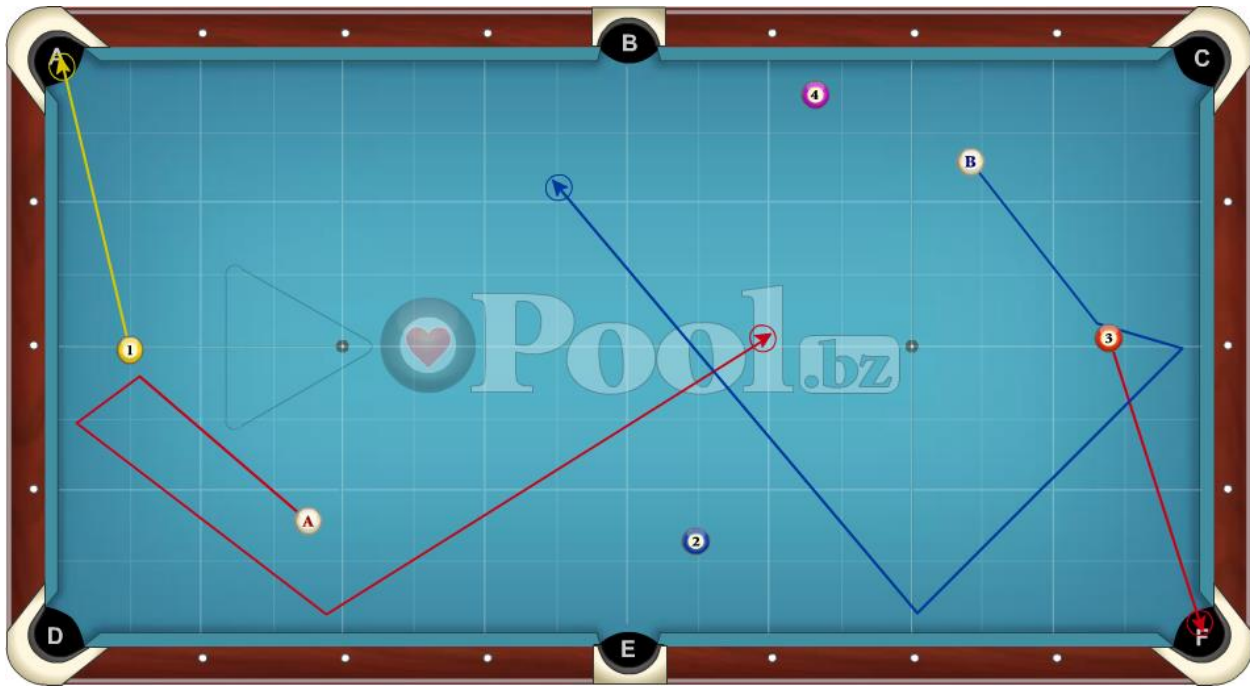


Position Route #3 – 1 Rail (or 2), Object Ball along the End Rail

Here's another combined category, accounting for a little more than 10% of the position routes, and the shots are very similar. These routes are used when the object ball is near the end rail and you need to get back to the center of the table, or even extend the route back to the opposite end of the table. You can choose to simply hit a stun shot and follow the tangent line, use a little follow or draw to go forward or backward from the natural line, or even use a bit of spin as needed.

The decision to use 1 rail or 2 is somewhat of a personal preference but also dependent on the angle into the first rail and the position of the next object ball. Some players just prefer to drive the ball a bit more, while others are comfortable using stun or floating the ball down table with pure speed control and minimizing spin. The choice is yours, just be sure to practice both in case you need to navigate around obstructing balls.

Make sure to practice hitting the ball softly to minimize cue ball movement, especially on steeper angles. Often people miss these shots due to collision-induced throw or "cling". The best way to compensate for this is to aim to hit the object ball a little thinner, or use just a bit of outside English to negate the effect. If you have a steep angle and need to hold the cue ball in the center of the table, on fast equipment it's often best to go all the way to the opposite end rail and back to center. Just be careful of your line and spin so you don't scratch or run into any interfering balls.



Position Route #4 – 2 Rails back to Center

This category accounted for about 10% of the position routes used. It's an excellent way to get back to the center of the table, or extend the route further to the rail for a shot that's near the end of the table. As above, you don't always need to just automatically add outside English on the draw shots, the rail will add some natural running English to the shot. Just use English as needed with either shot to achieve the correct angle out of the first rail or help the cue ball lengthen out after the second rail.

An excellent way to practice these shots, and shots from the category above (1 or 2 rails off the end rail), is to use a simple endless drill. An endless drill is one where you place the balls on the table, but when you reach the last ball of the drill you replace the earlier balls and continue the drill by trying to get position from the last ball to the first. They are an excellent way to practice repetitive patterns and increase your concentration and focus, as well as offering an objective way to keep score of your progress.

See the diagram below for this endless exercise:



Place one ball on the head spot and one ball on the foot spot. Start with cue ball in hand, and make the first ball and try and get position on the second ball. As soon as you make the first ball, since there are only two balls in this drill, replace it on the spot and try to make the second ball and get position back on the first.

You will use a variety of shots in this drill – stun shots, draw back off the long rail, 1 rail off the end rail and back toward center (#3), 2 rails out of the corner (#4), etc. You can also place the object balls a diamond closer to the end rail to practice a slightly different set of shot and angles, or even place both balls just a few inches or so off the rails to work on moving the cue ball up and down the table. Try these exercises out and see how many shots in a row you can make with each one!



Position Route #5 – 1 Rail, Object Ball near Center

This category accounts for about 5% of the position routes and rounds out our top 5. Many times from cue ball position A (left side above) people will choose to go up to the end rail and back down using 1 or 2 rails. But from this type of position, it's actually easier to control the result by hitting it solidly with some draw, and maybe a touch of outside English, to pull the cue ball to the long rail and back out. This is of course dependent on the angle, position of the next shot, and any interfering balls, which is again why it's important to know these basic routes but also practice alternative routes. Position B is a fairly simple shot, although it often occurs when a player overruns their position slightly and instead of being able to draw back to center or drift over they are forced to use the rail to get back in line.

This concludes my lesson on common position routes. The remaining 4 or 5 categories I came up with, including an "other" category, only accounted for a few percent each. Ironically, for amateurs, the numbers are probably somewhat reversed. Particularly with beginning and intermediate players, but also somewhat with better amateurs, it's far too easy to get out of line and have to rely on multi-rail positional shots, unnecessary spin and speed, bumping into balls everywhere and just hoping to land on the next shot. If this sounds like you, work on the common routes above and the associated drills, and I think you'll find that your shots will be easier, your position more precise, and your consistency much improved.