

## PSP – Perfect Safety Practice

This is a follow up to last month's lesson on Perfect Position Practice and common position shots you must master. If you master those shots you will have a great offensive arsenal, but to go along with that you need a great defensive arsenal as well.

Many people don't realize that the top pros only run out from the break around 25% - 30% of the time when playing 9 ball. They don't always have a good shot on the first ball, and even if they get off to a good start they may face a difficult table layout or play themselves out of position during the rack. Therefore it should be obvious that the majority of the games are actually won or lost based on defensive play.

This article will focus on safety play. There are a wide variety of safety shots and a lot of creativity that can be applied, but if you can recognize and master the basic shots and practice them from different positions you will see an immediate increase in the number of games you win. You also need to learn how to return the safeties when they are directed at you, that's where kicking knowledge comes into play. I have a ton of kicking information also available on my webpage under the Lessons and Articles section.

## Goals of Safety Play

There are some general goals you should have when playing a safety, sort of a mental checklist you can evaluate when looking at options. Here is a list, in descending order of preference:

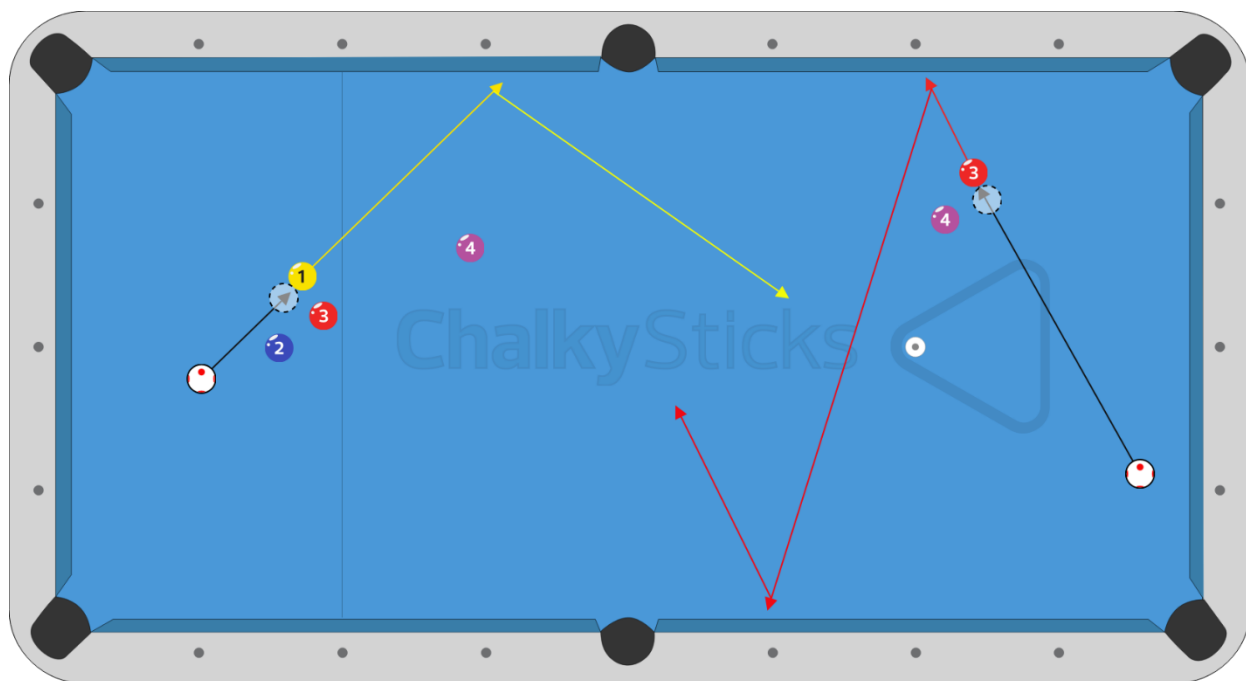
- 1) Lock up safety – in jail, opponent has very little to no chance to hit the ball. Very difficult to achieve this even when the table layout allows for this type of safety
- 2) Hidden safety - opponent can't make a direct hit on the object ball and must kick
- 3) Obscuring safety - opponent can see only a small part of the object ball, thus limiting your opponent's options for where the object ball can be hit
- 4) Containing safety – opponent can see the entire ball but there is no direct shot
- 5) High degree of difficulty – there is a shot available, but the degree of difficulty is high due to cue ball location (frozen to a rail or in front of another ball), cut angle, distance between the balls, or ability to get position on the next shot

## Principles of Safety Play

Some general principles to keep in mind:

- It is very difficult to control both balls perfectly, so typically you want to focus on either the object ball OR the cue ball. Controlling the object ball is usually more important, that way even if the cue ball isn't hidden or blocked you won't give up an open shot
- Focus on the blend of speed control and how thick you are hitting the object ball to achieve the path you are looking for
- Use side spin as necessary to speed up or slow down the cue ball or to throw the object ball slightly in the direction you need, and minimize side spin over long distances to increase the accuracy of the hit
- If you aren't sure what to do, look at hitting the object ball  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , or  $\frac{1}{4}$  full and visualize the path of the cue ball and object ball with those fractional hits. Remember that with a half ball hit and no english the cue ball and object ball will both travel about the same distance after contact, and with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{4}$  hit one ball will travel about 3 times as far as the other
- Don't drive yourself crazy trying to get too perfect or too close to a blocking ball because you are worried about someone jumping over an interfering ball to escape the safety. Most people just aren't that good with a jump cue
- Keep it simple! Often a simple bump or roll is more effective than trying to position both balls using multiple rails

## Safety 1 – Stop Shot

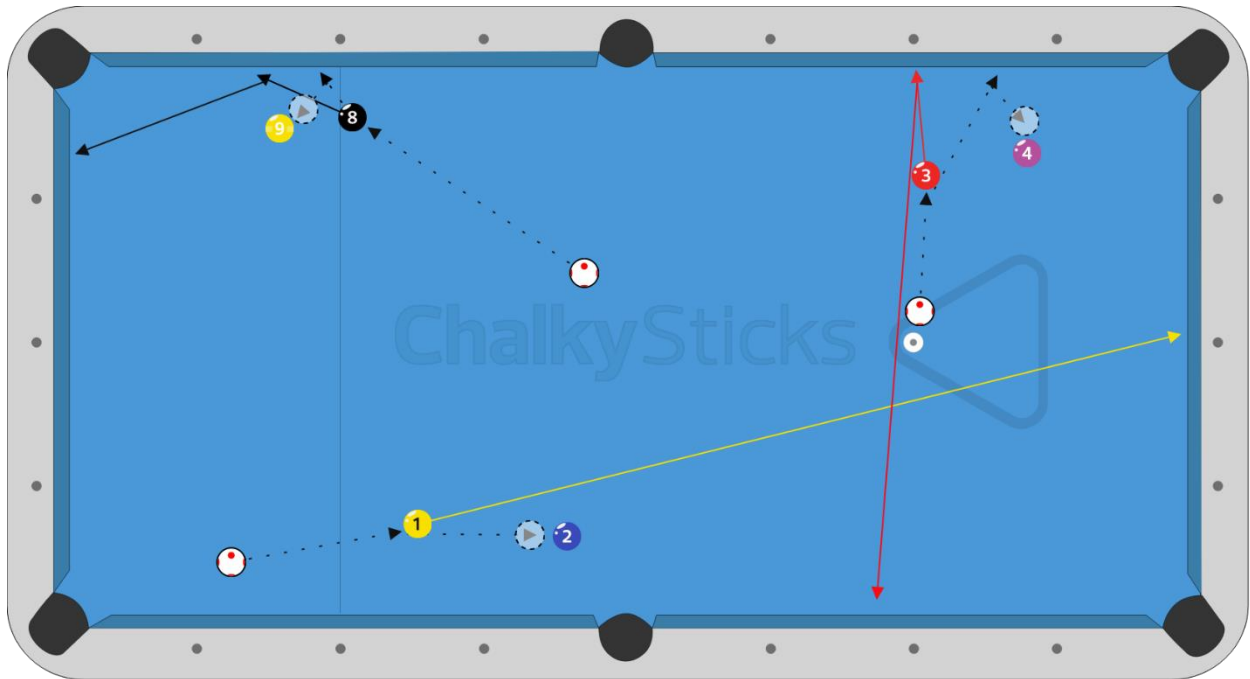


These should be the simplest of safeties, but I see people mess them up all the time. Two examples are shown above – in both examples, hitting the cue ball with a stop shot will stop the cue ball dead, send the object ball up table, and hide the cue ball behind another ball. Simple, right?

Not so fast. A few things to watch out for:

- Execution of the stop shot. Especially as distance increases, you must be very aware of your speed and tip position to execute the stop shot perfectly. That's where various drills will help – see My Favorite Drill, Progressive Practice, and Perfect Position Practice, Shot #1 elsewhere on my site for more info
- Pay attention to the speed and direction of the object ball, don't take it for granted. You don't want to leave it in front of a pocket, or worse accidentally make the ball and hook yourself! It's often better to leave the object ball in the middle of the table as opposed to near a rail, makes it tougher for your opponent to hit. Use speed and/or spin to control the object ball's path.
- Don't get too fancy and try to get the cue ball to move slightly to really snug it up to the blocking ball. All too often I see people try to do this and they end up moving the cue ball too much and giving up a shot. Of course, the better you play and the better your opponent the more you will need to do this to really put your opponent in a jam.

## Safety 2 – Nip and Tuck



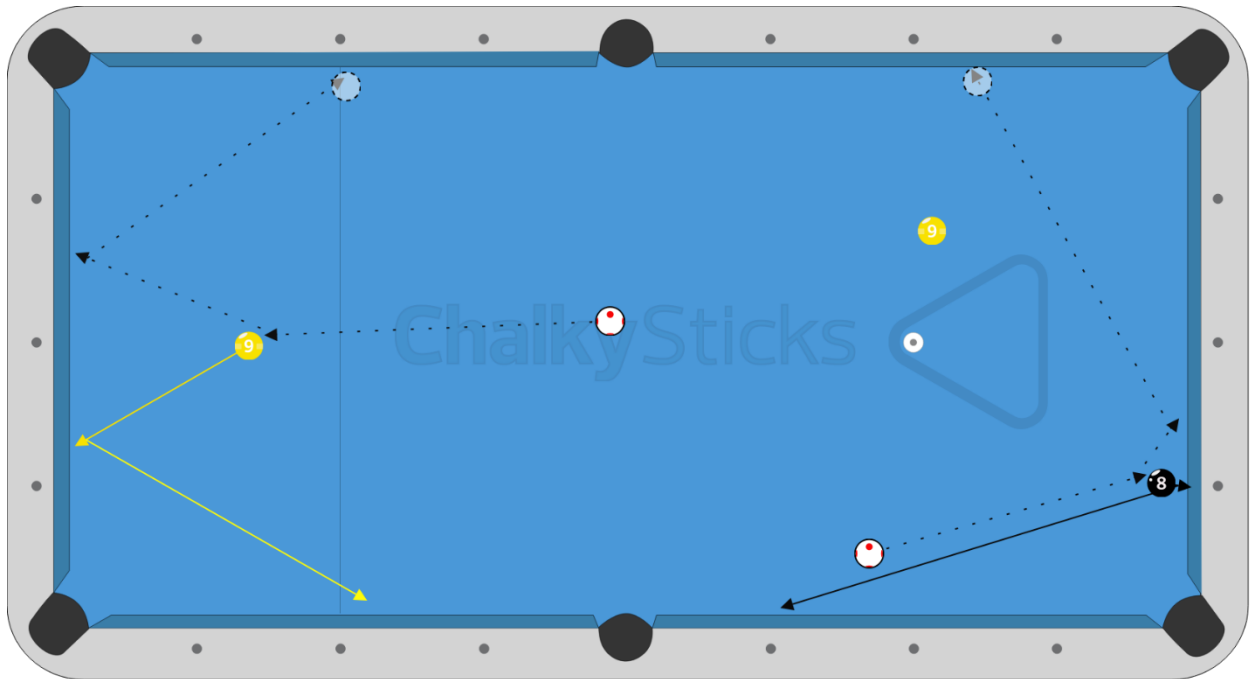
Above are three examples of the nip and tuck. These types of safeties are very effective with the added benefit of being easy to execute with a high degree of accuracy – with practice of course!

You typically will have a little leeway in how thick you are hitting the object ball, and can blend the thickness of the hit with proper speed to send the cue ball behind the interfering ball. This concept can be extended for longer distances as well, but of course the difficulty increases with the distance traveled.

Note in all three examples the final position of the object ball. Whenever possible, try and play the safety in this manner, so that even if you fail to fully hide the cue ball you are not giving up a shot.

The best way to practice these shots is to throw a rack of balls on the table and practice continuously rolling up on other balls. Learn the relationship between the thickness of the hit and the speed required. If hitting a rail with the cue ball, experiment with using some sidespin to further slow the cue ball down after impacting the rail.

## Safety 3 – Side to Side

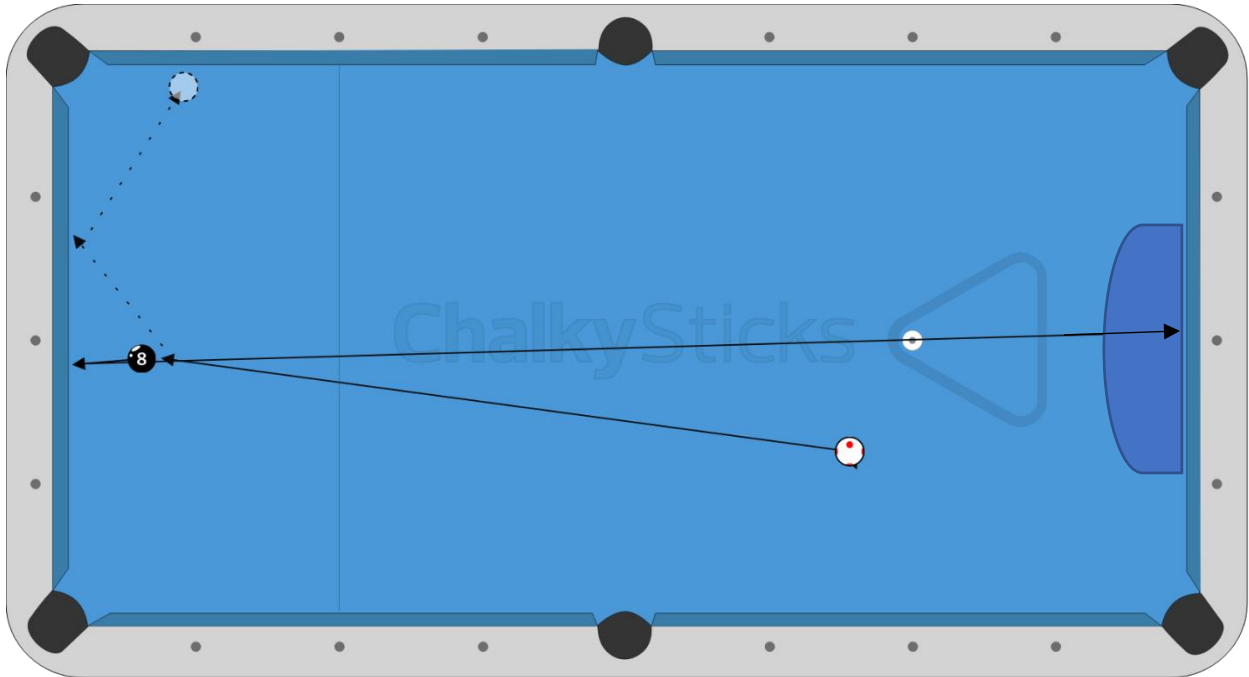


This safety comes up frequently and requires a good amount of skill to execute properly without selling out. All too often amateurs hit the ball too hard or too soft and leave the object ball too close to the corner pocket, right in front of the side, or with an easy bank. What makes it even more difficult is unlike the examples above, the cue ball is often all the way up table, and the increased distance makes executing the correct speed and hit that much tougher.

A good goal is to leave both the cue ball and object ball around the second diamond, as shown in the example at the left. From that position you have a decent margin of error in either direction for both balls, and if you hit it perfectly the bank in either direction is difficult. Another good position is leaving one ball on the first diamond and one on the third diamond, similar to the example on the right. Of course, with the example on the right the added bonus is hiding behind the blocking 9 ball.

You must practice this repeatedly from different positions and distances to get a feel for the thickness of hit, speed, and spin required to send both balls to their desired locations. When deciding how to hit the shot, try and visualize the shot and don't try and make one ball travel a certain way at the expense of losing control of the other. Place the emphasis on object ball control if you are having trouble, leaving the object ball near the second diamond allows for a wide range of cue ball locations that will still be safe.

## Safety 4a – End to End 1

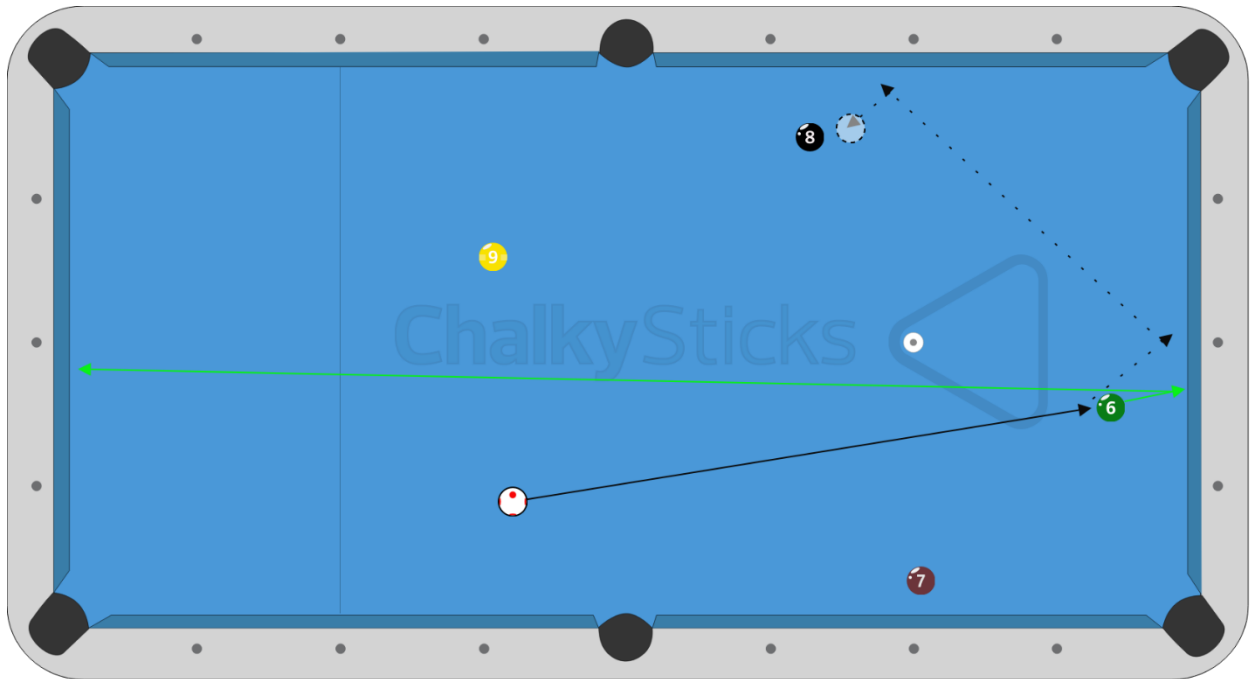


A classic safety and one that is used often as a containing shot. As with the other safeties, especially in a wide open table like this with no interfering balls, control of the object ball is of the utmost importance. The middle of the end rail is perfect, anywhere between the first and third diamonds in the shaded semicircle is acceptable.

One trick I found to help with speed control of the object ball is to just visualize the speed needed to send the cue ball to that same area as if the object ball wasn't there. Since you are typically hitting the object ball pretty full, that type of hit transfers most of the cue ball energy to the object ball and it will continue the second half of the journey you "visualized" the cue ball would take.

You can also use a bit of spin on the cue ball, in this case maybe a little left or inside English, to slow the cue ball down after contact with the cushion. Just be sure to not compromise the accuracy of the hit or the object ball path.

## Safety 4b – End to End 2

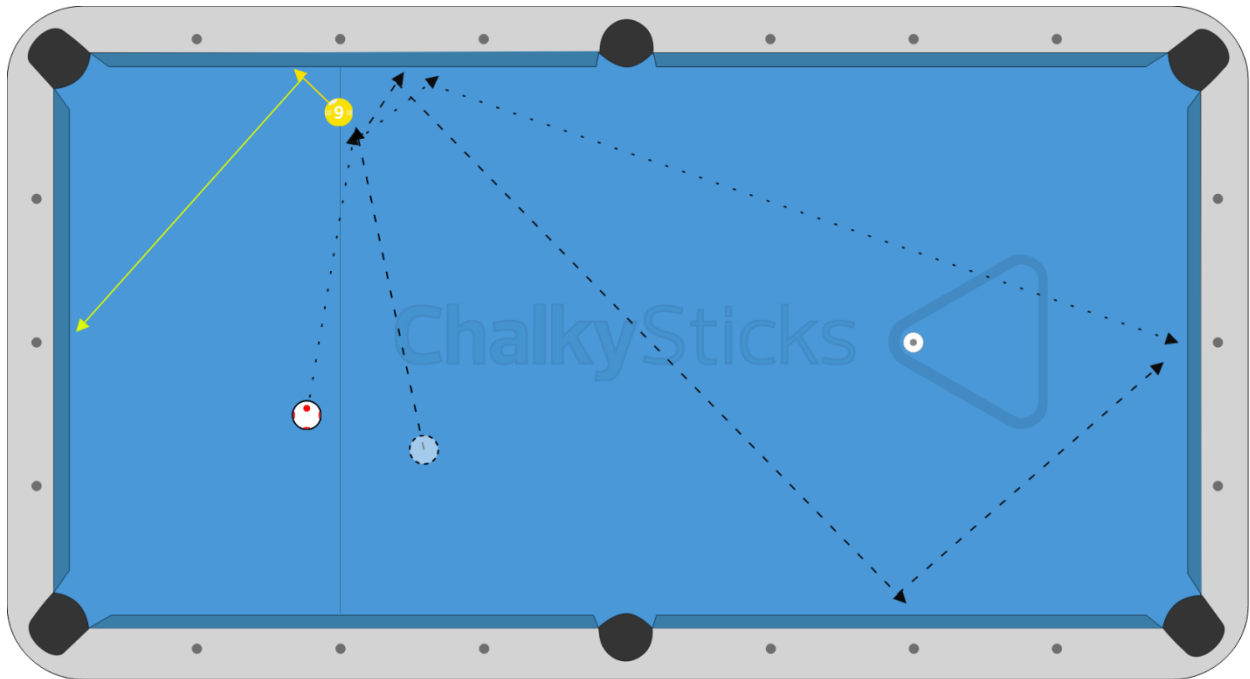


Here's another good example of the end to end safety, this time with more balls on the table. This adds a little more complexity – you don't want the object ball to bump into an interfering ball and leave a shot – but it also provides additional cover for the cue ball to make the safety even more effective than just putting the object ball on the opposite end rail.

In this example I will judge the hit on the 6 to send it to the opposite end rail, but also try to blend the speed and spin of the cue ball to ideally hide it behind the 8 at the same time. Note that even if I don't completely hide behind the 8, with good speed and object ball path the 9 ball could also come into play as a blocker.

Note that this safety is better than trying to hide the cue ball behind the 7, since that would send the 6 toward the opposite side or corner pocket. It's also better than a slightly simpler side to side safety, since there is no guarantee that the cue ball would land behind the 7 or the 6 ball would land behind the 8.

## Safety 5 – Bank to End Rail



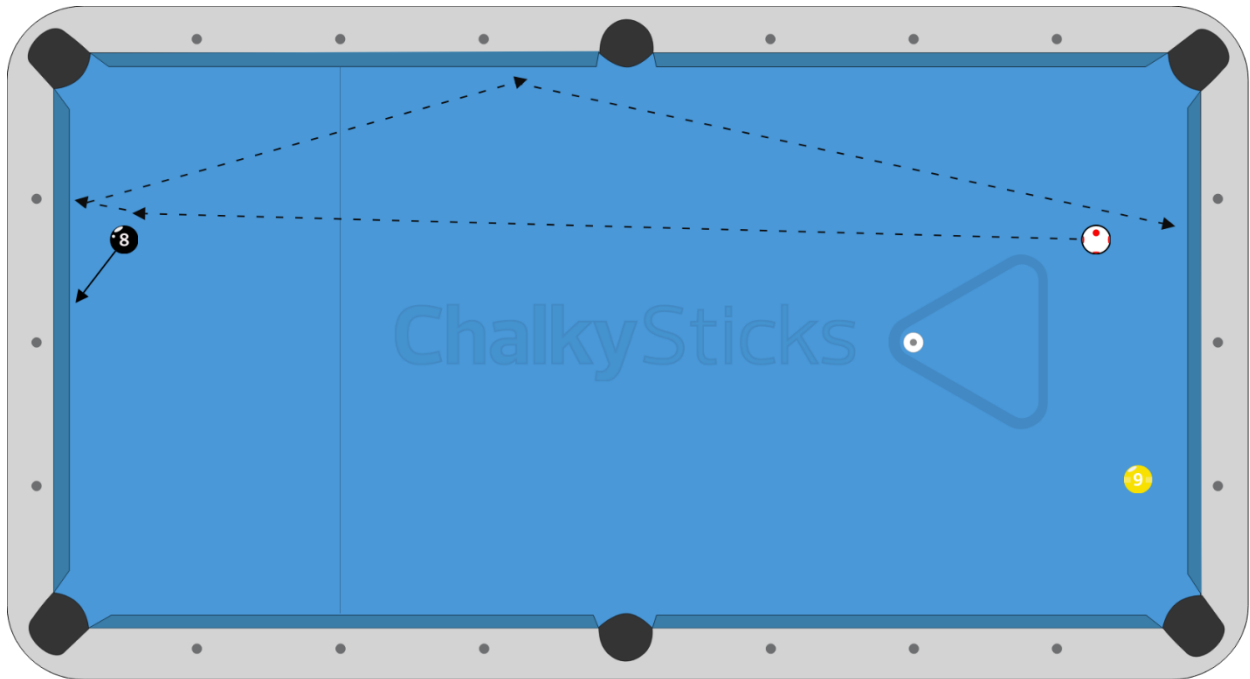
This safety offers a few different options for both the cue ball and object ball to reach the desired positions in the middle of the opposite end rails. Two possible options are shown above, a thicker hit with spin to go directly to the opposite end rail, and a slightly thinner hit with some spin to go to the opposite long rail and then to the end rail. Not shown but also a possibility is banking the object ball two rails to the middle of the end rail. Which path you choose will be based on the position of the balls and any interfering balls on the table.

Pay close attention to the object ball – sensing a theme? Too thin and you will leave the object ball in front of the nearest corner pocket. Too thick or too much speed and it will land in front of the opposite corner pocket. Picture the speed and hit needed to send the object ball to the end rail, then based on that determine the best way to get the cue ball as far up table as possible, ideally on the opposite end rail.

One hint you might find helpful - when judging the object ball path, walk around the table and look at the path going into the rail. Picture the “V” created by the angle in / angle out and make sure it looks right, rather than just getting down on the shot and trying to guess the proper thickness of hit from behind your shooting position. Walking around the table to assess the situation from different angles and feeding information into your visual computer is a good practice to get into in general.



## Safety 6 – Thin to Win



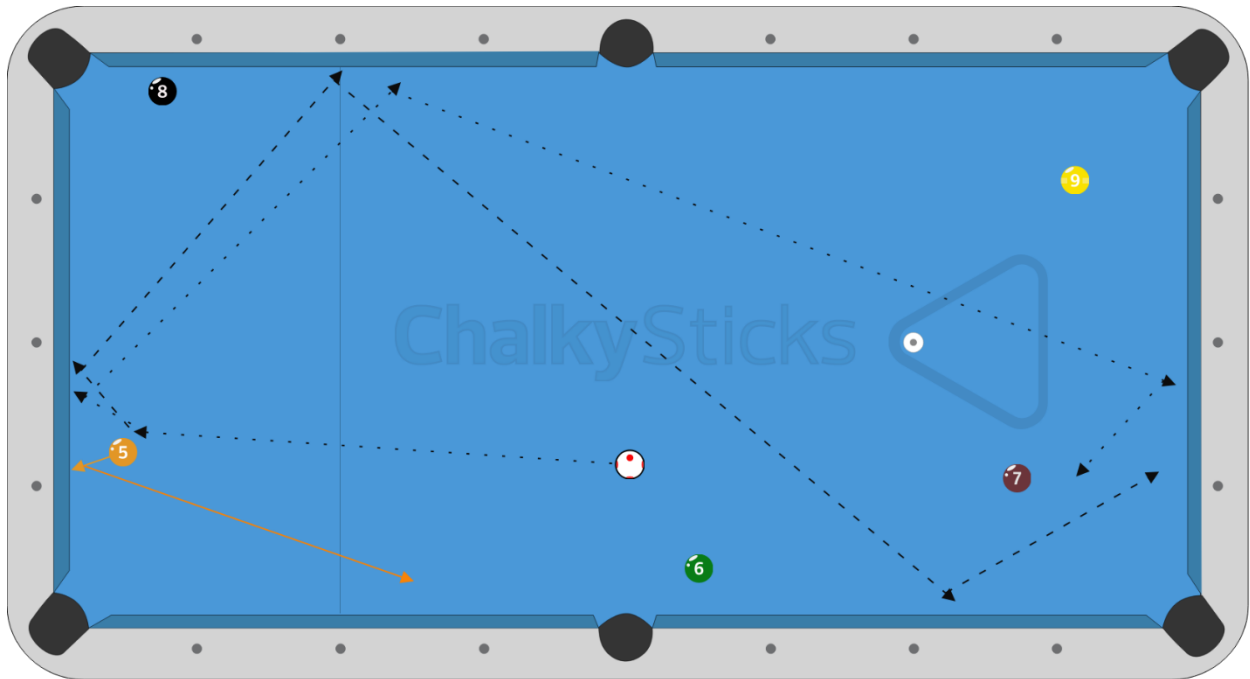
These are not easy safeties, especially when distance is involved. The fear of missing the ball completely overwhelms most people and causes them to hit the ball far fuller than intended, which almost always results in giving up a shot.

In addition to the example shown, sometimes this will occur in a side to side version, where you can really thin an object ball and just travel back across the table, perhaps behind an interfering ball. While easier to hit thinly, it can be touchy due to the very soft speed that is needed.

My main recommendations for this type of safety:

- Use a lag speed type of stroke. Since you aren't hitting much of the object ball, not much cue ball speed is needed.
- Minimize sidespin to increase the accuracy of the hit
- If you do have to use sidespin, be sure to aim a little thicker than intended since you will get some amount of curve or swerve on the shot due to the slower speed. Using a rolling ball (above center) with a level cue will help to minimize the swerve effect
- Practice and more practice! Work on hitting 1/4 of the object ball, 1/8, 1/16, etc. Really, really thin. Visualize the shot using the inner edge of the cue ball and the outer edge of the object ball. Don't be afraid to miss the ball completely in practice or even in a game. Often hitting too thick is a sellout anyway. Shave that paint off!

## Safety 7 – 2 or 3 Rails

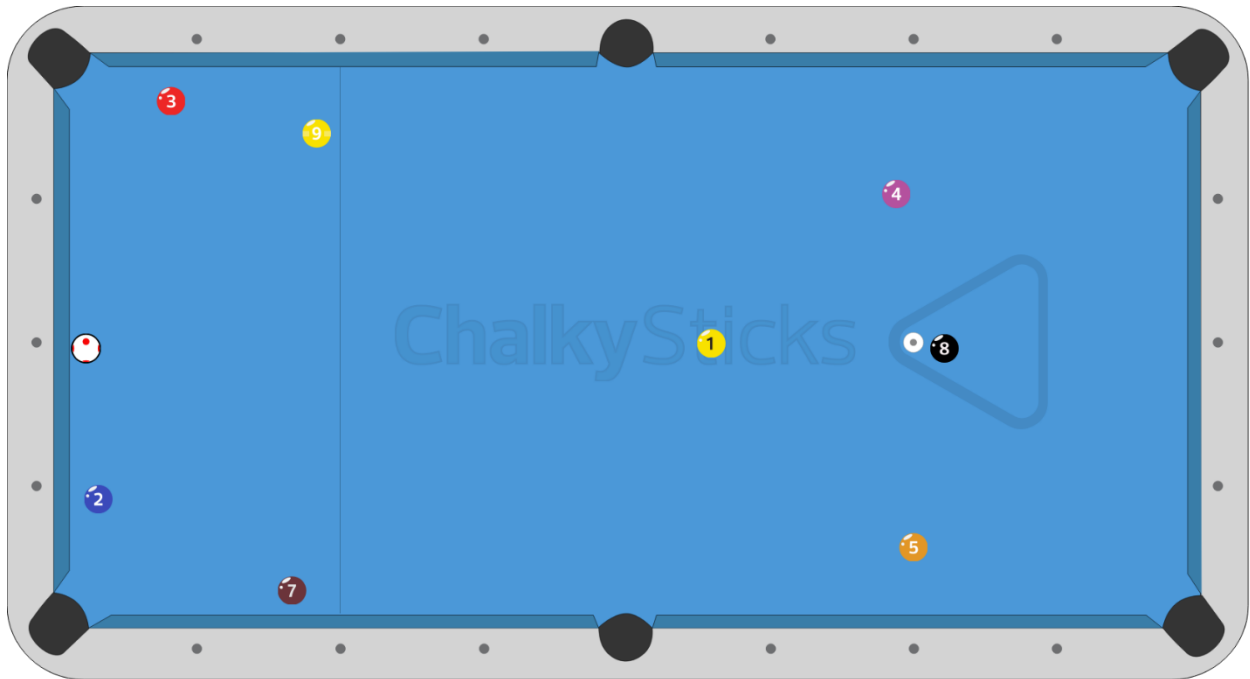


This is often one of the more difficult safeties to execute correctly, yet for some reason I see many amateurs using this as their go-to safety. They just love to try and control both balls over multiple rails and land in what is typically a very small target area.

When the balls are in a position similar to that pictured in the diagram, this is a decent safety to attempt. The 7 ball can be used a blocker via multiple cue ball paths, and the 6 ball provides an additional blocking opportunity. All too often though a blocker such as the 7 ball is not present or closer to one rail or the other, or a blocker such as the 6 ball is not present as a backup.

Playing games such as one pocket or three cushion helps a player develop the touch and feel needed to execute these types of safeties with a high degree of accuracy. You must practice hitting the object ball at slightly different thicknesses to drive it to the long rail, and then also judge the cue ball spin and speed needed to send it accurately up table while avoiding the scratch.

## Game Example



As I was writing this article and preparing for my next clinic, I saw this situation occur on a YouTube match I was watching. Cue ball frozen to the middle of the end rail perfectly, yet plenty of balls to hide behind. What would you do?

My first choice, and the one chosen in the match, is to cut the 1 between the 8/5 and try and roll the cue ball down behind the 4. The 1 should bank either behind the 5 or up higher against the bottom long rail (toward the 7), depending on the exact angle.

What happened in the match was the 1 ball banked and landed right in front of the side pocket, the cue ball leaked out behind the 4 and left an easy open shot. This emphasizes the importance of object ball location – if the 1 had traveled a little more or a little less, there would not have been an open shot. Another key factor was having the cue ball frozen to the middle of the end rail from the previous safety. Quite often that's all that is needed, even open shots are very difficult from that position, not only to make the ball but also to get any sort of position on the next shot.

I hope this guide has been helpful and inspired you to work on your safety game. I could show many, many more examples but I will leave it up to you to learn and master these general safety types and work with the tips provided to create your own practice situations. Watch professional matches on YouTube, especially those with decent commentary, and see if you can see the safety before they shoot it. Pay attention to the hit, speed, and spin used. You'll see many variations of the safeties above as well as some other creative and effective safes.

I watched one 9-ball match recently that started out with about 10 minutes of safety play on the 1 ball, neither player quite locking the other player up, both players kick-safeing back, each waiting for that all important first opening.

A great way to practice is to throw out 9 balls and leave yourself with no shot on the 1 and try and play a safety. If you are successful, then turn the tables and try and kick at the ball, ideally playing a successful kick-safe and continuing the process. If you leave an open shot, just nudge the ball somewhere bad and continue. You can do this by yourself or with a partner, even make a game of it by coming up with some sort of point system. When you get tired of playing with the 1, put it in the pocket and continue with the 2, 3, etc. It's really challenging when you get down to just the 7-8-9, or the 8-9, or just the 9.

Stay safe!