



101 TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR GAME

by GEORGE FELS

LONG HAVE WE been entranced by that symmetrical number, which represents, in no special order, (1) the first three-digit *prime* number (i.e., it cannot be divided evenly except by itself and 1); (2) the first three-digit numerical palindrome; (3) the number of Dalmatians in the famous Disney animated feature; (4) one of the Army's most elite Airborne Divisions. Here and now, though, 101 stands for the number of cue-games tips you're about to receive — any one of which might provide just the shoring-up your game needs.

1 Every sport played with a ball demands *balance*, and that surely includes the cue games. Precisely *how* you assume your shooting stance isn't nearly as important as your being solidly planted — solid enough that you could resist a shove on your shooting side.

2 Every game or sport requiring a stance also requires that you be *comfortable* in that stance. Don't imitate

another player's stance unless it feels good to you. Looks are far less important than comfort.

3 A stroke should be just that: a smooth, rhythmic motion with a beginning, middle and end. Don't rush it, and don't choke it off.

4 Follow through. True of every sport in which a ball is struck with something, even the human hand, as in handball or volleyball.

5 The only other sport that demands pool's and billiards' level of *concentration* is golf — because, once again, you're attacking an inert ball, and have no opponent to interfere with that except the game itself. Bear down.

6 One of the key secrets to longer runs in pool is to leave yourself position for *angled* shots rather than straight-in shots. Angled shots offer you far, far more options for cue-ball position.

7 The entire game of pool — in any form — can be *focused upon the*

cue ball and nothing else, if your concentration is strong enough. You'll improve overnight if you can just *assume* the object ball will be in the hole, and concentrate instead on the cue ball's destination.

8 A good technique to learn Tip Number 7 is to practice fairly long straight-in shots, playing to stop the cue ball dead. (After all, when you stop the cue ball on a straight shot, where else but the hole can the object ball possibly go?)

9 In three-cushion billiards, on the other hand, one of the keys to the advanced game is to follow *the speed of the first object ball*. This is how you begin to learn to play billiards position.

10 Rid yourself of "Body English." Not only is it a sure sign of lack of confidence, but it may lead you into an un-straight follow-through. That's poison.

11 Keep your head down and stay in stance until the object ball is

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in the hole and the cue ball stops. Helps establish rhythm.

12 After eyesight, rhythm may well be the second prerequisite of all pool. Don't rush; don't dawdle. Find a comfortable pace and stay with it. Again, overnight improvements are possible here.

13 Three to five practice strokes are plenty. More than that and you force yourself out of rhythm, and begin to put unnecessary pressure on yourself.

14 Always come to a complete stop after the last practice stroke, and check your aim. If it looks and feels perfect, pull the trigger. If not, stand erect and adjust. Helps establish a consistent stroke and playing rhythm.

15 Do *not* adjust your aim while still in your shooting stance. You're odds-on to miss.



16 *Visualize* — and do it properly and positively. If you can see yourself making the shot, you probably will. (And if you see yourself *missing*, you probably will. Adjust your aim — and attitude — accordingly.)

17 Do not attempt to play serious pool or billiards while bothered with negativity from some other aspect of your life. You'll go off like a Gatling gun.

18 *Feel the ball.* One of the very best techniques for falling into the fabled "dead stroke." Feel the cue ball against your cue; try to imagine the feel of cue-ball/object-ball contact.

19 Chalk up before every shot, and do it right. The chalk should move, not the cue. (Paul Newman still doesn't know how to do this, after 30 years and two films. Emulate his looks and success, not his pool.)

20 Don't overhit the balls. It's a definite symptom of anxiety, costs you accuracy, and is near-suicidal

on any table with tough pockets.

21 Don't underhit them either. It leaves you at the mercy of bad table rolls — and virtually every table in existence is capable of a bad roll in one place or another. Shoot hard enough that the ball rolls straight, soft enough that you can still develop your touch.

22 *Structured* practice is much more valuable than the mere abstract hitting of loose balls. Practice 9-ball or straight pool, and/or some drills.

23 Pool is a *game*; games are to be *played*; the playing of games should be *fun*. If you don't agree with this, you've come to the wrong game and the wrong magazine. Anyone who is ready to let pool take over his/her life should get a life. No sermon intended; this admonition will help your game.

24 Pool imitates life. Your own game, strategically and executionally, ought to have your own personality in it.

25 The immortal Willie Mosconi's No. 1 tip for improvement: don't waste time on opposition your speed or worse. Play with *better* players as often as possible.

26 In *all* forms of pool, unless you need to separate a cluster, do your best *not* to touch a second object ball after *sinking* the one you intended. Your position play will improve immediately.

27 By all means, bet a few bucks. Morals aside, you'll learn to handle the games' unique pressures much faster and much better.

28 When cue ball and object ball are both very close to one another and a cluster, shorten your bridge. Not only will this help keep you from fouling, but you'll get a bit more "juice" on the cue ball which will help break up the balls.

29 When cue ball and object ball are very close to one another and you *don't* need cue-ball dynamics, a relic from decades past may help: the fist-bridge (formed exactly like it sounds, knuckles down).

30 Don't hold the cue in your fingertips. It's not a teacup.

31 Don't strangle the cue either. It's not a baseball bat.

32 The head and/or foot spots on the table are useful for more than the correct spotting of balls. They're invaluable for checking the straightness of your stroke and follow-through.

33 Regarding bank shots: "Angle out equals angle in" is fine if you're playing on mirrors, but pool tables aren't mirrors. Only a small percentage of bank shots can be made via that equation (those that line up perfectly straight

to the mid-point on the opposite rail).

34 Can enough spin be transferred to an object ball to help it fall in the hole? George Fels says yes; Robert Byrne says no. Experiment and see which side you're on.

35 The universal instruction concerning object balls frozen to the rail is false. Do *not* attempt to hit object ball and rail at the same time; unless the ball is within a few inches of the hole, you won't even be close. (Aim to hit the rail about a credit-card's width in front of the ball.)

36 Object balls frozen to the cue ball, or very close (¼-inch or less), can be "thrown" about 1 inch for every foot of length to the shot. Ditto object balls frozen to one another, when you play a carom shot.

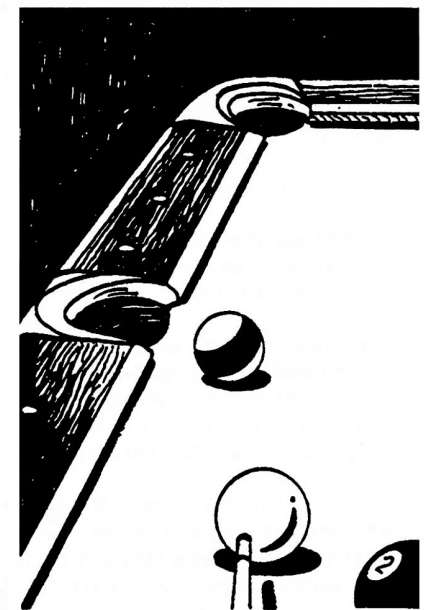
37 Find out how far you can stretch your non-shooting shoulder in your stance, and use that stance for critical shots. (It'll help keep you "locked in.")

38 Learn to "widen" the pocket by sending the object ball in off the pocket jaw farthest from you. (Again, English can help.)

39 Many advanced players *do* use varying grips and strokes to attain varying results. Explainable only in terms of psychology, not physics, but it does seem to achieve the desired end.

40 Center cue ball plus stop-shot speed equals a 90-degree deflection from the object ball's path, on all cut shots. One of the fundamental principles of position play. (Some advanced players believe the angle can be increased with cue-ball speed.)

41 Outside English (i.e., English on the same side as the direction of your cut shot) can be a valuable



ally. Lets you use the true aiming point instead of allowing for throw.

42 Any stance is fine as long as it combines balance and comfort, and keeps your chin over the cue.

43 In *all* the cue games, you directly control zilch except for your body and your cue. (You affect the cue ball only indirectly, and the object balls far less than that.) When your game isn't going well, your body-mechanics are the first thing you should check.

44 Most good players begin sighting the shot while still erect, rather than waiting until they're in their stance.

45 Do *not* use your backswing to simulate the speed of your stroke. If you tried to throw a ball, or make any other athletic move that way, you'd end up on your duff. Take the cue back smoothly and unhurriedly.

46 For even wider angles on follow shots, learn to hit your cue ball low without drawing it.

47 Many advanced players achieve added firmness in their shooting stance by turning their shoulder line toward the shot, as archers do.

48 When you're trapped in straight pool, try to lure your opponent into taking two table scratches with you before you complete your required safety. Puts all the pressure on him, once it's his turn.

49 Some advanced players use a two-finger grip on the cue when *bunting* balls, but at no other time.

50 Forget the old saw about "no more than a cue-tip's worth of English." With today's equipment, you'll never get the cue-ball control or position you want that way. Use no English whenever possible — but that will be possible less than you think. And learn to apply all the English you can control.

51 Don't dip your cue tip to the cloth in front of the ball, even though it seems to work just fine for Mosconi, Dallas West and some others. You can't hit the ball down there, and you might as well aim where you want to hit.

52 When you need to send an object ball along a rail with speed, jacking up your cue *slightly* seems to help avoid "wiggling" the ball in the pocket jaws; also eliminates throw.

53 Those horrific object-ball "skids," when the ball seems to wink at you in a ghastly cockeyed way, occur far more often when you shoot softly.

54 The open-thumb bridge is more valuable than you might think; it helps you relax. And it's a *must* if you play less than once a week; you'll never get comfortable with the loop bridge

unless you play regularly.

55 The best way to learn position play is to strive to do whatever's easiest (whenever possible; it won't always be).

56 You'll learn efficient position sequences much better if you first learn to spot the balls nearest the four corner pockets, and try to get them in succession.

57 Byrne blanches at this notion, but there is a school of three-cushion players that believes a short stroke contributes to a shorter-angle cue-ball path, and a longer stroke enhances a longer roll. (What the varying strokes really do is apply less or more spin, respectively, to the cue ball.) Experiment and see.

58 Private instruction is a super idea, but your mentor must be able to teach you *conceptually*. "Shoot



that ball" is useless advice unless he can tell you *why* you ought to.

59 A cue-ball deflection theory that seems to work: if you need to cut, say, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the object ball, sight for $\frac{1}{4}$ of your cue ball on the same side as the direction of your shot. Then aim as you would normally.

60 Practice a bit of the archaic lineup straight pool. It's a terrific aid to developing finesse-draw.

61 Shut up. Of course pool and camaraderie go hand in hand, but talking or playing to spectators while still at the table is one of the most certain self-destruct tactics.

62 A good tension-fighter: Put your teeth together, just lightly enough that you can feel them touch.

63 Two more such tips: Try to relax the base of your spine and the back of your tongue.

64 Deep breathing is universally accepted as an excellent stress-fighter in all walks of life. It should work

equally well at the table and in the chair.

65 Don't hold on to your cue while you're in the chair; the tendency is to squeeze it as your impatience grows, and this is only one more tension-producer. Lean it securely next to you.

66 Tournament tennis players are taught not to slump their shoulders after losing points; it gives away a psychological edge. Apply this same instruction to your pool or billiards game. You should see beneficial results almost at once.

67 Without getting fancy, try to look as good as you can while at the table. It's a virtually automatic game-improver. Visualize and execute "the thoroughbred look" and you'll leave opponents in your dust.

68 Mosconi claimed he planned six shots ahead in straight pool; top 9-ball players, at least three. How far ahead are *you* planning?

69 In assuming your shooting stance, you should line the shot up not with your hand or cue, but with your *chin*. It's a smoother body move, and the rest will automatically fall into place; putting your hand down first may result in tentativeness and an awkward, uncoordinated approach to the shot.

70 A spot-shot technique: Visualize a straight line between cue ball, object ball, and the first diamond on the short rail. Then aim at the edge of the ball.

71 A 9-ball tip: When your opponent scratches on the break and leaves you with the lowest ball spotted and the 9 near a corner, *don't* play the combination. Instead, play a billiard off the other side of the spotted ball. Outlandishly easy; far more certain than the combination shot.

72 The very best way to introduce a kid or other beginner to pool is to have him (or her) learn the correct stroke in the absence of *any* balls.

73 If you don't slip-stroke naturally, don't force it into your game. It's pretty to look at, but you can execute your backswing just as efficiently without it.

74 The game's very thinnest cut shots should be attempted with center cue ball. They're hard enough as it is.

75 A good straight-pool and 8-ball tip: *Choose balls early on which open paths to the pocket for other balls.* Letting them go until later is no more logical than letting problems go in life.

76 In one-pocket, it's frequently valuable to pass up a shot that will net you only a ball or two, in favor of a move that will send multiple balls closer to your pocket.

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77 Before shooting long shots, line yourself up with the object ball and pocket and see what your actual angle is. Excellent idea for break shots, too.

78 In 14.1 and one-pocket, don't settle for merely breaking clusters open. Look for the cue-ball point of contact with the cluster; adjust your English accordingly; try to anticipate the flight of the liberated balls.

79 In blast-break games, remember that the break, no matter how hard, should be a controlled stroke, not a matter of "hit-and-hope." Strive for a hit which will bring the cue ball to the center of the table without visiting a rail.

80 Every single time a cluster is altered in the slightest way, examine it before shooting. It doesn't take much to turn a ball which can't possibly go into one that can't possibly miss.

81 It's the combination of practice and competition that will bring you the best results. Don't neglect one in favor of the other.

82 Train yourself to *observe* the results of your game, rather than falling into the treacherous trap of *judging* them. Excellent for achieving dead stroke, and a super lesson for life as well as pool and billiards.

83 Tip Number 82 works positively as well as negatively; don't congratulate yourself for good results until the game's over. Your 50-ball run means nothing if the other guy gets to 100 first.

84 Another immediate improvement tip: The world does not come to an inglorious end when you miss a shot, miss position, lose a game or lose a session. Lighten up. You'll enjoy

yourself more and win more often. (Or maybe it's the other way around; what's the difference? Review Tip Number 23, too.)

85 To improve your masse shot-making, try holding your cue between the knuckles of your index and middle fingers of the shooting hand. Much more natural position for your wrist.

86 When contemplating where to send the cue ball next, make center table your first option.

87 Don't choose behind-the-rack break shots if there are options. Breaking from in front of the stack is, on balance, much more efficient.

88 The break shot involving a corner-pocket hanger is tougher and more dangerous than you think, especially if the cue ball is some distance away. If you don't make contact with the corner of the stack, you'll have the dickens to pay.

89 Concentrate on the feeling of all four fingers on the cue butt. Helps you attain and stay in a better shooting stance and stroking position; also helps clear your head of distractions.

90 Your most formidable opponent by far in the cue games is the voice(s) you hear in your head. Create a simple command or phrase to block out that interference, such as "Calm," "Feel the ball," or "Play your game."

91 Before executing the cue-ball path you've planned, check it mentally and see if there isn't a *simpler* way to achieve the same thing.

92 If you must break the balls from behind the stack, a three-rail cue-ball route is frequently a smarter choice than a one-rail route. (It's close to

impossible to get tied up that way.)

93 A good slump-breaker: Change your playing pace *radically*.

94 Becoming a good player is no guarantee that you'll become a good gambler too. Know your limitations.

95 As in golf, play pool and/or billiards within yourself; do the things you know you can do. Important matches are no time for unknown risks or experimentation.

96 If you insist on practicing via the mere pocketing of loose balls, at least practice those shots with a variety of cue-ball spins. And especially include those you're *least* comfortable with.

97 The best single pool game for improving all your *other* games is, by far, straight pool — whether it bores you or not.

98 Billiards experts claim that *systems* are available for a much larger percentage of shots than you think. Find yourself a qualified teacher and explore this.

99 A good basis for long cross-corner bank shots: Find a parallel path to the line that connects Diamond 1 on the short rail with Diamond 1 on the long (or, for that matter, Diamonds 2 and/or 3).

100 On short cross-corner or cross-side banks, where the point of origination is within a diamond of your target pocket, bisect your angle by three instead of two.

101 Create a television screen in your head and watch yourself play on it. Potentially even more valuable than videotaping yourself.

Whew!