

## Getting Out of a Slump

When everything is rolling, really rolling, the pleasure is all ours to leave things be and roll along with it. Business is great; money is coming in from unexpected places; our jokes are funny; and saints be praised, the opposite sex cannot get enough of us. It happens. And it comes wrapped in various packages with certain frequency for everyone. Few people question great fortune when it visits and only a few more acknowledge it as such. After all, when the ship comes in, wasn't it a lot of hard work that took us to the pier to meet it? Then, while toweling off one day, we notice weird, red rings everywhere and, in a naked panic, start typing the words, "hideous skin disorders" into Google before remembering that a lot of people have simply been touching us with ten-foot poles lately. That's when we want to run to the nearest church, call an astrologer or enlist a witch doctor to find out what's happening.

Really we spend most of our time somewhere between nirvana and hell, going about life in the center lane, business as usual. And so it goes with our pool games too. Usually, we beat the players that we are supposed to beat and fall short against the ones that dwell above us while working to move opponents from the latter group into the former. But every once in a while, something clicks and, for a few hours or days, we cannot miss, lose or even get an unlucky roll. "Where's Johnny?" "Who knows Cory's phone number?" And then, from out of nowhere—BANG—we can't get out from the six with ball in hand.

When we are playing great, better than we thought we could, we tend not to tamper with things or risk jinxing the good times with a lot of pointless analysis. And maybe that is precisely how to handle it; great pool does not fall from the sky on lucky souls but springs from the players who work for it. It's a safe bet that if you are playing flawlessly, you earned it and should therefore take rightful ownership. A slump on the other hand can lead to a lot of brooding, anxiety and doubt, which must be why the bad periods always seem to last longer than the good ones.

Before moving on to a method for getting out of a slump let's spend a moment to see if we can determine how to get into one. Sometimes our game suffers as a result of external causes, problems at home or work, a profoundly different schedule, or maybe a new courtship with psychedelic drugs. There are too many possible, outside influences to list; but typically, when the problem is solved, our normal game returns. More difficult to manage is a slump that begins on the table; and I believe that I have witnessed the birth of many, both for myself and others.

Many slumps proceed from one meaningful and heartbreaking mistake, usually a missed shot that causes a loss. Commonly after the match the player will set up that same shot and shoot it over and over with mounting tension that leads to twenty more misses where before, there was only one. Wrapping oneself up in the frustration of one mistake, and reliving it repeatedly, breathes life into a single moment of failure and helps it grow,

fueled by the anger that surrounds it. That begins a cycle of playing every subsequent shot in a state of terror with dreadful anticipation for the next breakdown. But the hole is not yet deep enough so we move to step two. Because we know that great pool lives inside of us we begin to set up more shots, really supernatural ones, to prove it with a lot of desperate flailing at the cue ball. If I can make a table-length, paper-thin cut, an off-angle bank with speed, or a jacked-up, eight-foot draw from a long shot, I'll know that my skills haven't left me.

While it is highly improbable that our skills will vanish in an instant, we can lose touch with them if we try too hard to confirm their presence with heroics. So, if things are going badly, instead of beating yourself up to prove something, step back for a moment to remember how you felt the last time you were in the zone. When we are hitting the ball perfectly and running racks we lose a certain amount of awareness for exactly what we're doing and become immersed in experiencing the beauty and the rhythm of pool. That is probably what reached out and grabbed you when you first fell in love with the game. And the best way to get back on track is to regenerate your friendship with those transcendent qualities.

Rediscovering the beauty of pool only requires that you remember where to find it. It lives in the feeling of a perfectly stroked shot that splits the pocket. Set up some shots, one at a time, and play each one separately in your tournament tempo, with a focus on hitting every shot with a fine, crisp—not hard—stroke. I like to begin with the cue ball and object ball about a foot apart from each other and aimed straight to a corner pocket at the other end of the table so the shot will play itself out over some time. Identify the exact spot in the pocket that the object ball will hit and shoot the shot. Feel the hit in your fingers; hear the sound of a perfectly stroked ball; and stay down to watch the object ball along its entire route to the pocket. Repeat the same shot until you begin to lose yourself in the feel of your stroke and the sounds that follow, your tip on the cue ball, the cue ball on the object ball, and the object ball falling into the pocket. You need not worry that the shot is not difficult enough to merit your time; easy shots are your primary goal during a long run. If this sounds boring, remember that great pool is very boring and routine, one easy shot after another; and the greatest players never surrender to the temptation to change that.

Now you can take that elegant stroke and marry it to the rhythm of running balls. Throw seven balls out on one end of the table and run them with no regard for stripes and solids or numerical order. Simply clear off a few layouts of seven balls until you feel your movements flowing in consistent time. The speed at which you walk around the table, the time you take to plan what you want to do, the time you take in your stance, the number of warm-up strokes you take for each shot, and even the time you take to chalk before every shot are all elements of tempo and rhythm that combine to make *you* boring and routine, and therefore perfectly suited to great pool.



I honestly hope that you are not experiencing the despair of a slump and that you never do. But should one come along the above work will help move you out of it. If things are bad right now, spend just 30 minutes with the two exercises and then leave the poolroom. A half-hour of perfection is enough to make any day complete. And if you currently happen to be playing your very best, a brief, daily visit to the pinnacle of execution will help keep things that way. Our talent never leaves us without notice but can be a little coy sometimes when we abuse it after a mishap. It's best to keep the relationship alive with regular reminders of its highest potential.



