

Walking

In a panic I once called a writer friend to ask him if he ever gets stuck and what he does when it happens. “Take a hike,” he said. A little stunned I apologized sheepishly, assuring him that he wouldn’t have to worry about hearing from me again before he stopped me to explain that he meant that literally. Whenever the words stop flowing, he leaves his desk and goes outside for a walk to breathe some fresh air, clear his mind, and get blood moving to the brain for ideas. He swears by its effectiveness. Another person I know refuses to fight with his wife. So when he feels frustration brewing in a potential conflict, he goes out for a walk. And he continues walking around the block until he remembers why he married her. Then he returns home to see his bride in the glow of renewed affection. In a country where people routinely drive from one store to another in the same shopping center, almost everyone has something to say about walking and the benefits that come with it.

Walking also plays an integral part in our pool games, a fact that few players would deny since we have to move from one shot to another somehow. Yet I’ve never heard anyone discuss its importance or any of the reasons that we should consider its role in a complete and consistent game. On the surface we can easily see how important it is to spend the necessary time to walk around the table for an accurate view of all the possible options accompanying certain shots. And if we go a little deeper we can see how our movement fits with and affects our rhythm and therefore our ability to stay on track with a consistent performance. So we should examine how we move around the table when we play, both to see every possibility and to strengthen our consistency.

Straight-pool players learn early the value of walking around the table to study the balls from every angle. All it takes is a couple of safeties that look good until the opponent walks up to blast a dead ball out of the pack. Jackie Gleason shows us a nice example in *The Hustler* after Paul Newman welcomes him to the table with, “I didn’t leave you much.” “You left enough,” Gleason says before he slams a dead combo in from the stack and goes off to the races. Whenever the balls are touched, seasoned straight-pool and one-pocket players always study the rack from every angle to avoid giving back a table that may look safe but hides a gift instead.

Even more painful than leaving a good shot for the opponent is the embarrassment of playing a self safe for no reason except neglecting to walk down table for a clear look at the next shot. Nothing turns my face a deeper crimson than strutting over to prepare for the next shot only to find out that the ball I just played flawless position for cannot be made. Oops! As boneheaded and needless as that mistake is, I’m sure that I’ll make it at least once more in this lifetime. A little more subtle and less embarrassing is getting position for the next shot, but not the kind from which the run can continue. Imagine shooting a ball at one end of the table and needing position for a ball near the short rail at the other end. From nine feet away it’s too difficult to determine exactly how far from the rail that next shot is. Commonly, we will glance at the next shot, treat it as a ball *on* the rail and play position accordingly. Then we arrive at the shot to find ourselves straight in on a ball three inches from the rail and therefore unable to move the cue ball. And we see that, if that ball were on the rail, the angle would be perfect to continue the run.

We can find many more examples that arise when the game strays from routine and we commit errors because we did not take the time to walk around for a closer and more complete look at the table. But even when the balls are laid out ideally and the run out is smooth sailing, walking contributes greatly to performance. In the last few years, instructors and writers have finally tuned into the pre-shot routine and the vital role it plays in the overall game. Because we execute our shots with the creative mind, the non-thinking movement leading up to the execution works to open the clearing that the creative mind needs to take over and perform. That's what's happening in every athlete's routine as that person goes through a series of motions that appear unrelated to the main action such as a pitcher touching his cap and rubbing his glove before every pitch. For a long time I wondered how I could miss a shot with ball in hand and why such misses occur so much more frequently than they should. It will happen when we get down to line up the shot and then stay down to shoot it instead of standing up to look at it and walking into the stance as we do for every other shot.

Tempo is the key to consistency—consistent play springs from consistent behavior. And walking is key to tempo. When tempo changes, the variations usually show up in our movement around the table more so than in our shooting rhythm. Walking provides the unthinking movement that's so necessary to making the transition from left-brain analysis to right-brain execution. Occasionally we get two shots in a row that we can play with little or no movement and the worst possible choice in those situations is attempting to shoot two shots from one stance. A golfer would never have that option. In fact, that game's greatest feature is the time between shots for a little stroll through the grass in the sunshine to relax and prepare.

Despite walking's importance, we tend to disregard it in our practice, where we often stand in one place to shoot the same shot repeatedly. Such workouts can be helpful but can also often lead to actions that are not part of the competitive game such as slapping balls around with the shaft. Players who like to stand in place and practice one shot typically move into a tempo completely foreign to their competitive games as they rev up into a speed-pool rhythm, attempting to shoot the shot as many times as possible in a given time frame. Practice routines that immerse us in a tournament tempo are more beneficial as the skills learned in those sessions are more likely to resurface when we find ourselves moving in the same tempo again. We learn early in our practice to gather some balls nearby so we can repeat a specific shot without wasting time. But how can walking around the table, something we must do after every shot in competition, be considered a waste of time? When practicing a shot, our "ammo" is best placed at the other end of the table to introduce walking after each successful trial. All that "wasted time" trains us more realistically for the competitive setting.

I envy golfers and wish sometimes that, after a bad pool shot, I could go outside for a walk along the river to collect my thoughts and prepare for the hideous challenge I just created for myself. I might go out there and remember why I love pool so much and then return to face that challenge with serene confidence. Or I might lapse into a golf memory and get lost in the forest looking for a ball.

