SECOND EDITION

POOL, PLAYER'S EDGE

- Superior shot making
- 8-Ball and 9-Ball tactics
- Competitive focus



Foreword by Charlie Williams

SECOND EDITION

POOL PLAYERS EDCE





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To all the top players in history who have made the sport fascinating to all of us.

Foreword

grew up in a little-known city called Newport News, Virginia. I started playing pool at the age of 12, in two pool rooms called Long's Billiards and Pockets. I would alternate my days in one and late nights in the other, but of course only during summer vacations or on weekends. Unfortunately, one of the hardest things I had to overcome on my way to becoming a player was the lack of instruction available. I used to offer the best players in my city money for lessons, but no one ever budged. They told me I'd learn from gambling and practicing. So that's how it was, the school of hard knocks.

I was so thirsty for knowledge about the game, and I bought every book that existed at the time. On top of that, I bought my monthly *Pool & Billiard Magazine* and read the instructional columns religiously. That, combined with a good deal of overzealous practicing, competing, and gambling all over the state and later even farther out, eventually helped my game grow. Though I have no regrets, it would have been nice to have access to better books on pool; that would have saved me a lot of money and time.

Playing on tour now for 12 years and against every top player you can name in countries worldwide has helped me develop into a world-class player. I have had the honor of competing against (and pleasure of beating on occasion) champions you'll see pictured throughout this book—top players such as Mika Immonen, Johnny Archer, Francisco Bustamante, Buddy Hall, Rodney Morris, Thorsten Hohmann, Mike Sigel, Nick Varner, Ralf Souquet, Earl Strickland, Efren Reyes, and many more. It's really amazing to list players like that—to see the list on paper and to realize that somehow I made it to that level.

Of course, not everyone has the fortunate access I had to get to major pro events and the chances to play against world champions. But, on the upside, pool books and instructors are abundant nowadays. The best advice I can offer is that readers need to find a book that will teach them not just fundamentals and basics, but more advanced skills, too, such as how to get out of tricky situations. A pool book should include troubleshooting areas because every player gets into trouble. And, speaking from personal experience, it sure is nice to learn it in a day versus taking a year to figure it out on your own.

With this edition of *Pool Player's Edge*, players today can hold in their hands access to real inside knowledge of the sport. With detailed color photos and illustrations, players can better see exactly what they need to do. And, thanks to decades of pool wisdom from bestselling authors who have both played and covered the sport, *Pool Player's Edge* will help players rise to the next level in their own games.

And who knows? Spending some time with this book may just help you get to a level where I'll want to name you as one of my victims on the pro tour scene, too!

Charlie Williams

12-year touring pro; 5-time USA Mosconi Cup team member 2010 Derby City 14.1 champion 2004 Brunswick Korea International champion 2002 BCA Open 9-Ball champion

Preface

"Billiards is the well-developed art of thinking ahead. It is not only a game, but first and foremost a demanding Sport, which requires good stamina, the logical thinking of a chess player, and the stable hand of a concert pianist."

Albert Einstein

pocket billiards, or as it's more commonly called in the United States, pool, is a tricky sport. Like individual target sports (such as golf, archery, or bowling), it requires you to have command of great offensive skills to excel. But, like soccer, football, or hockey, it also requires good defensive play, because what you leave on the table may offer your opponent a win. Finally, pool is often compared to brain games such as poker or chess. Planning and strategy are required, and outthinking your opponent may well win you the rack.

With all that going on, it's no wonder the sport of pool attracts millions of new players each year. Once hooked, players can enjoy the sport throughout their entire lives, regardless of their age (or the weather). Pool is an indoor sport requiring less physical strain on the body than reactive contact sports. However, pool is also a very challenging sport. Unlike bowling, where you're likely to bowl a strike on your very first attempt at the game, a new pool player is never going to jump up and run a rack of balls. The sport requires extensive learning and practice to achieve a level of prowess. Most pro players will tell you that it took them years to learn the sport, and that they're still learning nuances of the game and will continue to do so throughout their lives.

Pool Player's Edge offers you exactly what the name implies—an edge to move you toward a better pool game. We believe that the game, in its simplest form, boils down to this: There's a perfect shot waiting to be played each time a player approaches the table. Our challenge as players is to find that perfect shot each time, both by knowing how our bodies must propel the cue to execute and by being able to decide between the endless options that will present themselves on the table.

Pool Player's Edge guides you seamlessly toward these goals. Filled with clear, comprehensive instruction—including physical troubleshooting tips, pre-shot routines, and diagrams and photographs outlining specific strategies that include hundreds of shot combinations—Pool Player's Edge offers new insights, new skills, and new concepts to take your game, no matter your current skill level, to the next level.

Part I, Become a Player, offers advice on tactics and techniques used by professional players for everything from aiming to advanced shot and safety selection. Plus, we offer a troubleshooting list for each of the fundamentals. These lists give you the benefit of quick-fix remedies used by professional players when their own mechanics are out of sync. You'll also learn plenty about cue ball control and mapping the table to help you find the easiest and most productive way to a win.

Part II, Act the Part, offers insights into the mental game, inspiring you to put all those newfound skills into play. You'll learn how to better mentally prepare for a game and how to think ahead. Plus, an all-new section of drills will help you develop your mental confidence in your physical game.

x PREFACE

In part III, Expert 8-Ball, you'll discover the tricks to mastering the breaking and shooting patterns for the cue sport's most widely played game, 8-Ball. This part is divided into three chapters based on the three parts of every 8-Ball game: the opening game, the mid-game, and the end game.

Part IV, Top-Notch 9-Ball, is all about the pro game of 9-Ball—including racking, breaking, rollouts, and run-outs—just as you've seen played on TV by today's contem-

porary pro players.

Naturally, we can't show you every game and match ever played, but we do use actual tried-and-true shots and safeties to describe key concepts you will encounter as you play. Every shot situation discussed and illustrated throughout *Pool Player's Edge* has occurred in actual match competition and will further your knowledge of how the pros think and react under pressure-packed conditions.

Whether you are playing in leagues on the local scene, competing in regional tour events, or making your way to the professional ranks, *Pool Player's Edge* will teach you how to think like a pro so that you too can shoot your way to the next level of competition.

Acknowledgments

o book is possible without the help of many individuals. Our special thanks to Harold Simonsen, *Pool & Billiard Magazine* publisher, whose insights and advice are always appreciated; columnists Dominic Esposito, Ewa Mataya Laurance, and Charlie Williams, who can always be counted on for opinions on everything from drills to who has the best break; ace photographer Dale Shank, who allowed us to view and access his substantial photo collection; and our editors, Tom Heine and Laura Podeschi, who work to make us look good on paper (or at least better!).

Thanks also to the many professional players and coaches who have shared their expertise through the years and have shown off their talents to the masses so that we may all learn and better our games!

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Part 1

Become a Player

Pool Player's Edge is organized in the same chronological order as you might approach your pool game. In part I, Become a Player, we offer an advanced yet comprehensive approach to key concepts used by top players across the globe.

We'll begin with the essentials needed for a skillful pool game—the basics that all professional players return to when honing their own games. After a review of the basics, including valuable troubleshooting information for problem areas you may experience in your skill development, we'll delve into some of the finer points of pool. This includes chapters on perfecting your aim, controlling the cue ball, a full selection of top-shelf shots, and how to map the table (with extensive information on advanced pattern and safety play strategies).

Keep in mind that as you encounter information that may seem vaguely familiar, you should take the time to absorb the text and try the techniques shown in the accompanying photographs and diagrams. As most intermediate and advanced players will agree, it's the fundamental aspects of the cue sports that allow you to gain an edge before you move on to specific game tactics that help you keep that edge.

Master the Essentials

ny pool player's edge begins with proper fundamentals. What players might think of as simple mechanics will mean the difference between a win or a loss when performed incorrectly. And all professional players return right here, to the fundamentals, when troubleshooting problem areas of their game.

No matter how extensive a player's knowledge of the cue sports may be, all players must work to achieve consistency in their game. This starts with the player's body. Fundamental skills such as a proper stance, alignment, bridge, grip, and swing are necessary to play consistent, successful pool. The following sections offer a brief summary of how to correctly perform each skill and provide quick fixes for common trouble spots.

Stance

Pros will tell you that if there's something wrong with their game, chances are it's related to the way they are standing when they shoot. A proper stance provides good balance and a foundation from which to execute shots. Here's a quick checklist to help you find your proper stance:

- 1. Stand behind a shot you are approaching at the table.
- 2. Line your back leg up with the line of the shot (right leg for right-handed players, left for left).
- 3. With the heel of your back foot planted, bend into the shot at the waist, letting your front leg arrive at a comfortable distance between the table and your back leg. Your back foot will naturally turn out so that it's more or less perpendicular to the shot, and your front foot should point toward the shot.
- 4. Depending on your height, you may have both your legs straight, the back leg straight, or both legs bent (see figures 1.1 and 1.2 on page 4). This is also a matter of personal preference—what keeps you balanced at the table and delivering a smooth, unhampered swing. As you'll note in figure 1.3, you'll sometimes need to adjust to stand on one leg, depending on your shot and approach!

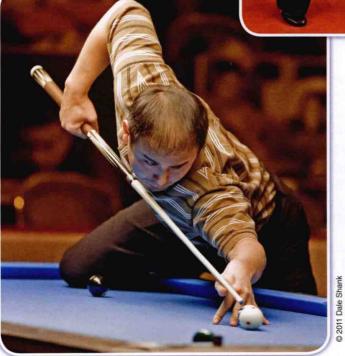
The most important thing is that once you determine your perfect stance, you must stick with it. Too many players stand one way and then change their stance mid-game, which throws off their body alignment. Without proper alignment, you won't deliver a consistent swing.



← Figure 1.1 Pro Tiffany Nelson bends her front leg and keeps her back leg straight or slightly bent.

Figure 1.2 → Pro Gerda Hofstatter approaches her stance with both legs slightly bent.





← Figure 1.3 Japanese player Tomoki Mekari keeps one foot on the floor, balancing his other leg on the table to approach a difficult shot. Note that this stance requires the grip arm to move forward for balance.

Of course, every rule is meant to be broken, and the rules for a perfect stance are no exception. There are times when you will find yourself, in an effort to maintain your usual stance, with your hip lodged up against the table, off balance, or forced to sit on the edge of the rail with one foot on the floor. Obviously, when you are off balance in this way, you'll find it more difficult to set the cue tip where you intend to contact the cue ball.

Shot A in figure 1.4 poses one such inconvenience for the left-handed player. In a normal approach, the player's right hip would be jammed up against the short rail, and almost all of his weight would be on the right foot—and in some instances, a player might have his left leg up in the air. To avoid this awkward position, instead of angling your hips to the shot, square them up. Stand at the end of the table with your hips parallel to the rail, and then bend over into the shot. *Hint:* You may find that you must move into the shot sideways from the waist (to keep your line of aim), while keeping your hips straight.

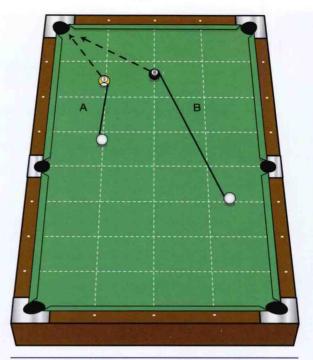


Figure 1.4 Shot A for a left-handed player and shot B for a right-handed player demand a more squared-up stance.

Shot B in figure 1.4 poses a problem for the right-handed player. Again, the average player will be flirting with a bruised hip and a ballet stance in an attempt to reach this shot. Square your hips to the table again, and you will find the added bonus of extending your reach. Some players, including most snooker players, square their hips on each shot; snooker players learn this technique from the demands that the larger snooker table (6 by 12 feet, or 1.8 by 3.7 m) place on a player, including more stretch shots and extensive use of the mechanical bridge. One distinct advantage for players who always square their hips is that their approach doesn't ever need to change. Another advantage to this technique is that it makes it more difficult to jump up off a shot, forcing the player to stay down and follow through.

Another situation in which we've observed top players adjusting their stance is when they approach a long, difficult shot. Hall of Famer Dallas West was one example. Although he used a normal stance on normal shots, he would spread his feet much farther apart on long shots. This accomplishes two things. First, widening your stance gets you down and behind the shot more for an easier view of a long shot. Second, the wider stance offers the maximum feel of balance and a solid base from which to execute a tough shot. If you have a chance to see the pros live, watch for this.

Hint: You should always be walking into your shot, not backing off it. If you find yourself coming down into your stance and having to step your back foot back, or leaning back from your shot, you're crowding your stance. Get up and approach again.

Also, stay mindful of overcorrecting. If you think you're too close to the table, don't back up so far that you're straining to reach the shot. Moderation is key—make tiny adjustments until you arrive at your perfect stance.



STANCE

If your game is not going as well as you'd like, try checking your stance. Make sure your feet are aligned, you're balanced, and that there's plenty of room for you to swing the cue. Try these troubleshooting tips to correct inconsistencies:

• Foot position. If you usually hit perfectly in the center of the cue ball on every shot with your normal stance, even a slight deviation can throw off your aim, your stroke, and your game. Try the following exercise to check your foot position.

Approach a shot and bend into the shot in your normal stance, with the tip of your cue just behind the cue ball. Now, without taking your eyes off the tip of your cue, pivot the toes of your back foot slightly forward (inside), keeping your heel planted.

Did you see the cue tip move? If you are a right-handed player and your right toes move toward the shot, the tip of your cue stick actually moves slightly to the left. Now, try this again, this time moving your toes away from the shot (outside), again pivoting your foot with your heel planted. Try this same exercise, this time keeping your eyes down on your hips. See them move? A slight foot movement, and the whole scene changes.

Therefore, if you are a right-handed player who is consistently striking the cue ball to the right of center, your stance may require a subtle adjustment of your right foot into the shot. Periodic stance checks are prescribed for any player experiencing consistent cue ball reactions to one side or the other.

- Balance. If your stance is unbalanced, your body will waver as you shoot. A practice partner can help you check your balance by simply pushing you (a gentle nudge is sufficient) from either side while you are in your stance. If you lose your balance from either side, adjust your stance until you are once again sturdy and stable and can't be knocked out of position.
- Room to breathe. Make sure there's room for your cue to swing freely through your shot and that you're not too close to the table. Crowding your swinging arm or keeping your body too close to the table will adversely affect your stroke. These conditions can cause you to have a crossover in your stroke because your mind will try to compensate for bad body position. When you play in a room where tables are close together, or where table placement is too close to seating or walls, your body's natural response is crowding, so be aware of your playing conditions. To ensure that you have enough space, set the cue behind the cue ball and then come down into your stance.

Alignment

Proper alignment in pool refers to your proper head position—in line with both your body and your shot. Being properly aligned allows you to easily see the shot and execute it. If your head is too far up or down, left or right, it will impair your ability to see the shot consistently as well as hamper your swing and delivery.

Too often, a player naturally wants to see the outcome of the shot before it has been executed. This usually results from anxiety over the situation at hand or anticipation about the outcome. It could be that you're bent too low over the shot, forcing your head up when you follow through. It could just be a bad habit. Even worse, if your head moves during the shot, even slightly, your consistency will suffer. This may be the most important thing you ever learn in your pool game, so pay very close attention!

Think about how head movement affects your shot. When your head rises, your shoulder moves, your arm moves, and your eyes move off the target. You've set into motion a chain of events that will prevent your cue tip from finding its way back to the intended spot on the cue ball. If you are prone to this habit, your head movement will be magnified in crucial situations.

Ideal head position will allow you to see the shot comfortably and still see the table beyond the shot in your peripheral vision. That means, while in your perfect stance, you should be bent over far enough to have a view of your cue tip and where it is approaching the cue ball. However, if you are bent too low on your shot, you'll not only strain your eyes, but you'll also need to lift your head slightly to see the shot as you follow through—a terrible (yet terribly common) mistake.

Cocking your head to one side or the other is another malady that distorts your aiming and shot-making abilities. The perfect head alignment for a player with perfect eyes would be head over cue, with the cue directly in line under the chin and with the eyes equidistant apart from the cue. But very few people have perfect eyes.



ALIGNMENT

All pro players (whether they admit it or not) have had to find their perfect alignment. Fortunately, there's always a quick trick to help you with your trouble spots.

- **Height.** Figure 1.5 on page 8 indicates a view from a head position that may be too low, forcing your head up through the shot. Figure 1.6 shows a view that is too high, not allowing proper sight of the cue tip to the cue ball. Figure 1.7 is the "baby bear" view—just right!
- Centered and level. Set up a mirror opposite your practice table, or take your cue out and get into your stance at your bathroom counter. Is your head centered over the cue? Are your eyes level and parallel to the surface of the table or counter?

You can also use a camcorder or coach to check your alignment. Another help-ful technique employed by some pros, such as champion Efren Reyes, includes placing your hand on the rail of the table and checking your back and forth stroke along the rail, so that your cue travels directly on the ridge where the cloth cushion meets the table rail. This is fine in warm-ups; just make sure you're duplicating the alignment during actual play.

- Head movement. The following techniques can help you control head movement:
 - 1. Try putting more weight on your front leg. With your weight distributed farther forward, it becomes more difficult to quickly raise your head.

(continued)