

Chapter 1

Arriving at the Pool Party

In This Chapter

- ▶ Playing various games on a pool table
 - ▶ Becoming familiar with a cue
 - ▶ Pocketing a ball
 - ▶ Minding your manners
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The game of pool is all about knowing where you are and where you want to go. You make one shot with an eye on the next one and the one after that one. To that end, you should start your venture into the world of pocket billiards with a roadmap. The sport of pool and billiards is something that can be a lifelong passion that combines physical exercise and substantial hand-eye coordination in a rather social game that is just plain fun. I've written this book to be your guide to take all the mystery and mythology out of pool so that you can get the straight story. So when you're ready, take your cue and start playing.

In this chapter, I get you rolling on the path to a greater understanding of the sport of pool, including stroke fundamentals, strategy, etiquette, and equipment.

Introducing Games You Can Play

You've got plenty of options when it comes to what type of games you can play on a pool table. Some use all the balls, while others use just some of them. Some let you use all the pockets; others limit their use. But no matter your style, you'll be able to find a pool game that's right for you.

8-ball (see Chapter 18) and 9-ball (see Chapter 19) are by far the most popular games among amateur players. *8-ball* requires you to make one group of balls (either the stripes or solids) before making the game-winning 8. *9-ball*, on the other hand, requires only that a player hit the lowest numbered ball on the way to hitting the 9 ball into a pocket.

But besides these two games, you have a ton of options when it comes to the cue sport. You can play one-pocket, straight pool, and a plethora of multi-player games on a regular, old pool table.

On top of that, you can venture out to different takes on the traditional table. Three-cushion, a game played on a table with no pockets, requires you to hit one cue ball off three cushions and another ball before hitting the third ball.

Snooker, another pocket billiards game, is played on a bigger table (10 or 12 feet long) with smaller balls and smaller pockets. The goal is to accumulate points by alternatively making red and colored balls (which are then spotted).

See Chapter 20 for details on all these game variations.

Getting in Position

Knowing where you need to put your feet, your hands, and your eyes to give you the best chance at playing your best is absolutely vital. Working from the ground up, when you have a solid stance (see Chapter 2) you are able to

- ✓ Stay balanced when you're in your stance, with properly spaced feet.
- ✓ Feel comfortable while down on a shot.
- ✓ Know that you're positioned along the line of the shot.

But positioning your body and legs is one thing. Properly holding the cue with both your *bridge hand* (in the front) or *grip hand* (in the back) is a fundamental skill all pool players must have.

Learning how to handle the cue (see Chapter 3) means much more than just picking up the cue and putting its tip to the cue ball. You first have to establish a proper grip on the back end of the cue. You must find the middle ground where you're not squeezing the cue too tightly, while also not allowing the cue to move in your hand by holding it too loosely.

And when you start to work on your bridge hand — the one up front — you need to establish a firm bridge to allow for an accurate stroke. By growing familiar with open, closed, and many different special bridges that you may need in the course of a game, you'll be ready for any situation you might face.



Don't restrict your bridge practice to the table. You can practice forming a proper bridge almost anywhere. You can use a pencil or a straw or anything that will help you grow comfortable with forming a fundamentally sound bridge.

Also, in preparing to shoot, you should become familiar with your own preshot routine (see Chapter 2). This repetitive process of approaching a shot should

- ✓ Establish an order of going through necessary steps to plan for your next shot and getting yourself prepared for the shot at hand.
- ✓ Create a routine that will help you prepare for stressful shots because you're so used to the steps along the way.
- ✓ Regulate the number of practice strokes you take for each shot.
- ✓ Give you a final opportunity to check that everything feels as it should.

Aiming for Success

After you're down in position to pull the trigger — or, in this case, swinging the cue — you need to know where to aim to properly strike an object ball so that it heads toward a pocket.

The most popular system for aiming is known as the *Ghost Ball System* (see Chapter 4). By connecting the centers of the object ball and the cue ball at impact, a line is formed that should point to the pocket. The important idea is that you see where the cue ball should be at impact and then send the cue ball on such a path where it can strike the object ball in the correct spot.



Any aiming system that sounds too good to be true probably is. Aiming is one of the most contentious areas of instruction in pool, with plenty of people claiming to have a secret to repeatedly pocket balls.

Stroking the Cue

Developing a smooth, even stroke not only looks good but is an important step to becoming a consistent pool player (see Chapter 5). When you want to deliver the cue tip to the cue ball in the best way possible, heed these tips:

- ✓ Keep your cue as level as it can be for a given shot.
- ✓ Move your body as little as possible, allowing your back arm from the elbow down to do the work of swinging the cue back and into the cue ball.
- ✓ Establish an even acceleration from the end of your backswing through contact with the cue ball.
- ✓ Keep your grip hand relaxed as it holds the cue on its way through the cue ball.

- ✓ Understand that the follow-through is an essential part of the stroke, and an abbreviated follow-through can lead to accuracy problems.
- ✓ Keep your back elbow in the same position throughout your stroke to minimize movement.
- ✓ Staying down after your follow-through can prevent you from jumping up during a shot, which will lead to accuracy problems.

Controlling the Cue Ball

Control the cue ball, and you will control the game. It's easy, right? Knock the cue ball off the object ball (which then goes into the pocket) and then leave the cue ball exactly where you want it to stop for your next shot.

Speed is an important factor when trying to control the cue ball. By understanding how much speed is necessary, depending on the distance the cue ball must travel and the angle it is going to hit the object ball, you can develop a feeling for hitting the cue ball at the correct distance.



Players have a tendency to *overhit* shots — that is, to use too much power on a specific shot. Don't be afraid to hit a ball with barely enough speed to get the cue ball in shape for your next shot. You'll find that you will underhit a shot far less than you overhit the same one.

A second way to control the cue ball is by understanding what happens when you hit the cue ball in different places (see Chapters 7–10). If you hit the cue ball above center, it will behave differently than a cue ball hit to the left of center. Understand and control the spin of the cue ball, and you'll be a long way to knowing where the cue ball's going to stop.

It's also important to know *why* you want to use spin during a shot. The ultimate goal is to change the cue ball's path before and/or after contact with the object ball so that you can get a better angle at the next ball.



Using any kind of spin on the cue ball to pocket a ball is rarely a good idea. Hitting away from center complicates a shot, which you don't want to do unless absolutely necessary.

Here are a few things to know when you're hitting the cue ball:

- ✓ If you hit the cue ball below center, it will begin to move toward the object ball while spinning backward. Conversely, a cue ball hit above center will quickly begin to roll.
- ✓ When the cue ball has no spin at impact, it will head in a direction 90 degrees in the opposite direction from the object ball's path. If the cue ball hits the object ball fully, it will stop in its place.

- ✔ If you hit a cue ball away from its vertical axis, the cue ball will move off of its line in the opposite direction (to the left if hit on the right).
- ✔ A side spin will pull the cue ball back to the other direction.

Top spin and back spin change the cue ball's path both after impact with the object ball and after contact with the rail. Side spin, meanwhile, can have a dramatic effect on the cue ball's path after hitting a rail. You can use a combination of these spins to achieve the desired path for your cue ball.

Seeing Shots

Playing your best is as much about execution as it is planning. Along with the physical process of putting cue to cue ball, you need to be able to see certain shots that you can make and see certain ways of getting in position for your next shots.

You could play pool for your whole life and see a particular shot only once. But other shots will pop up time and time again (see Chapter 13).

- ✔ **The break:** The *break shot* is a way of starting a game (see Chapter 11). In 8-ball and 9-ball, the break shot means hitting the cue ball into a stack of balls at a rather high speed. In Chapter 11, you discover how to develop a solid break that will give you a good chance of winning any game you play.
- ✔ **The straight shot:** Even when a ball is lined up perfectly with the cue ball and a pocket, the shot may not be so easy (see Chapter 13). When faced with a perfectly straight shot, you have to focus on your fundamentals. By minimizing the possibility for an error in aiming (you know exactly where the cue ball must go), missed straight shots often expose errors in your stroke.
- ✔ **Angled balls:** From a straight shot to one that is as angled as can be, you'll face a large amount of shots at plenty of angles. Over time, though, you'll begin to see certain shots that look similar. Grouping certain shots together allows you to get a feel for that particular set of angles.
- ✔ **Hanging balls:** When an object ball is sitting right near a pocket, you still have plenty of planning to do. You need to make the shot and figure out exactly where the cue ball will go.

Shots using multiple balls may give you an opportunity to pocket a ball when it may otherwise look like you can't. Combinations (see Chapter 14), kisses and caroms (see Chapter 15), and kicks and banks (see Chapter 16) are just a few ways to make balls that are more complicated than just hitting a cue ball into an object ball into a pocket.

When using these types of shots, you have to plan accordingly:

- ✓ Because these shots often involve more variables than a simple one-cue-ball, one-object-ball shot, these shots are often difficult to position with the cue ball.
- ✓ Aiming shots with multiple balls is similar to aiming regular shots. The only difference? Usually, multiple-ball shots require you to take an extra step to go from the cue ball to the ball that will be pocketed.
- ✓ Understanding which multiple-ball shots are makable is important. Often, these shots can be fairly easy if laid out in a certain way.

Playing for Your Next Shot

Making the shot at hand is one thing, but you also need to plan ahead for the next shot (see Chapter 12). When you're figuring out how to plan for your next few shots, these tips can help you develop a proper pattern:

- ✓ **Minimize cue-ball movement.** You'll be best served by minimizing the distance the cue ball moves. Usually, a player gets in trouble when the cue ball has to travel a significant distance. When you can, keep the cue ball on a short path from one ball to another.
- ✓ **Limit the speed.** Similarly, you don't want to use extra power when a soft hit on the cue ball will work. Hitting the cue ball hard increases the chances that it might get out of line.
- ✓ **Plan three balls ahead.** You want to plan to pocket the ball you're aiming at so that you can get a good position on the next ball and then the third ball. Always play three balls ahead, planning to pocket each ball in a way that keeps you at the table.
- ✓ **Avoid other balls.** When possible, you want to avoid sending your cue ball into other object balls (other than the one you're trying to pocket). Hitting other object balls only makes position play more difficult, so try to avoid them if possible.

Playing Defense

You need to play defense (see Chapter 17). Forget anything you've heard about defense and safety play as the wrong way to play. Playing effective safeties can keep you in control of the table and in control of the game.

When you don't have a viable option to pocket a ball, here are some ways to keep the cue ball in a spot that will tie up your opponent:

- ✓ **Blockers:** Try to put an object ball between the cue ball and your opponent's object ball. This blocker ball(s) can keep your opponent from hitting the ball directly.
- ✓ **Distance:** If you can't put a ball between the cue ball and the object ball, distance will make any shot more difficult.
- ✓ **Obstacles:** An obstacle can be a rail or a ball your opponent has to cue over, making a particular shot more challenging.

One way to play defense is by imagining where your opponent would have a difficult time hitting one of his object balls. If you can put the cue ball in this safety zone, you should be in good shape.



The goal is to make the game more difficult for your opponent. Combining any or all of these safety guidelines can help you stay in control of the table, so always look for new and different ways to put your opponent in jail.

Gearing Up

When you walk into a bar or pool hall, you need to find a house cue that works for you. Here are a few hints to help you pick a winner:

- ✓ **Look for a one-piece tip, not a plastic tip that is slipped on over the edge of the tip.** A one-piece tip will give you a more solid hit.
- ✓ **Try to find an evenly rounded tip.** You want one somewhere between the curve of a nickel and a dime.
- ✓ **After you find a quality tip, test the cue to see whether it's straight.** Roll it on the table. If it jumps around at all, it's not very straight.
- ✓ **Observe whether the cue feels heavy or light in your hand.** Cues come in many weights, usually from 18 to 21 ounces. Experiment with different weights until you find the number of ounces that works best for your game.

Should you ever be in the market for a table, you need to consider several factors:

- ✓ The size of the room you have available dictates the size of table you can fit. Tables come in 7-foot, 8-foot, and 9-foot models. Seven-footers are common in home rooms, simply because of spatial constraints.

Tables in pool halls tend to vary, with many establishments offering a few different sizes.

- ✔ Be sure you know what thickness the slate is on the table. Anything over an inch should last for as long as you'll play on it.
- ✔ Pockets can either be *drop pockets* (balls stay in the pocket) or *ball-return* (balls funnel back down to a collection area). Home tables are more likely to feature drop pockets (which usually make for a less expensive table). Tables at the local pool hall, though, will probably have return systems.
- ✔ A table's cloth will be important to the quality of play. Look for professional-grade worsted wool cloth.
- ✔ Tables come with a ton of accessories, including cue racks, table lights, bar stools, chalk, and matching furniture. Be sure you know what you'll need before buying premade packages.

For more on purchasing equipment, see Chapter 21.

Playing Nicely

Pool comes with its own set of social conditions (see Chapter 6). Here are a few of the common no-nos on and around a pool table:

- ✔ Agree to any special rules before a match begins. Clearing the air early keeps you and your opponent on the same page.
- ✔ If you don't know, ask. Ask a ref, another player, or your opponent if you have any questions about a rule or situation.
- ✔ Steer clear of drinks or food on or near the table. A table's cloth can be pretty expensive, so you don't want to drop a pizza slice on it.
- ✔ Avoid distracting your opponent in any way during a match. When one player does anything to get an opponent's mind off the match, it's considered a high crime.
- ✔ Respect the table and cues. Don't dump a full tray of balls on the table and don't use a cue for anything but hitting the balls as intended.
- ✔ When in doubt, try using a little common sense. Social graces go a long way at the table.