

You Don't Know What You Don't Know

by Tom Simpson © August 2004

Back in the early 60's, when I began playing pool, there wasn't much help available. Mosconi had a little book out, and that was about it. Just like today, there were lots of great players around, but the unspoken attitude of that time was "I ain't tellin' nobody nuthin'." Many players felt that if they taught you their "secrets" you'd use that knowledge to take their money. Others felt that, since *they* had to work hard and had to make all the mistakes, if you didn't "earn" your knowledge, you didn't deserve it. You were supposed to learn by losing money to better players. Sharks and fish. Predator and prey.

I'm happy to announce that those days are mostly gone. Today, we have good instructional books & videos, training & practice aids, and instructors & schools. Of course, they're not all good. Like everything, some are good, some are extraordinary, and some are just plain wrong. But it's possible now to get great help.

Some players are blessed with terrific natural ability. They got good very quickly, and never understood what the problem with everyone else was. They saw angles, they saw ball paths, they clearly remembered shots they had seen before. They could take you through a shot by shot replay of a match they played two years ago. Not everyone is wired up this way. Sure, these players still had to go on and do the work – sink those million balls – to really pull themselves up to their personal potential. **There is no escaping doing the work.** Nobody just walks up and plays great from day one. But somehow, it came easier for them. This is the story of most pros.

Unfortunately for the vast majority of us, it's not that natural. It doesn't come that easily. It's not that obvious to us. We're not fulltime players, and we're frustrated because lately, we're not getting better. We need an edge.

The edge is available in several dimensions: superior fundamentals, clearer, better knowledge, more effective practice, engaged exposure to higher level play. We have only so much time and energy to devote to pool, and if we really want to get better, we'd better plan on devoting some of that time and energy to things that will improve our game. So what can we do?

1. **Read and watch good material.** Be very picky about what you choose to believe from the materials you read and videos you watch. Great players are not necessarily great teachers. In fact, many great players have beliefs about what they're doing that are completely wrong, from a physics perspective. They can get whatever results they want on the table, but their belief about how they are doing it may not be true. Place your faith in the science types for why things work the way they do, and in the great players for how to play smart and how to win. But be skeptical.
2. **Practice the right things in the right way.** Set aside small amounts of time to work on the worst parts of your game, and do it with all the focus you can bring to bear. Start with an easy version of what you're working on and gradually make it more challenging, as you improve. Don't practice failure.
3. **Make good use of training aids.** Seeing yourself on video is usually a very surprising experience. Most players immediately see things that could be improved. Try working with a practice cueball, and try to believe what it shows you. Work through drills that look promising.
4. **Find a good instructor.** There is no substitute for hands on help and guidance. Ask around. Instructors with advanced certifications usually have a lot of teaching experience, and they would not have gotten all that experience if they weren't helping players get better. Good instructors have curriculums that take you through a planned series of learning and practicing, in an organized way. If someone just wants to watch you hit some balls and then show you how they would have done it, you're probably in the wrong place. Ask some questions and see whether their answers make sense to you. If you find a good instructor, it will be the best money you'll ever spend on your game. Spending \$600 on yet another new cue is not going to raise your game. Spending \$600 on serious, proven instruction will make more difference than you can imagine – for the rest of your pool life.
5. **Engage your brain.** Actively try to predict and understand what happens at the table. Watch the best players you can find. Think about why they make the choices they make, and how and why their shot to shot results are what they are.

There is way more to this game than people think. **You don't know what you don't know – and there's a lot of it.** We need every edge we can get. Make your learning time and your practice time count. The gains will eventually show up in your game.