

Break Smarter

by Tom Simpson © October 2007 – All Rights Reserved – PoolClinics.com

For most players, breaking is about power. How hard can I hit those balls? Of course, the physics truth is that the more energy you deliver into the rack, the more ball motion you'll get as that energy dissipates. So it's a good idea to whack that cueball as hard as possible, right? Not quite.

There's more to the break than power, and power is not as easy to deliver as we tend to think. This is not another article on the subtleties of the power breaks of the pros. This is much more fundamental. Better breaking calls for brains more than brawn.

What constitutes a good break in power break games such as 8-Ball and 9-Ball? **A good break sinks at least one ball and leaves the cueball (CB) in the clear. What's important is accuracy, power, and consistency.** We tend to trade one or two of these qualities for gains in another. Is it smart to hit a little harder, but give up accuracy and consistency? This hard-learned lesson for thousands of players says no.

Every week in our classes, players ask about the break shot. What everyone seems to need is *not* a tip on how to get another one or two mph into their break. What's missing is an understanding of a few simple guidelines leading to a more strategic (and less hit-and-hope) approach to breaking. Focus on these aspects of your break, and you'll see improvement.

The standard Break Shot for 8-Ball and 9-Ball is to hit the head ball of the rack absolutely square, from wherever you've placed the CB. **The accuracy of the hit is more important than power.** The idea is to get the energy out of the CB and into the rack. Hitting square delivers all the power to the head ball, and allows the CB to bounce back and die somewhere around the center of the table. This means you rarely scratch, you aren't wasting energy flying the CB around the table, and you are more likely to *have* a next shot.

Get ready: What is the table showing you? If you have a chance, watch some breaks or shoot some breaks with the equipment you'll be using. What seems to be working? Check for wear lines on the cloth formed over time by the skidding, bouncing cueball on hard breaks. If it looks like a much higher percentage of the wear is in one place, there may be a good reason.

Before you shoot, check the rack. You can have the best break in town, but a bad rack will nullify it. Make sure at least the first three balls are frozen together. With some equipment, it's not going to be possible to get a perfect rack, but the fewer gaps, the better the rack will break. Make sure the head ball is on the spot and the rack is square to the table.

Clean the chalk marks off the CB before the break – and any time you get ball-in-hand. If the balls collide at a chalk mark, the huge amount of extra friction will cause the CB to climb the other ball and you will miss.

Get it done: The break shot is not the same as other shots. Try standing a little taller & closer than for normal shots. It's hard to stay down nicely when you're shooting hard, so you might avoid some unnecessary movement by not bending quite as low to the stick.

Try to break with *zero* sidespin. Don't waste energy & accuracy spinning the CB. Fundamentals of stroke break down when you hit hard. Maybe you can't really control the stick that 20" bridge you're trying to use. If you're getting unintentional sidespin on the CB, try shortening your bridge to minimize the effect of your swerve error.

This is not a random whack. Set up carefully on the shot. Come to a full stop at the back of the CB before hitting. Check your tip position on the CB. This is your final check before the hit stroke. Aim a little lower than you expect to hit. With power, your elbow will drop some, raising your tip.

Take a slow backswing, so you don't pull your stick off the aim line. **Hit as hard as you can hit while still controlling the cueball.** Because accuracy and consistency are so important, most pros break at about 3/4ths of their full power. What speed should the rest of us use? Hmmm.

Get Better: To get better results and more consistency, observe closely, and change only one thing at a time. From whatever CB position you use, aim to hit absolutely square on the head ball.

Watch the CB. (It's OK to have your eyes on the CB when you hit it for a break shot.) Hit from the same spot each time, focusing on tip position, speed, and aim. Strive for consistency. You're trying to make a ball and park the CB in the middle of the table. You can't always control making a ball, but you *can* try to control that CB. If it comes back too far, hit higher; too far forward, hit lower; off to one side of the table, hit more square. If the CB flies the table or bounces high, the butt of your stick is too elevated. Get flatter and/or move the CB back a few inches.

If your results are poor, try a little *less* speed. Or move the CB a little and try a new spot, or try breaking from the other side of the table. If your results are good, try to repeat your shot as perfectly as possible. Break smarter. Avoid heartbreak.