

Breaking It Down!

The pros serve up 28 tips for *demolishing the rack*

By *Mason King*



ADMIT IT: We can talk all you want about squirt and throw and angles of incidence, but the break is pool's glamour shot. It's our answer to Brad Pitt, while position play more closely resembles Paul Giamatti.

The kicker is that it's essential to have a good break. In most games, it determines whether or not you can continue playing. And let's be serious — you want to hit 'em hard, right? So we turned to the pros for their top tips on serving up a molar-rattling, shaft-bending opening salvo. Try 'em all. You'll feel like a star in no time.

1. POWER AND ACCURACY. Surprise: They're intimately related. The number one rule in breaking is to hit the head ball — almost always the 1 ball — as fully as possible. An accurate, dead-center hit will transfer all of the ball's momentum — i.e., power — into the rack. "It's like hitting a golf ball," says Johnny Archer. "If you hit a golf ball at dead-center at 105 mph, you are going to hit it just as far as somebody swinging at 120 mph and hitting it off center. In pool, if you hit the 1 ball at dead-center, you don't have to hit them as hard to get the action."

2. BEST RESULTS. In the end, the only good break shot is the one that sinks a ball, so be prepared to adjust your tactics. That could mean switching cue ball positions, changing speeds, or even trying a less-than-full hit on the head ball (in extreme situations). For example, "some people refuse to soft break because they are stubborn," says Thorsten Hohmann. "They think, 'I have to break hard.' But you want to win."

3. SIDESPIN. Avoid left or right hand English. You want to keep the cue ball from scratching, and side English will impel the cue ball to dance around the table until it falls drunkenly into a pocket. Some pros may use a hair of left or right if they're consistently scratching on otherwise solid breaks (for example, a little left if you're always scratching in the right side pocket, says Shawn Putnam), but they're professionals.

4. STANCE. Some experts suggest narrowing your stance, and that helps if you plan on propelling your hips and torso forward on the break

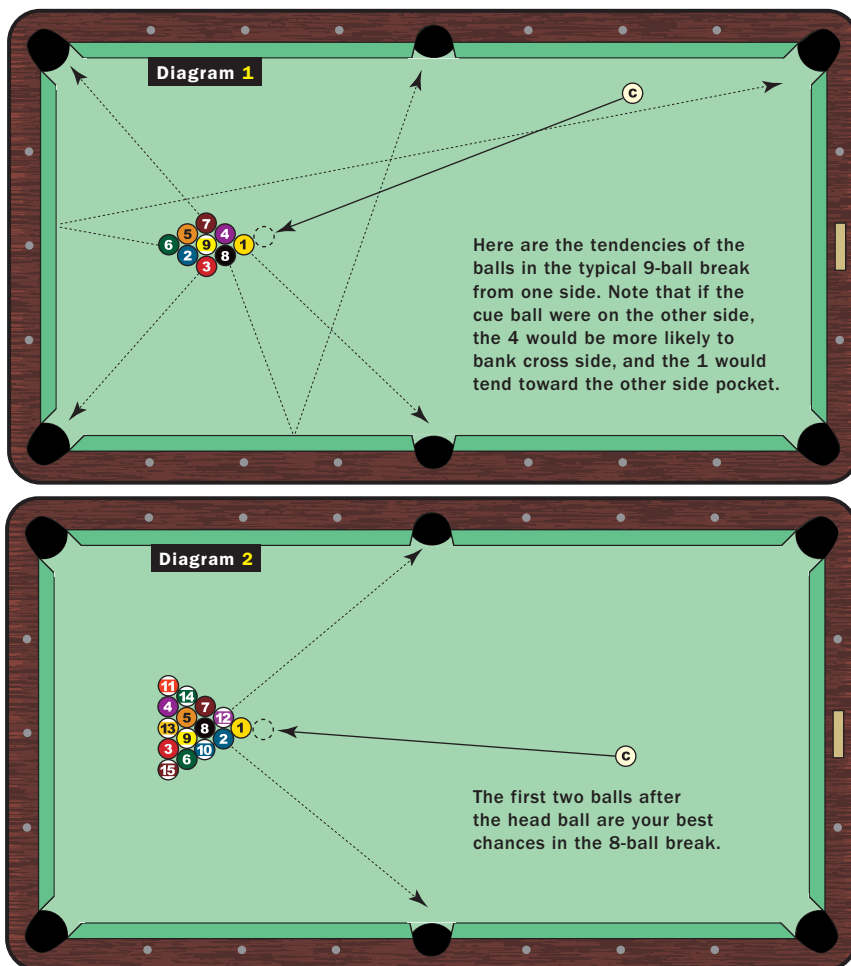
stroke (see Tip 18). Most pros favor their front foot on the break anyway. And it's a good idea to stand more upright than you would on a regular shot. Your stroke will need some clearance for a big follow-through, and upward motion is just wasted on the shot anyway. But make sure you still keep your legs bent. That will help you generate momentum. Everybody has their own interpretation of these principles, and you can see Thorsten Hohmann's on page 42.

5. POSITION TRICKS. Every table breaks differently, but there are a few tricky ways to find the sweet spot in a hurry. First, check the cloth for tell-tale signs of wear. Previous players will have found the best cue-ball position for the break, so you should see marks for that position, and streaks leading to the foot spot. Second, if you know your table ahead of time, check out an earlier match to see where the players are breaking and what speed seems to be working.

6. WHERE TO START — 9-BALL. Unless the rules mandate breaking from the box, most pros start breaking from a point a few inches from either the left or right rail. Depending on the result, they could move in a few more inches, which usually will affect the path of the 1 ball as it flirts with the side pocket (and the wing balls to a varying degree). Another option is to switch sides and/or the speed of your stroke.

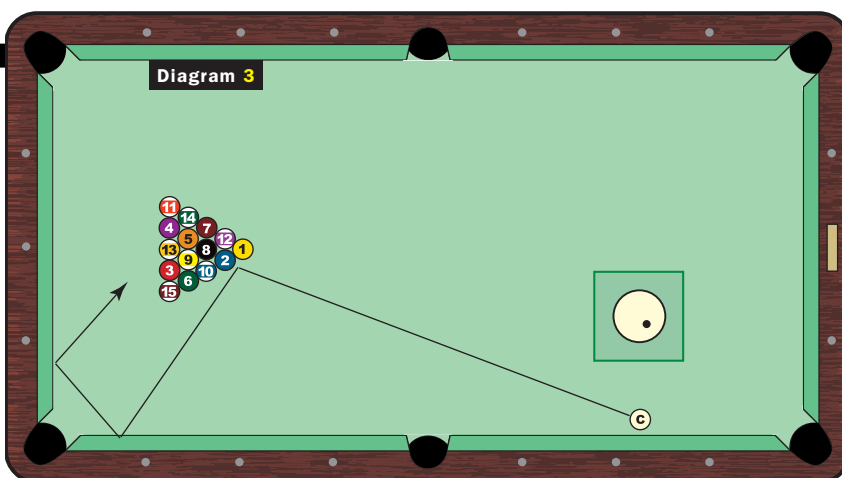
7. OBJECT BALL PATHS — 9-BALL. In Diagram 1 is a map of the tendencies of the object balls on a 9-ball break. Obviously, these are best-case scenarios. The key balls to watch are the head ball (1 in the diagram) and the wing balls (7 and 3), as they are the most reliable. Expert players will adjust the position of their cue ball along the headstring, and/or the speed of their break, until they can reliably sink one or more of these balls.

8. WHERE TO START — 8-BALL, PART I. In 8-ball, it's crucial to make a solid



hit with the energy of the stroke direct-ly straight into the head ball and rack, so many pros break within the first diamond from center (left or right).

9. WHERE TO START — 8-BALL, PART II. *Billiards Digest* 8-ball guru Larry Schwartz recommends using another break if the rules say you win by sinking the 8 on the break. (Some rules call for spotting the 8.) In this circumstance (Diagram 3), hit the second ball as fully as possible, either from the right or left. Strike the cue ball with low right English if you are breaking from the left, and use low left if you are breaking from the right. The English helps to keep you from scratching. This break helps propel the 8 from the pack toward the pockets, and you get a good spread no matter what. Plus, there's a secondary break when the cue ball comes off the rails.



and you follow-through so much that you need to make more room," says Johnny Archer. The extra distance certainly allows for more acceleration on your stroke. (If you're bridging from the rail, the distance will tend to be shorter.) But be careful: the longer the bridge distance, the less accurate your stroke will tend to be.

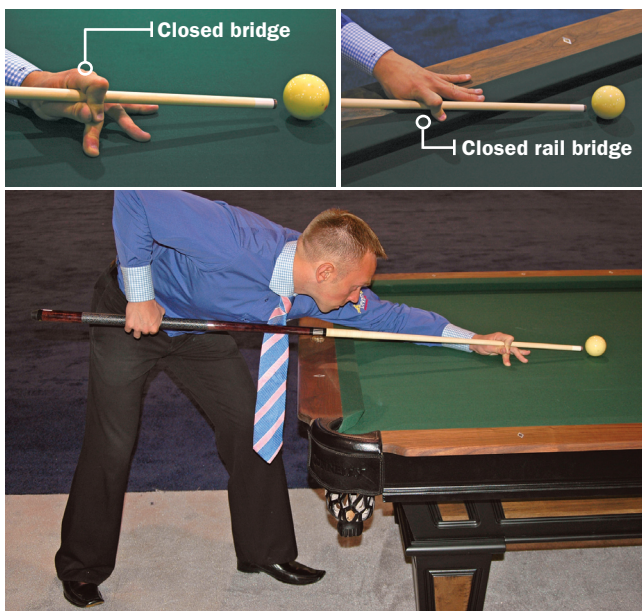
tact the cue ball a hair to a full tip below center. The point is to squat the cue ball at the middle of the table once it hits the head ball. The backspin that you're applying will dissipate after the collision, leaving the cue ball with no locomotion. But be careful: A lot of folks aim low, but their cues creep up on the break stroke.

10. OBJECT BALL PATHS — 8-BALL: Obviously, the 8-ball break is exponentially more complex than the 9-ball break, so it's difficult to control any of the object balls with any precision. But we do know that your best friends are the two balls after the head ball, which tend to meander toward their respective side pockets (see Diagram 2 on page 41).

11. BRIDGE STYLE. Whether you're breaking from the rail or the center of the table, you want to use a closed bridge. You'll have more accuracy on your cue-ball hit, and the closed bridge (see photo at right) will help you keep the tip down as your body rises up. "I put a little pressure on my bridge hand so I don't raise up," says Stevie Moore. "I'll lean on it a little bit."

12. BRIDGE ARM. It should be relaxed and bent at a slight angle. If it's straight and stiff, it will inhibit your body on the backswing and keep your body from moving into the shot.

13. BRIDGE DISTANCE FROM CUE BALL. A lot of pros set up a bit farther away than normal on the break shot — maybe 8 or 10 inches. "You have to take it back farther on the backswing,



Sample Thorsten Hohmann's set-up: balanced stance, knees bent, back hand slightly forward on cue, bent elbow and closed bridge.

14. BACK HAND POSITION. There's a lot of debate over whether you should reach a few inches farther back on the cue for your break shot — giving you a longer stroke — or to keep your back hand in its usual position. Experiment, and go with what's comfortable. For the record, Thorsten Hohmann actually chokes up a few inches for the break for more control (see photo above). Jeanette Lee also chokes up, as does hot new Filipino Jeff De Luna.

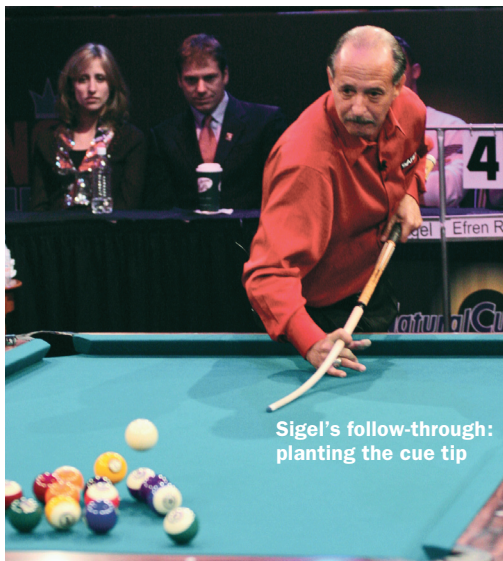
15. CUE BALL AIMING POINT. It's nearly unanimous: You should con-

16. BACKSWING. "I've always had problems with my break," says Jeanette Lee. "There are many different techniques that people use, but the universal commonality between them is the slow backswing. On your last stroke, pull the cue back in a controlled motion, and then start forward smoothly and accelerate." Think of it as pulling back the string of a bow before launching an arrow.

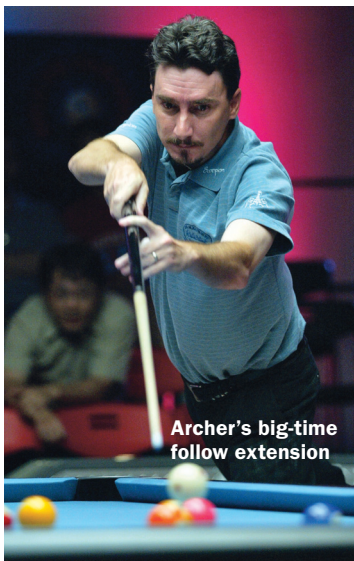
17. WHERE TO LOOK — CUE BALL VS. OBJECT BALL. There are two schools of thought on your focus point during the break stroke. Some players recommend looking at the rack's head ball, and other's keep focused on the cue ball to ensure an accurate hit. "I've been trying to look at the 1 ball, and it's pretty tough for me," says Stevie Moore. "I've always looked at the cue ball. I kind of glance back and forth, but my last look has been at the cue ball. I can't really control it. A lot of good players look at the 1 ball. It's hard. You have to really trust your stroke."

Perhaps the most accurate breaker among pros pleads ignorance. "I have no idea what I look at on the break," says Johnny Archer. "Anybody who really believes they know they're look-

PHOTOS BY MASON KING



Sigel's follow-through: planting the cue tip



Archer's big-time follow extension

ing at, really doesn't know. In the end, we're all playing by feel."

18. WEIGHT TRANSFER AND KICK. Many of the biggest breakers propel their hips and torsos forward as they're starting their stroke, usually ending in a kick from the back foot. Their weight ends up on the front foot. "You're using your legs to give your arm and stroke more speed and momentum," says Charlie Williams. "Try to focus on using your back leg to generate forward power. And that makes your back leg naturally kick higher." One tip to try out: Think of it as a martial arts move, kicking someone who's standing right in back of you.

19. TIMING. It's the key ingredient and the most mysterious element of a successful break. In essence, you're trying to get several body parts to work together in a movement that takes less than a second.

In the end, go with what works for you. But, in a nutshell, here is the progression that most experts suggest: Finish your backswing, pause, start pushing your hips and torso forward, start a smooth

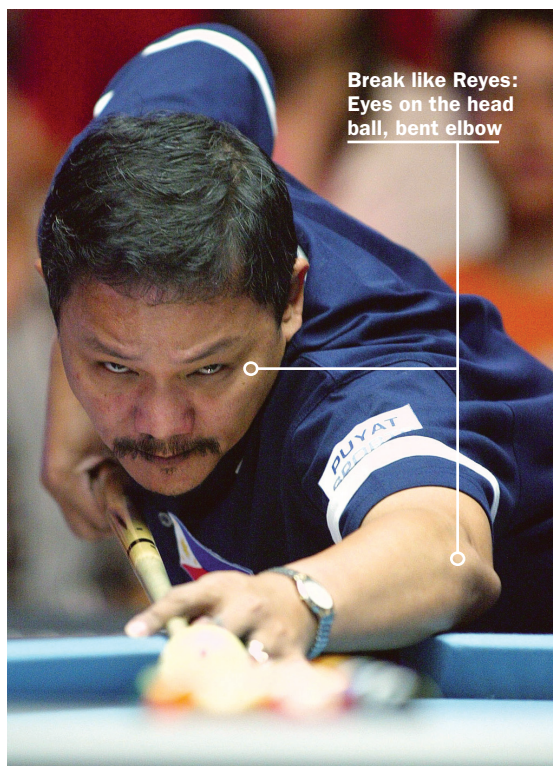
acceleration of the cue, strike the cue ball and then follow-through as your back foot leaves the floor.

20. CUE POSITION AT CONTACT. Ideally, at the moment your cue tip hits the cue ball, you want your forearm to be perpendicular (at a 90-degree angle) to your cue. "You're in the middle of the range of motion," says Shawn Putnam. "You've started accelerating, but you're not running out of stroke yet." And keep the cue as level as you are comfortable; too much

pitch, and the cue ball could jump off the table.

21. FOLLOW-THROUGH. After initially hitting the cue ball, the cue should keep moving forward. Since the cue is descending into the shot at a short angle, it's only natural that the cue tip should hit the cloth after the point of contact and continue sliding up the table. Some players, such as Mike Sigel and Thorsten Hohmann, actually plant their cue sticks at the end of the follow-through, and you can see the shaft bending at the end of the stroke. The guys with the most exaggerated follow-throughs, such as Johnny Archer and Francisco Bustamante, travel past that point until their cues are aloft and frozen in a sort of "Hustler"-meets-Heisman pose.

Famously, Archer once fouled in tournament play when his cue tip struck the head ball on the follow-through. And that was a good sign. It meant that his aim was right on track. A long follow-through will either improve your accuracy because it's forcing you to stay on line longer, or it will immediately tell you which side of the target you're favoring. "Look at the tip finish — that will tell you a lot," says Jeanette Lee. You also can check out your tip's track marks on the cloth.



Break like Reyes: Eyes on the head ball, bent elbow



Jeff De Luna: The big kick, closed bridge, and forward hand position

22. DANCING. Watch out for excess movement during the backswing. “When my break is off, it’s always because, as my husband says, I started dancing before the music started, which means bringing my body up on the backswing, instead of keeping it stationary,” says Jeanette Lee. “When it works, your torso and head are stationary on the backswing.”

23. STROKE THOUGHT. Instead of thinking in terms of striking the 1 ball, “I’m actually trying to drive the cue ball through the back of the 1 ball,” says Shawn Putnam. “I pick a point at dead-center of the 1 ball, and I aim behind the ball. I try driving the cue ball through to that spot. It mainly helps you follow through, and it lets all the power go through the whole rack.”

24. NEW CLOTH. “On new cloth, I’ll reduce the speed, because it’s usually very easy to make a ball on a new-cloth table,” says Thorsten Hohmann. “It’s easier to keep control of the cue ball when you hit soft.”

25. STRONG-ARM TACTICS. Don’t fall into the trap of breaking as hard as you possibly can. You’re sure to lose accuracy on the head-ball hit, and thus lose power. “Only the young guys try to use 100 percent of their power on the break,” says Charlie Williams. “The experienced players use 70 to 80 percent of their power. You need to take 30 percent off your maximum to control the cue ball. Honestly, if you have to use more than 70 percent, you’re better off changing position on the table.”

26. BREAK CUES. Some players think extra weight will help give their breaks more oomph, but the key ingredient for power is speed. A lighter cue will help you accelerate more quickly and with more control. Some players go a full ounce lighter than their playing cues. “I just went an ounce lighter than I used to break with,” said Stevie Moore in June. “It seems to be working pretty good so far.” Of course, others opt for the same weight as their regular cue, preferring their accustomed feel.

27. PRACTICE, PART I. To get a feel for your break and how the balls will typically react, set aside a few hours and break the balls 100 times in a row. Thorsten Hohmann suggests always racking the balls in the same order and then tracking where each went (at least, which hit a pocket). Make a chart and record the results. Switch positions and/or speed every 25 racks.

28. PRACTICE, PART II. When practicing your break, start slow and focus on accuracy and follow-through. “First, practice hitting the head ball full with a medium stroke stop-shot,” says Charlie Williams. “When you can consistently hit the head ball so that the cue ball stops, or jumps back a little and then stops, add 10 percent more power. Keep practicing and adding power until you’re stroking with maximum power, yet still hitting the head ball with accuracy.”

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