

DIAMOND DANDIES

The Plus 2 System is one way to simplify two-rail kicks.



RECENTLY I was at Joe Laufenberg's billiard room, the Southside Billiard Club in Savannah, Ga. I was doing an exhibition and clinic for Joe and a few players, when one of the players asked about diamond systems. One system I have used a lot during my career is the "Plus 2 System." One day over 20 years ago, I was looking over Bob Byrne's "Standard Book of Pool and Billiards," when I noticed this particular entry in the back of the book in the billiard section. I wondered if this system would work on the pool table. Going straight to the poolroom, I found out that the system worked surprisingly well. Plus, by that time, most of the 9-ball tournaments were one foul for ball in hand, so kicking was a very crucial part of the game.

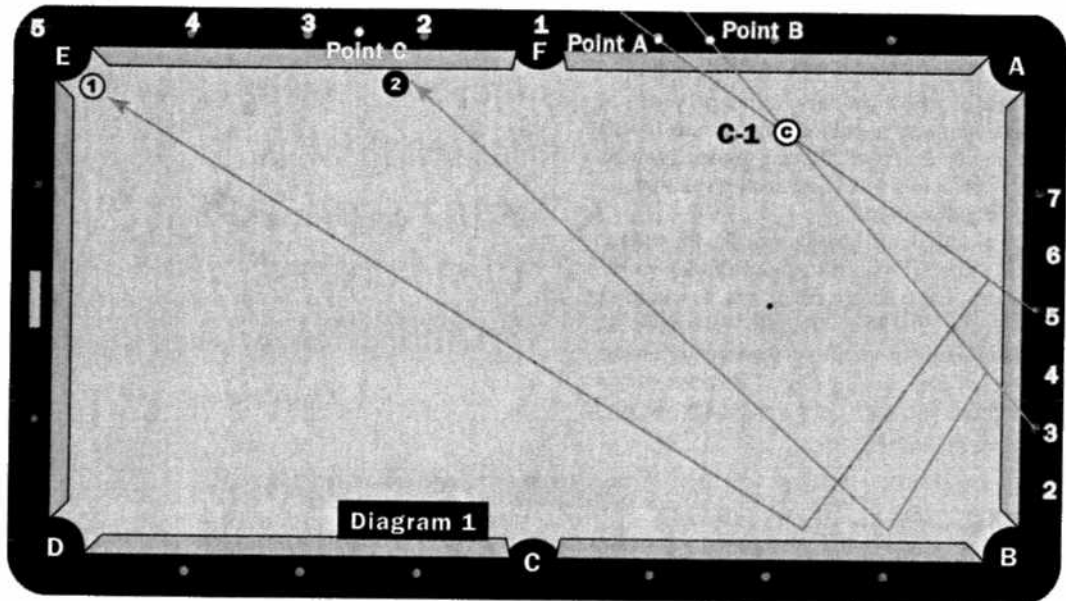
Over the years, the use of this system has helped me win a lot of games and a few tournaments. (And I want to take this opportunity to thank Bob Byrne and recommend his book.) By now one of your questions might be, "What exactly is the Plus 2 System?" Well, it is what three-cushion players use to help make billiards, all based on a number system that will tell you where the cue ball will go after you hit two rails. In **Diagram 1**, the three diamonds on the short rail are numbered 3, 5 and 7. The rail is numbered by the half diamond, so 6 is between 7 and 5 and 4 is between 5 and 3. Also, the number 2 is a half diamond from number 3. What these numbers tell you is how far away from the point where your cue cross the rail (point A in the diagram) the cue ball will go. When you aim at diamond 5 (the middle diamond on the short rail), your cue will

cross the long rail at point A when the cue ball is at position C-1. As shown in orange, aiming at the number 5 on the middle diamond tells you that the cue ball will go two rails and make the 1 ball into pocket E. The big key here that ties the number 5 to the 1 ball is that the 1 is exactly five diamonds from point A (shown in yellow numbers).

Now let's try another example. This time, aim at the diamond marked No. 3 on the short rail. Notice that point B is

ponent won't wait for you to draw it out on paper.

Also, there are a lot of variables when you're dealing with two-rail kicks, so you need to try and keep them the same on every shot. Try to keep your cue stick parallel to the bed of the table (or as close to parallel as possible). If you vary the angle of your cue stick, your results will be inconsistent. Also, keep your speed the same to make sure you get consistent reaction from the rails. Another variable



the spot where your cue crosses the rail between the diamonds. Since you are aiming at number 3, the cue ball will go two rails and head toward point C (as shown), which happens to be three diamonds from point B. Take a look at the 2 ball; if the 2 were sitting here, I would be able to make a good hit on it. Sometimes I might even make it in corner pocket E.

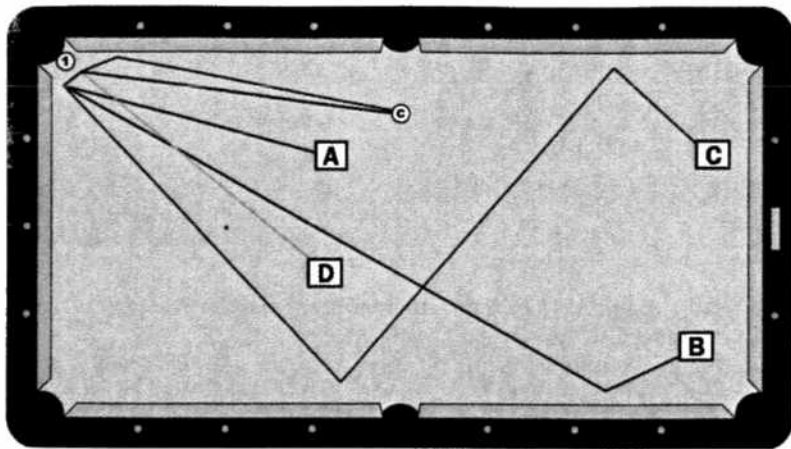
When I first started working with the Plus 2 System, it took a while to learn how to count and figure out where to aim on the short rail. And, since you'll be using this when you're playing a match, it's important you are able to do the math in a hurry. After all, your op-

is where you contact the cue ball. I usually try to use about 1 1/2 tips of running English (right English in this case).

Hopefully you will be as excited as I was when I started playing around with the system. It certainly has paid big dividends over the years. While some tables may play a little short or long, it is easy to learn to adapt to different tables once you become familiar with the system. Plus, more evidence to the effectiveness of the system, it is amazing that it works on all size tables. So you may want to drop by your local billiards store or poolroom to pick up your copy of Byrne's "Standard Book of Pool and Billiards." Thanks again, Bob.

FOUR SQUARE

+ HOW TO DO IT + While we're on the subject of hangers, here's a drill that will help you increase your precision when pocketing those easy ones. Put four index cards on the table as shown in the diagram. Hitting A and B should be the easiest. Find the right contact point on the 1 ball for each path, then calibrate your speed accordingly. Card C can be reached by going rail-first on the 1 ball (shown in purple). Hit the long rail before pocketing the 1 for a wider angle up table. Shot D doesn't require hitting a rail, but you must possess a precise draw stroke. Aim low and develop a feel for bringing the cue ball back along the orange line. [Larry Schwartz]



Hanger Danger

THAT BALL nestled right in the jaws of a pocket couldn't look more enticing ... and it's not a problem if it's the game winner. But playing position after pocketing a hanger isn't the easiest thing to do. Luckily, you've got Nick Varner on your side.

- Make sure you've pinpointed the exact contact point on the object ball. Playing to mere generalities can result in a widely different result than the one you had in mind.
- Just as important, be sure to strike the cue ball with the correct amount of spin. Odds are you'll be playing the cue ball off a rail or two, so you need to consider the effect of any English you may apply.
- There are three speeds you can use on a hanger: too hard, too soft and just right. There's no secret to mastering this aspect of position play. Get to the table and get to work!

I don't call it 'hustling.' I've made my living matching wits with people, and then I outperformed them.

— Ronnie Allen



On the Spot


LOUIS ULRICH HAS SOME GREAT ADVICE TO SHARE

- + *What is your approach to practice?*
You need to be able to define what your weaknesses are, and then you practice them and turn them into strengths. ... Sometimes a shot will only take a day or two of practice before it becomes something I'm relatively good at, or it may take a month. But if it's a shot that will come up, if it's something that is worth knowing, if it takes me a month's worth of practice, I'll spend a month on it.
- + *So you pinpoint particular shots?*
I can go through a routine of about 30 shots. Like, if I was going to go through a 30-day practice schedule, on Day 1 I would probably spend an hour or two working on a particular shot or a particular kind of shot. Say I'm going to be shooting a ball up the rail with inside English, coming three rails for position, I'll probably shoot that shot for an hour before I start practicing running out. And then the next day I'll find another shot. I have it all written down, so I don't really have to think about it.

One-on-None

YOU CAN have a splendid time on February 14 without the heart-shaped boxes of chocolate by working on your 8-ball game. Here's how:

- **Evaluating Shot Selection:** Make a special effort to evaluate all your options, noting what situations give you trouble.
- **Safety Play:** This is the perfect time to see what sound safety play can accomplish. You'll also get a little practice in escaping safes.
- **Stay Focused:** If you can stay focused from shot to shot when you're playing solo, you'll be more than ready when you're up against another player.
- **Finish the Game:** Pocket the 8 ball, no matter how easy the shot might look. It's a great way to get your mind used to seeing the black ball disappear.



STRAIGHT TALK

GURU GEORGE FELS HELPS YOU RUN 100

YOU REALLY should know this one by now, but it's worth revisiting. Learn to aim your shots to carom off the exposed pocket jaw, not to "split the hole." You'll make more shots and enjoy increased cue-ball options. Cheating the pocket is a more exact way of aiming. It also forces you to be precise in planning the cue ball's path. (The only time you should be aiming for the center of the pocket is when the object ball lies in the "funnel" formed by the extended lines of the two pocket jaws.)



Beauty and the Beast

THE CUE games have no event to offer more beautiful than a top-shelf three-cushion billiards tournament. The table cloth is almost always new, the balls well-polished, the contestants (at least the international ones) impeccable in their official playing vests. Everything is *pristine*. A good pool tournament, for the most part, features levels of play you can attain now and then yourself, just less consistently than the pros can. But a national-class billiards tournament, practically on an inning-by-inning basis, shows you skills and insights you would never have dreamed of.

And because the best heated caroms tables of today cost close to triple what a pool table does, it's usually a highly sumptuous commercial room which installs them. Billiards' most charming forum, after all, fully deserves charming surroundings. Which makes the United States Billiard Association's decision to hold their International Open meet at Chris's Billiards in Chicago last month a bit off-the-wall. Chris's is, oh, let's say "rustic." It's a pool hall of the old school: no bar, decent or better food, but the principal business is pool and billiards. The room is actually three adjoining rooms. When the caroms tables were located in the first back room, there was no problem erecting temporary bleachers where fans could behold bona fide world-class competition among the immortal Raymond Ceulemans and his near-peers Blomdahl, Jaspers, Sayginer and others, seated in comfort with the scores clearly visible. But the caroms tables are in the front now, which means virtually no spectator seating and no way to keep track of the score short of shading your eyes and squinting at the faraway overhead bead wires. It was pretty clearly an event for billiards lovers only.

On the other hand, Chris's five carom tables (recently increased to seven) are very nearly the majority of tables available for commercial play in all Chicago. The room contributed generously to the prize fund and has always been extremely accommodating to players; its original, 1973 founder, Bob Weir, was a caroms player himself (the place has never been owned by anybody actually named Chris), and the room has catered to such competitors ever since. Besides, the spectators are accustomed to all this. Any given pool tournament will host some total strangers to the game, in the form of women towed by their boyfriends or kids chaperoned by parents. But a caroms tournament, for the most part, attracts players only, who applaud in finger-snaps and roll their eyes in brief horror when a scorekeeper, attempting to remove a chalk crumb from the table, moves a ball aside and marks its place with a mere wet fingertip. The game is played not only *by*, but *for*, people who know it.

And the 32-player field was high-caliber enough to satisfy any fan, seated, squinting, or otherwise. Pedro Piedrabuena, Hugo Patino and New York's marvelous Sonny Cho have five national USBA titles between them (three for Piedrabuena). Illinois' venerable George Ashby, a welcome sight after a lengthy sabbatical from tournament play,

has eight such titles (although won under the auspices of two other players' associations). And two of Ecuador's finest players, Javier Teran and Luis Aveiga, were in the fold too, along with one of the game's top female competitors, Colombia's striking Mercedes Gonzalez. (Piedrabuena would eventually win, the Ecuadorans would finish second and third respectively, Patino fourth, Ashby fifth, Cho sixth, and Gonzalez tenth. And local favorite Paul Navarette, along with Indiana's spectacular bank-pool star Mark Jarvis the only real pool players in the entire field, came in a highly creditable eighth.)

Ashby, in particular, has weathered some nasty kisses in his billiards game of life; he even jokes that his apparently healthy, ruddy complexion is nothing more than a reflection of his high blood pressure. But his is still the finest beard in all billiards, just the right balance of salt and pepper, every single hair perfectly groomed, and his game still one of the most imaginative. Short of artistic billiards competition, you will not see a player who enjoys getting his cue perpendicular more than George Ashby.

But the real star of the show, as it always is with billiards, was the game itself. "I *hate* this bleeping game," player and co-tournament director George Theobald advised me cheerily during one of his early-round matches, "and I hate you for liking it." But he had tongue firmly planted in cheek, and besides, how mad can I get at yet another competitor named George? On any one of the five tables in action, the odds were close to even money that the next inning would produce a shot you had never seen before. The factor of luck, in a top-class caroms match, is pretty much reduced to which side of the second object ball the cue ball scores upon. The best players go through entire games as bereft of kisses as though they were in a nunnery. Most of the time, they select shots offering no such dismal dangers. When that glum possibility does exist, they find the right combination of hit, spin and speed that will defeat it. Frequently they send their cue balls off the side of the first object ball precisely opposite to the side you had visualized, and yet they still score effortlessly. It's the damndest thing.

The game's dilemma, especially in America, remains that almost nobody young seems to want to play it. In this field, just two competitors, Piedrabuena (who only begins to look his 33 years with the addition of a modest Van Dyke beard) and Gonzalez, are on the sunny side of 40, and both are native Latin Americans hailing from countries where the game holds near-equal footing with pool. But we do have resources like the USBA's tireless secretary/treasurer Jim Shovak, who puts a juicy chunk of his own dough into his association's tour without expecting any return except the promotion of their magnificent game; there is simply no way these tournaments can be profitable. This meet's prize fund was a highly creditable \$14,000-plus, and this year's USBA tour was better than the 2007 version. Things could certainly be way worse.