

The Mental Game

Positive Attitude

Earl Strickland has a saying, "Pool is the hardest game in the world, and the world is against you." At first you might laugh and think ole Earl is just being sarcastic. But there is a lot of truth to what he says. How can that be you ask? All you do is stand around and push a ball around the table. Let me tell you, it can be physically hard to play because you stand around and push that ball around the table. I have played in tournaments where I started playing at 8 AM and finished at 11 PM. No, it's not running or jumping or physical exertion, but all stamina and muscle flexibility. You stand up, bend over, stand up move 5 ft. and then bend over again and shoot. This happens at least 7 times each game. With safeties, a bit of bad luck, it could be as high as 20 or 30 times. That's one game! Most matches are 5 or 6 games and in a tournament you could play 8 to 10 matches. That's somewhere between 300 and 800 shots in a day. Pool is also mentally exhausting. Some compare it to golfing except you are putting every shot. I prefer to think of it more like a chess match. If you ever played in a chess tournament you quickly found how exhausting extreme focus can be. After about an hour your head starts to pound and your mind wants to wander. Pool is hard because you are constantly focused on the table. What balls do I shoot? What is the best run out? Where is there an easy safety? We are doing that for approximately an hour to an hour and a half every match. Between the physical and mental fatigue your brain starts allowing all kinds of foreign minutia in that kills that focus and brings in all kinds of doubt. When we have one bad shot we may shrug it off. A second shot goes long and then we start to doubt our ability. If we don't stop and refocus our self-confidence starts to spiral out of control. We lose the match and maybe several more before we restart and rebuild our game. How do we reclaim that focus? How do we regain our positive attitude?

To start with, there are some things we need to understand. Pool is the only game you can lose and never take a shot. If your opponent comes up and runs 8 racks in a row and you never get to shoot, there is nothing you can do about it. It's hard to maintain a positive attitude when things don't seem to go in your favor. It can be down-right frustrating. Over the years I've seen every kind of response to things not going your way. I've seen people lash out, throw chalk, break their cue stick, and even totally give up and walk away from the table. Now take a look at the pros. How many of them do you see talking? How many do you see throwing chalk? With the exception of Mike Siegel or Earl Strickland you won't find hardly anyone who talks during their match. The pro knows that all they need is a chance to get to the table and they can win. They also know that it's a slippery slope to let emotion get into their game or to let those negative thoughts in their brain. The pro remains calm, evaluates the table, and plays every shot like it's the most important shot in the match.

It's easy to say have a positive attitude. Believe you are going to win. See yourself winning. However, if you don't back those affirmations up with solid play they are just empty words and your confidence will quickly disappear. So how do we develop that positive attitude? I'm going to quote Vince Lombardi here. "Winning is not a sometimes thing. You don't win some of the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing. There is only one place in my game and that is first place. There is a second

place bowl game but it is a game for losers played by losers.” On the surface this sounds a little harsh, that winning is everything. That’s not what Vince is trying to say. Every time we approach the table we have to believe that we are going to play the best game of our lives. We have to believe that we have the tools to bring the best game we have to the table. We do that by making our fundamentals “automatic.” We do drills that will stabilize our stroke and make it automatic, and we identify our weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

Unfortunately, practice only gets us so far. There are two parts to the mental game and creating a positive attitude. The part we just discussed about making the physical part automatic, getting it into the subconscious, the second part is all mental, believing you are going to win. Fatigue, mental stress, and noise, all fight your brain for control. We are in a constant battle to maintain the sharp focus we need to compete at a high level. It’s important to have “triggers” that constantly engages the subconscious part of our mind. This starts with a pre shot routine. I tell my players, “See the ball. Be the ball. Put the ball in the hole.” Kind of a “ZEN” mantra. Your pre shot routine should be the same every time you come to the table. Chalk up, walk around the table looking at the shot you want. (See the ball). Set up your aim and decide what you want to do with the cue ball. (Be the ball.) Visualize the cue ball hitting the object ball where you want and see that ball going into the pocket, then stroke the ball. (Put the ball in the hole.) If by chance you miss. Analyze what you might have done wrong then forget about it. It’s done. Making one good shot or playing one perfect safety can send your confidence through the roof. Don’t take high risk shots if you don’t have to. These will break your confidence. Remember, believing and visualizing you can make the shot is the foundation of positive thinking. Don’t “try” you can make the shot. “Believe” you can make the shot. To quote another master, “Do or do not, there is no try.” Don’t waste the energy of getting mad, irritated, arguing, or being distracted. These are all things that will lead to the dark side. I’m inspired when I see my opponent get frustrated and start acting out. When I know that they are frustrated, I know they are prone to making mistakes. Don’t inspire your opponent to play better!!!

To summarize, practice your fundamentals, make them automatic.

Trust your subconscious. It knows how to play pool better than your conscious mind.

Don’t give into distractions, anger, or idle chatter. These things lead to the dark side.

When things go wrong, go back to the fundamentals and reestablish your game.

Have a trigger that reestablishes your automatic pool player. See the ball, be the ball, put the ball in the hole.

Don’t inspire your opponent to play better by showing your frustration.

Have fun. Pat yourself on the back when you do something right. If you do something wrong, analyze, correct and move on.