
Supporting narrated video (NV) demonstrations, high-speed video (HSV) clips, technical proofs (TP), and all past articles are available online at billiards.colostate.edu. Reference numbers used in the articles help you locate the resources on the website.

If you have read my column for any length of time, you know I dedicate a lot of time to pool physics and cue ball (CB) control. However, many people’s games are limited and held back by the mental aspects of pool. Even if you have sound fundamentals and good skills in pool, there is no guarantee you will play at a high level when it counts. If you want to play at your best in competition, you must have a strong mental game. I recently posted an online video (see [NV J.37](#) and **Photo 1**) that describes and demonstrates the top 10 most important mental aspects of pool, which are summarized below.



Photo 1 Video title screen

1. Plan and Visualize

First, it helps to have a consistent and purposeful pre-shot routine, being sure to plan and visualize successful execution of each shot before getting down to shoot. Also, when thinking or daydreaming about upcoming matches or tournaments, visualize yourself playing well and winning. This will help create a confident mindset. But be realistic with your expectations so you don’t create disappointment and lose enthusiasm and motivation. Also watch past videos of you performing well, especially before a major tournament. This will help remind yourself of and give you faith in your abilities.

2. Respect and Focus on Every Shot

Have you ever played a good positional shot and thought the next shot was too easy, and you didn’t give it enough respect, and you missed it? Give every shot the respect it deserves in terms of attention and focus, even the “easy” shots. Make it a goal to try your best and give 100% like every shot matters (because they do!). It is important to do this during practice so you will develop and reinforce this important good habit. Do it during competitive play also regardless of who you are playing and whether or not you are way behind or way ahead in a match. Always play your top game and never play down to an opponent or situation. If a disciplined and purposeful pre-shot routine is well practiced, it won’t take much emotional, mental, or physical energy to do it. Instead, it will be an effortless and natural habit.

3. Pull the Trigger with a Clear Mind and Still Eyes

There should be no uncertainty whatsoever just before or during your stroke. If there is, you should get up and re-start your pre-shot routine. If you are uncertain with your aim or didn't plan CB control carefully, don't just "Hit It Anyway." Instead, always be methodical and purposeful. Also, if you are thinking stuff before the stroke like "Don't miss," "Don't drop your elbow," or "Don't scratch in the corner," your inner subconscious self (that needs simple and straightforward instructions to perform the stroking action) might only hear the negative parts ("Miss," "Drop your elbow," "Scratch"), especially if there is any doubt or insecurity. Instead, give yourself clear and positive thoughts and instructions like "Make the shot," "Hit the middle diamond" and "Stay down and be still."

During the final stroke, there should be no high-level thoughts (or "second thoughts") whatsoever. You need to get your mind out of the way of your natural action process. And remember, don't "pull the trigger" until the alignment and aim look and feel perfect, with clear and still focus on the target. Then, with a quiet mind and still body, head, and eyes, trust your trained "muscle memory" to execute the stroke.

4. Create Confidence Through Preparation

You need to be confident and trusting in your skills and abilities. The only way to develop this is to work hard to improve your skills, break bad habits, and create new good habits. If you really want to improve and win more, you must be dedicated, disciplined, and motivated to do this work. Don't just play during "practice," unless you just want to have fun, which is a good thing. To get more benefit from "play" practice, when you miss a shot or position, diagnose what happened and play it again to learn from the mistake. Even better, don't just practice a shot until you make it once ... practice it until you make it almost every time. Then similar mistakes will be much less likely in the future. Be sure to also practice safeties; and repeat them when they don't go as planned. Also practice your break, striving to control the CB in the center of the table with a good look at a shot after the break.

You should also dedicate serious practice time to doing drill-based skill training, like athletes in all sports do. This will improve your skills and confidence, but it will also help you develop the discipline you need to focus and play at a high level. Use score-based drills like the [Video Encyclopedia of Pool Practice \(VEPP\)](#) and the [Billiard University \(BU\) Playing Ability Exams](#) to add competitive pressure during practice, in trying to beat your past scores. And video record yourself so you can review and learn from it later.

Also, play under pressure as much as possible in leagues, tournaments, and gambling matches. The best way to become good under pressure is to create a history of successful experience under pressure. Concerning preparing before a match, if you have limited practice time on a table, try to get accustomed to the table so there won't be any surprises during the match. In [NV J.37](#), I demonstrate a set of recommended table test shots.

And if you are warming up just before playing a match, shoot only typical easy or medium-difficulty shots to build confidence. Don't attempt and re-attempt very difficult shots you might miss multiple times just before a match. Also, be a student of the game ... read books, watch instructional videos, watch lots of pro pool matches online and in person, and get help from an experienced and qualified instructor or coach. All of these things might help inspire and motivate you to improve.

5. Breath

Take deep breaths when necessary to fight nerves or break tension. Also take a deep breath (or several when necessary) to help calm yourself before and after each shot as part of your pre- and post-shot routines, especially when you are nervous.

6. Diagnose and Learn from Your Mistakes

After mistakes, spend less time beating yourself up and spend more time diagnosing what led to or caused the mistakes so you can better learn from them. Did you not aim carefully while standing? Did you rush or get up on the shot? Did you swoop or steer the stroke? Did you not account for CB deflection? Did you not account for cut-induced throw? Consider mistakes as opportunities to improve and get better. If you can limit how much they happen again in the future, you will become a better player. Keep a performance journal reporting both good and bad match experiences, and make a record of your mistakes during play so you can dedicate time to working on these in practice. Also keep a list of prioritized reminders of things you want to stay aware of and focus on while you are practicing and playing.

7. Focus on the Process, Not the Outcome

It is good to set goals and think about desired outcomes when not playing; but when playing, focus only on playing effectively. During a match is not the right time to think about your goals or outcomes. Will I win or lose this match or the tournament? Will my buddies ever stop teasing me if I get beat by a girl? Will my FargoRating go down if I lose? These are not helpful thoughts while playing. To win, you just need to execute one shot at a time. That should be your only goal.

8. Be Aware of Your Mental and Physical State

Do not try to deny your fears or insecurities. Instead acknowledge and accept them and do your best to address and manage them. Take deep breaths and use supportive and nurturing self-talk to help calm them. Process and work on the root causes when not playing, maybe with the help of a sports psychologist. And have faith and trust in your pre-shot routine, abilities, and skills. "Without trust, your game goes bust."

Never give up, even if you are far behind in a match. Don't live in the past, beating yourself up after a mistake. Be in the present, focusing on the current shot or your next opportunity. When waiting for your turn at the table, put your mind to good use by studying your opponent's strategy (thinking about how you might do things differently or better). You might also learn some things from how your opponent plays the game. Also study the table for your strategy for when you return.

Be aware if you are thirsty or hungry, and drink water and eat snacks when necessary (and in moderation while playing), especially if you have issues with dehydration or blood sugar levels. It is difficult to play at your best if your body's physiology is off. Especially make sure you are well hydrated and nourished before you begin a match.

9. Reset Yourself When Necessary

After a mistake, or when your attitude is bad, or when you are slouching in probable defeat, take a deep breath (or several), drink a sip of water, take a time out and go to the restroom to wash your hands and face, clean your cue's shaft, chalk your tip, give yourself pep talks, and do whatever else you need to do to ready yourself for a fresh start when you return to the table. If you play a shot less than perfectly and leave yourself in bad shape, don't despair. Instead, reset yourself, pretend your opponent just missed and left you with a shot and opportunity to win, and say: Woo Hoo! Also, after a really nice or difficult shot, where you might get an Adrenaline boost and be amped up, or where you might be patting yourself on your back too much, step away and reset before the next shot. You don't want to miss an "easy" shot after a masterful crowd pleaser.

10. Enjoy the Game and Have Fun

The most important fundamental of pool is to have fun and enjoy playing well (see **Photo 2**). This is what will help motivate you to play more and improve. Celebrate and enjoy the moments when you hit a great shot

or get a big win, and relive these and other moments from the past in your memories and dreams. This will help keep you enthusiastic and motivated.

The other important fundaMENTAL of pool is to have a strong mental game, as described in this article. Try to be aware of and focus on all this stuff during practice and training. That is the only way to develop and reinforce the good habits you need to excel while playing. You need to practice and train both your physical and mental game to excel in this wonderful sport.



Photo 2 Important fundamentals

I hope the information in this article helps you improve your mental game. Everything described is demonstrated in online video [NV J.37](#). Be sure to watch the video and try to incorporate the advice into your game. If you want more information, links to many supporting resources can be found in the YouTube video description. In closing, here's a good 5-word summary of the entire list of 10 topics, with a snappy single-syllable acronym: **Focus, Reset, Enjoy, Visualize, Diagnose (FREVD)**. Make FREVD your new mantra when playing pool.

Good luck with your game,
Dr. Dave



[NV J.37](#) – Top 10 Mental Aspects of Pool – The Mental Game

PS:

- I know other authors and I tend to use lots of terminology, and I know not all readers are totally familiar with these terms. If you ever come across a word or phrase you do not fully understand, please refer to the [online glossary](#) at billiards.colostate.edu.

Dr. Dave is a PBIA Advanced Instructor, Dean of the Billiard University, and author of the book: [The Illustrated Principles of Pool and Billiards](#) and numerous instructional DVD series, all available at: DrDaveBilliards.com.