How Slow is Too Slow?

(What *is* an acceptable playing pace in amateur pool?)

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Introduction

If you are reading this, you are probably a serious pool player. Nonetheless, when you compete in tournaments, organized leagues, or both, one motivation is almost certainly the fun that you intend to have doing it. We all know that it feels good to win and, well...that's *fun*. Whether you are battling to win hard cash, trophies, or championships, "fun", however you define it, remains a principal intention.

In this commentary we will focus on one detail of our game that can overtly influence our perception of fun and, at the same time, also have a considerable influence on winning and losing. At first blush, you may think it's just a side issue, but no, this subject is one key to the fun. What is it? It is *the amount of time players take to shoot*.

At nearly all levels of competitive pool, it is common to hear grumbling about some players taking too much time for their shots. It has often struck me that the players who naturally have a faster-paced style are the individuals more likely to complain; it's as though the faster player thinks everyone should adopt this quicker pace. On the other hand, the more deliberate player feels comfortable at a slower pace, either because he feels he will make fewer errors by slowing things down or, because that's simply his natural rhythm—it just 'feels right.'

It is important to note that extremely slow play can certainly be annoying, even to normally tolerant players. What is more, the annoyance can extend well beyond the game at hand and have a domino effect on the entire event.

In a tournament, just one tediously slow match can delay all later matches that depend upon that outcome to proceed. Additionally, in some higher level team tournament play, whether at the local or national level, either of two competing teams' slow play can incur costly penalties for both teams.

In leagues, an excessively slow match bogs down both teams, causing too late a finish. Pool league play is usually at night and most players have the usual obligations of life; family, work, etc.—everyone wants to finish at a reasonable time.

How about the effects of tempo on performance? A player's pace is actually quite individual and tempos vary, from plodding to lickety-split. Traditional (and presumably sound) advice is to develop a comfortable rhythm and play at a pace that suits *you*. Experience has shown that if you alter your natural pace, perhaps to match the tempo of an opponent, you are likely to damage your performance.

So, on the one hand, organized pool should acknowledge individual rhythms and allow shot times that accommodate *all* players, both fast and slow. However, at the same time, allowed shot times must be within reason to keep things moving.

Thus, relevant factors are: (1) avoiding excessively slow play while (2) allowing the slower players enough time to play at their best. Since no one really complains about the tempo of fast-paced players, the issue boils down to, "How slow is too slow?" That's what this article will will concern itself with.

Let's start by looking at some established rules to see what allowed shooting times are typically accepted. Most rule sets do address this issue, with the relevant rule often being listed in a section called, "Slow Play." (See the links page for examples.)

Rules & Guidelines

Amateur pool leagues list shot times in their rules, though they lack uniformity. Four of the five below discuss use of a shot clock, the other does not.

Table 1: Various Amateur Pool League Rules about Shot Times

League	Rule No. or Location	Times			Comment
		Allowed	AB	Ext	
ACS	World Standardized Rules Rules # 6.15 & 6.16	-	-	-	At referee's discretion, shot clock option Each event may define allowed time limit
APA	Official Team Manual p. 3 Under 'Guidelines'	20	-	25*	No shot clock option mentioned TO of 1 min allowed Also Listed: Game and Match Guidelines
BCA PL	Official Rules & Records Rule # 1.16, "Slow Play"	45	NL	45	Shot clock option Shooter is warned with 10s remaining
TAP	Page 15 -"Slow Play, Shot Clock, & Time-outs"	45	-	-	Shot clock option TO(s) of 1 min allowed
VNEA	Under "E. Slow Play"	60	-	-	First warn, 3rd infraction=loss of game Shot clock may be imposed

Legend: APA=American Poolplayers Association; **BCA PL**= Billiard Congress of America Pool League; **TAP**=The Association for P.O.O.L.; **VNEA**=Valley National Eight ball Association
Allowed=Shot time, guideline *or* if put on clock; **AB**=After Break; **NL**= No Limit; **Ext**=Extension; **TO**=Time Out
***** = APA doesn't list 'extension' so this is derived, thusly, 20s+25s=45s listed as "Maximum"; **-** =not mentioned

But there's a problem with these rules, and that is *they aren't actually in force* most of the time, they're often ignored. Typically, the relevant rule is even intended to only be resorted to when a time-constraint or complaint has already arisen. Rules about "allowed shot time" or "slow play" are usually invoked for two reasons, namely to—

1) address complaints about players taking too much time
2) 'catch-up' when some matches impede the progress of a tournament

[*Though not really relevant for amateur play, one venue that does limit players' allowed shot times is television. So, for completeness we can add a third reason, namely to—*

3) *lend predictability to an event's duration, particularly for television*]

Accordingly, the questions we'll tackle in this commentary are: How slow is too slow? (What *is* an acceptable playing pace in amateur pool?) Does playing pace matter? How might we establish a proper benchmark for tempo in amateur play?

We'll look for insight into these questions by considering the playing pace of professional players, because the tempos of the best and most experienced pool players ought to serve as an apt reference for the rest of the pool playing world.

Since 8-ball is the commonest game played in organized pool leagues, we'll use professional 8-ball matches to guide our recommendations for amateur players.

Easier said than done! I consulted my favorite resource for watching pool and billiards, namely, www.accu-stats.com and, though Accu-Stats has an impressive catalog of events available for purchase and viewing, I found a scarcity of 8-ball matches. Even so, I located one event, the **2001 Accu-Stats 8-Ball Invitational**.

Statistics & Analysis

This tournament featured races to 8 and no time limit, i.e., no shot clock. Since typical pool leagues also usually function without shot clocks, this competition should be a fitting reference for our evaluation of shot times.

Six professional players competed in this invitational; Johnny Archer, Francisco Bustamante, Troy Frank, Roger Griffis, Mika Immonen, and Efren Reyes.

The graph in figure 1 (*below*) was constructed after timing all 1,771 shots in the tournament. The curve peaks between 10 and 15 seconds as that's where many shot times fall, but, there are also shot times extending as far out as 4+ minutes.

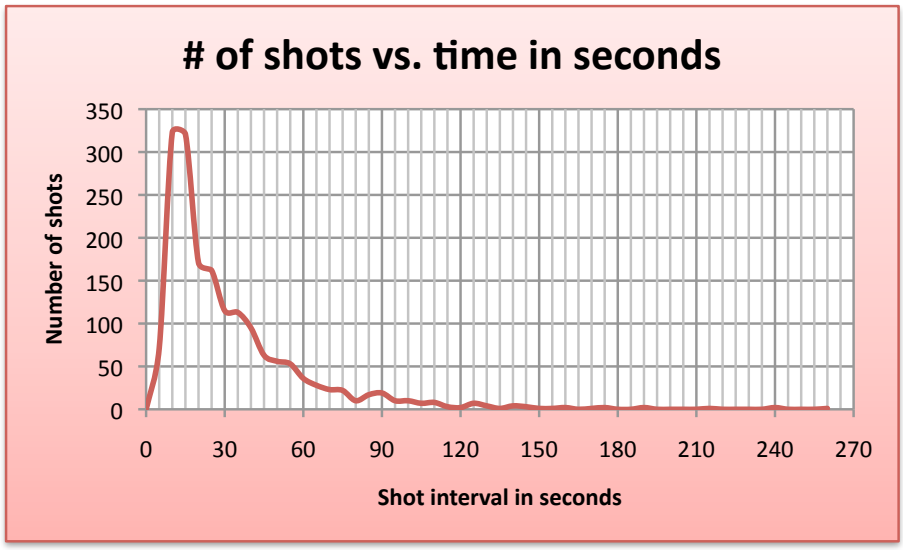

Figure 1: Shot Times at the 2001 Accu-Stats 8-Ball Invitational

Table 2, part I (*below)* lists some standard statistical calculations. Some of the stats need little explanation. These include the **average time taken** of 29.6 seconds, the **quickest** of 2 seconds (usually 8-ball hangers), and the **maximum** (longest) of 4 minutes 19 seconds (a tough match-deciding situation faced by Johnny Archer).

Table 2 - Part I: Pro Players' Shots
(times in seconds)

Specific Statistic	Stat
Number of shots	1,771
Total shot time (hr/min/sec)	14h 32m 46s
Average time taken	29.6
Quickest shot	2
Maximum shot	4m 19s
Median time taken	20

The other stats warrant further discussion, i.e., "**Median**" & Table 2, part II (*below*): The **median** shot time of 20 seconds reveals that one-half the players' shots were shorter than 20 seconds, and one-half were longer. This *middle* value is sometimes a better representation of the central tendency of a group of numbers than is the average, and this is especially true with skewed data such as we have here. For example, let's pose the question, "What is the 'typical' amount of time a professional pool player takes to decide upon and then execute a shot in 8-ball, assuming there are no time limits constraining him?" Well, it may be that answering, "20 seconds" (the median), is as much on the mark as is answering, "30 seconds" (the average)—that is, if you feel that we can generalize from this single tournament.

Table 2 - Part II: Pro Players' Shots (times in seconds)

Specific Statistic	Stat
Number of shots	1,771
10th percentile	8
90th percentile	63
2.5th percentile	5
97.5th percentile	105.8
% of shots < 20 sec	48.7
% of shots < 30 sec	64.6
% of shots < 45 sec	80.4
% of shots < 60 sec	89.0

The **10th** and **90th** percentiles of 8 and 63 seconds respectively denote the range for 80% of the shot times while the **2.5th** and **97.5th** percentiles of 5 and 105.8 seconds denote that 95% of the shot times were within this latter range.

The **percentile ranks**, i.e., the bottom four rows of table 2 - part II, denote the percentage of values *below* the designated time. So, e.g., note that only ~80% of shots were completed in less than 45 seconds. Obviously, subtracting any of these percentages from 100% gives the percentage of shots *above* these times. For example, 35.4% of shot times *exceeded* 30 seconds (100% - 64.6% = 35.4%).

Isn't it noteworthy that these professionals took more than 45 seconds to shoot 20% of the time, or 1 in every 5 shots? And, a figure that stands out even more, as a group these players took *more than one minute* for 11% of their shots! Even though they are some of the greatest pool players on our planet, each endowed with vast knowledge, an extraordinary skill set, and with years of experience in top level competition, they still spent this much time deliberating over and then executing a significant percentage of their shots.

Given these results, is it reasonable to expect amateurs to make decisions about and then execute shots *even quicker than do seasoned pro's?* I think not.

Another interesting aspect of 8-ball play is the shot time after the break. A player's analysis and shot choice immediately after the opening break is often key to winning or losing that game—and these six pro's were certainly aware of this. Playing at their level, any miscalculation here, more often than not, costs them that particular game.

Therefore, let's analyze the shot time statistics related to this crucial point in the game. We'll look at the same set of calculations as before, but this time focusing solely on the first shots after the opening break. We can then compare these stats to those calculated from all shots.

Table 3 (*below*) lists these results.

Table 3: The First Shot After the Opening Break (times in seconds)

Specific Statistic	Stat
Number of shots	193
Total shot time (hr/min/sec)	3h 16m 43s
Average time taken	61.2
Quickest shot	10
Maximum shot (min/sec)	3m 59s
Median time taken	50
10th percentile	29
90th percentile	103.8
2.5th percentile	21.8
97.5th percentile	145.2
% of shots < 20 sec	1.9
% of shots < 30 sec	11.4
% of shots < 45 sec	42.1
% of shots < 60 sec	60.4

Quite interesting! The pro's took an average of 61 seconds (median = 50 seconds) to map out their strategy and to choose their first shot after the break. So, they spent approximately *twice as long* on these crucial first shots as they did on their other shots throughout the tournament.

We should note that some rule sets overtly state that a shot clock, if imposed, **does not apply** to the first shot after the break in any game, see BCAPL Rule 1.16, ¶3g. This seems like an excellent exception to any "Slow Play" rule so as to not sell short the complexity of the initial decision making required to play 8-ball proficiently.

Windup

Pool is a difficult game to play well. Not only are the physical skills to excel difficult to attain, many games also challenge players' strategic capabilities. Though shot selection is often obvious, sometimes careful deliberation is mandatory for success.

This look at pro's shot times was revealing. The fact that six world-class professional pool players *took more than one minute to decide upon and execute more than 10% of their shots* is strong evidence that limiting shot time to significantly less than one minute is selling our sport and, the game of 8-ball in particular, very short indeed.

Excessively slow play does remove some of the enjoyment from play in general and league play in particular, and impacts one's opponent, teammates, and any officials. But, by the same token, badgering by opponents or referees of players who have a more methodical tempo *also* takes away from the fun of playing.

While 20 or 30 seconds may be acceptable for *average* shot time guidelines, when they are intended as *upper limits*, these times are simply too short to decide upon and shoot some shots. Furthermore, it is the players with slower tempos who are the ones unfairly penalized when very short times are given as expectations.

Very short allowed times disregard the complexities of many game situations and trivialize the analytical elements of pool, regardless of the level of play.

Based upon this analysis of top-ranked professional pool players' actual shot times in the only readily available pro 8-ball tournament, I recommend the following shot time guidelines for amateur play:

- Declare that an *average* shot time is expected to be 20 to 30 seconds but, as an average, this implies that some shot times will obviously take longer.
- Permit a "maximum" shot time of 1 minute, but even here allow some flexibility unless circumstances require play to be accelerated. This will respect the players who have a naturally slower tempo, and is not excessive.
- Acknowledge that the first shot after an opening break is a key time for deciding upon one's strategy for that game and therefore a doubling of the "maximum" guideline is reasonable. How about allowing up to 2 minutes?
- Place restrictions upon **teams' total match times**. Thus, after some suitable time, all team matches must have been completed or a "sudden death" rule is invoked. This puts time management in the hands of the players and most particularly the team coaches and captains. This way, the team captain can urge his or her players to alter their playing pace, if needed, to avoid penalty.
- Invoke a shot clock *sooner rather than later* in team matches that seem to get off to a slow start. This should prevent a team from deliberately slowing down play as a strategic move. Using a shot clock is not difficult since most events above the level of routine weekly league play have a referee or other official in attendance to manage the tournament. Even in weekly league play this it is now easy to accomplish. How? By finding a volunteer timekeeper and by using our ***new*** (and shamelessly promoted)

PoolTimer!

