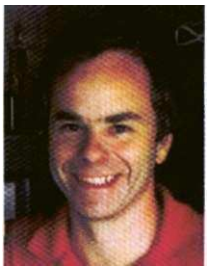
BY Bob Jewett



KILLING ME SOFTLY?

The outbreak of the soft break threatens the game of 9-ball.

TWO RECENT competitions have shown what many have been saying for a number of years: the current game of 9-ball is fundamentally flawed as a test of skill. The rack and the break have become major problems, and tournament organizers have not found a good solution.

At the recently completed World Pool Championship in Manila, the problem was reported to be worst on the TV table, which was used for most of the live broadcasts. The players discovered that a fairly soft break almost guaranteed to pocket a wing ball, and the correct hit would get position on the 1 ball. (The wing ball is the ball on the "side corner" of the rack.) In one rack I saw on YouTube, a player who is known for hammering the balls shot a break that looked like a soft stop shot on the 1 ball. All the balls were on one half of the table and the run was nearly automatic.

In one sense, there's nothing wrong with this technique. The players have discovered that if they get a really tight rack, it's not necessary to risk losing the cue ball to get a good break. In fact, if the rack and the rules permit such a controlled break, only a fool would smash the balls with all available force. It is a natural evolution of the game.

The problem is that it makes 9-ball a poor game to find the best pool player. If the break is automatic and the runout is usually easy with simple patterns, the game does not separate the champions from the also-rans. You might as well flip coins.

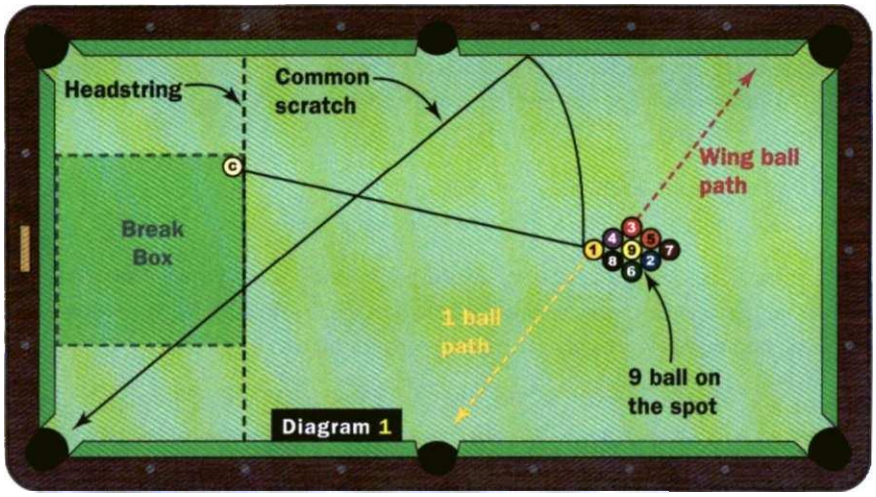
The second event of note was December's Mosconi Cup, which was held in the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. To avoid the dullness encountered in Manila, Matchroom Sport made three major changes to the break. First, the 9 ball was racked on the spot, which moved the natural line of the wing ball up the table — enough to make it very unlikely to go in. Second, the breaker was required to shoot from the middle half of the kitchen, which eliminated the normal angle used for the wing-ball break

Finally, the breaker had to get at least three object balls to cross the headstring or be pocketed to keep the table, which eliminated soft breaks. Each object ball could only be counted once, so that if a ball was pocketed in a head pocket, it was only counted once even though it both crossed the headstring and was pocketed.

It took the players a while to get used to the breaking rules. The standard break was to place the cue ball as far to the left or right as possible and then hit the 1 ball toward the farther foot pocket with draw and some sidespin. This hit on the 1 ball often pocketed it in the side pocket. Without a full hit on the **1** ball, the cue ball had a lot more energy than the usual "park whitey" break shot, and it was common to see it go straight to the side rail from the 1 ball and then either go straight back and forth and scratch in a side pocket or catch the side rail with enough spin and draw that it went one rail into a head pocket. There were few break-and-runs.

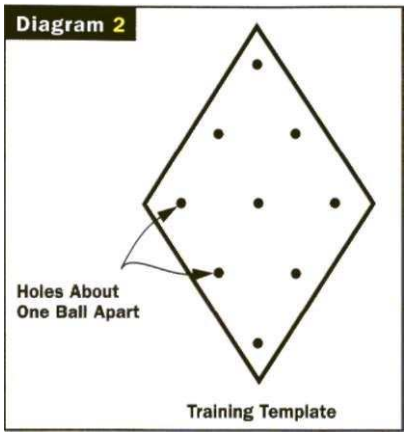
Diagram 1 shows the break box, a typical cue-ball position, a typical path for the **1** ball and a common scratch. Also shown is the path that the "wing ball" takes due to the rack being higher on the table — it no longer goes straight into the pocket.

The so-called "three above the line" rule produced some strange results. On one or two breaks during the Cup, two balls were pocketed but no ball crossed the head string, so the breaker had to give up the table. On some breaks, a ball that was about to drift into the kitchen to validate the break was knocked away by a ball exiting the kitchen. Fortunately for the breakers, a "soft break" violation did not result in ball in hand; the breaker just lost his turn.



"Three above the line" is not a new rule. It has been in force on the Euro-Tour for some time to prevent the soft-break, easy-run problem. This is a large issue in Europe, because they have a technique that gets much tighter racks than you find in most American tournaments. Their method is to "train" the table by tapping the balls into place, making small indentations in the cloth in the exact locations where the balls should be for the break. This is not done by tapping the balls in a full rack because that way will nearly always lead to gaps between the balls. Instead, a template like the one shown in **Diagram 2** is used, with one ball at a time being placed in each hole and then tapped to form the indentation in the cloth. The thin sheet of tough material has holes

punched through it in nearly the correct locations of the balls. I say "nearly" because if you space the holes apart by the regulation size of the balls — 57.15 millimeters or 2.25 inches — you will inevitably end up with some of the balls slightly misplaced. Instead, the holes need to be a little closer to each other than the ball diameter so that when the balls are sitting in their little craters, the sides of the craters will make the balls press together and be as close to perfectly tight as possible.



On a table that is trained like this, a triangle is not necessary. Just get each ball close to its assigned hole and it will fall into it. Among other advantages, this eliminates arguments over who should rack and how tight the rack is. As noted above, the large problem that results from such a consistent, tight rack is that the wing ball nearly always goes in if the **1** ball is racked on the spot.

One additional problem that the "three above the line" rule causes is the need to count the number of balls that get above the head string. Once or twice during the Mosconi Cup, the refs had to refer to the instant replay for a ball count.

So, what do you think should be done about 9-ball? Some argue that a normal, slightly loose rack should be used, but this is not fair to the player who gets the "bad" racks while his opponent gets the "good" racks. Each player should have the same chance on the break.

One possible change is for the breaker to always get the next shot. That at least would be fair, but the break might not be too exciting as soon as all the players figure out how to get position on the 1 ball.

Another possibility is to require the incoming player to always play a push-out. Optimum push-out strategy is when your opponent is 50-50 to pass the shot back to you, so this assures that most racks will start fairly enough.

For any plan that does not require a tight rack, the 9 ball should be spotted if made on the break. If the rack is tight, the 9 ball only moves if kicked by a ball that comes back through the rack area. At the Mosconi Cup, the majority of 9 balls at the end of the game were shot off the foot spot where it started, and there were only one or two 9 balls made on the break. If the rack is loose and the 9 goes in, the non-breaker was cheated.

What do you think of the alterations used in the Mosconi Cup?

The final solution may be 10-ball. So far, no easy automatic break has been discovered for that game, although the 1 ball in the side is fairly easy to plan. As a hint of things to come, the WPA — the world governing organization for pool — has decided to publish official rules for 10-ball for the first time.

You may want to start practicing with one more ball on the table.