

TECHNIQUE • AIM • DELIVERY

Techniques of Shooting

By Martin Shapiro

When observing experienced players, including today's top Florida pros, there are many different shooting techniques apparent. All have validity, but there are basic principles of stance, aim and delivery which serve to make shots easier and more accurate. Presented here are my own observations of the best principles to follow. I recommend that you try incorporating these into your own game, keeping what works for you and discarding what doesn't.

CourtShuffleboard.com scope note: Shooting technique varies by player, physical ability, equipment, and court conditions. This article presents Martin Shapiro's observations and recommendations; try what works for you and adapt as needed. Rules and local practices may also vary.

GRIP

Hold the cue at the very end of the handle, lightly. You can grip the handle end very lightly with the tips of your index and middle fingers and your thumb, or let the end lie gently on two or three fingers with your thumb resting on the top or the side of the cue to steady it. The fingers that aren't gripping or holding the cue rest in their natural curled position back behind the end of the cue. I favor the second method as it causes less tension in the fingers and thereby less variance in aim which can occasionally occur from involuntary twitching of the finger muscles. With a light grip, the cue may on occasion fall out of your hand at the end of your shot. This is not unusual and incurs no penalty unless you retrieve the cue before all discs have stopped their movement on the court.

STARTING STANCE

First place the prongs of the shooting end of the cue against the cue disc. The prongs should stay against the disc, never pulled back, even the slightest, until the forward motion of cue and the cradled disc are complete for the shot. If there is any pull back from touching the disc, the two prongs of the cue will make contact again with the disc at separate moments, subjecting the disc to some unplanned spin or angling that may cause unwanted alteration in the aim of the disc.

Next move your body to a position such that your hand is right next to your hip when your arm and hand are dangling loosely and freely, no muscle tension, no added bend in your elbow or distancing of your arm from your body in any direction. Place your feet together or just slightly apart, where you have comfortable balance standing straight up, neither foot forward of the other, your weight distributed equally between your feet.

Aim your whole body – feet, shoulders, face – in the direction you want to send the disc. As you adjust your body to the correct aim, let your arm and hand with the cue naturally shift in its aim as well, without changing from its loose dangle and position along the side of your body and next to the hip. Adjust the aim by shifting your whole body left or right, and the cue with it, turning slightly as you go to fully face the direction you want to aim. If in adjusting the aim your cue pulls back from the disc, or the end of the cue and the disc shift from the starting position you want, move the cue and disc back to their correct position and adjust everything else again to the correct starting stance and aim.

Your final stance should be: 1. Arm and hand dangling loosely along the side of your body, as if they are doing nothing at all but just at rest; 2. Hand and handle end of cue aligned next to your hip; 3. Feet together or slightly apart, even to each other, not one or the other in front, weight balanced between them; 4. Cue and whole body – shoulders, face, feet – fully facing the direction you want to send the disc. At this point, every part of your body is relaxed – no knee bend, no elbow bend, no leaning forward or sidewise, neither of your arms, hands, legs or feet in front of the other.

Some players choose to bend or lean their body as part of their stance. This isn't necessarily a detriment to shooting but does require adjusting for any resultant change in the starting positions of the arm and hand to ensure that the hand holding the cue ends up behind the hip after the first small-step forward as described in the next paragraph.

STEPS

From the starting stance, take two steps forward for delivery, first a small step (up to half of a normal step) with your right foot (if you are left-handed, do the opposite feet) and then a full step with your left foot. During the small-step, your hand, the cue and disc do not move from original position. At the end of the small-step, your hand and arm will now be behind your hip, poised for its swing forward, your right knee is not bent and your weight is on your right foot. As you take the full step with your left foot, or at the end of it, your right hand and arm swing straight forward like a pendulum with a smooth controlled motion. After the left foot becomes planted flat on the court at the end of its full step, continue through with the swing of your right arm to a full extension forward of the arm, hand and cue.

Maintain the light-grip hold of the cue throughout the delivery, with the prongs of the cue never leaving the surface of the court. Your right foot will end with the toes still touching the court for balance, the rest of the foot flexed upward. Your left foot will end with the whole foot flat on the court, bearing your full weight. Your left knee will end slightly bent and your torso bent somewhat forward from the hips, to allow full extension of the shooting arm.

Your steps should be smooth and steady, like you are walking through your shot – do not rush them. Do not cross one foot in front of the other; both follow only a straight forward motion, the same as in your normal walking stride. Do not lift your trailing right foot fully off the court at the end of the steps (some players do this, but sometimes it may cause loss of balance during the shot, causing a misdirection of the cue), nor cross it behind the left foot as you would in bowling.

The length of your cue should be sufficient to allow you to do the complete two steps without stepping on or over the baseline of the court, which would incur a penalty. If not, you need to adjust the length of the cue longer (or obtain a longer one), which will force you to start further back from the baseline for your starting stance.

SWING

For delivery of the shot, the motion of your arm, hand and cue is a smooth pendulum swing, starting from the position behind your hip at the end of the small-step with your right foot and ending at the full extension of your arm at the end of your full step with your left foot. Your arm, hand and cue follow a straight path forward, not shifting in front of or away from your body, only forward. Your wrist should not twist to one side or the other. Your elbow does not bend during the swing, but merely remains relaxed keeping the arm straight and fully extended throughout the swing.

The speed of the disc is not determined by the amount of muscle strength you put into pushing the cue and disc, but rather the speed at which you make the swing. If you want a faster shot, sending the disc faster and further down the court, make a faster swing; if you want a slower shot, for a slower or shorter movement of the disc down the court, make a slower swing. Do not jab the disc with the cue to make it

go stronger or faster; do not stop your arm short of its full forward extension to make the shot go shorter. The speed and distance traveled of the disc is determined by the speed of your pendulum swing. Do not increase or decrease the speed of your steps to change the speed of the disc – you are only altering the speed of your swing to alter the speed of the disc.

By the way, I don't like the term "hard clear" to mean shooting a disc fast to clear the board as the use of "hard" to mean "fast" can confuse a novice player to the incorrect assumption that you must put muscle into such a shot. "Fast clear" would be a more accurate term than "hard clear." You only need to put more speed into your swing, not more muscle. The other aspects of the delivery – starting stance, steps, ending position, etcetera – stay the same. Have I said it enough times that the speed of the cue disc is determined by the speed of your swing and only by the speed of your swing?

Many players put body leans and knee bends into their shots. Some start out leaning forward or bending one or both knees. Some lean or bend more than necessary at the end of their shot, even going as far as their right knee touching the court or their right hand nearly so. Also, there are many players that raise their wrist and handle end of the cue higher in the air towards the end of their shot, although the prongs of the cue still stay in contact with the court. Some cross their feet one in front of the other. This is all personal preference and doesn't necessarily add any control or accuracy to a shot, but might reduce control or accuracy on occasion in some cases. I find it easier and simpler to just stand straight at the start, shoot straight, and end without any extra flourishes; I still have great success in speed and accuracy. I believe my simple approach is also more sustainable in the long run than added big leans, bends or flourishes, considering the common infirmities of advancing age.

AIM

Some players aim their shot by bringing their hand holding the cue in front of their body for their starting stance, raising the handle end level to their chest and sighting down the cue to their target. They still use the same pendulum swing to impel the cue disc by bringing the hand and cue down to hip level at the start of their delivery steps. Some of these players stand at a distance from the cue disc such that the raised hand and cue when lowered are even with their hip, thus requiring only the normal steps – small-step with right foot and full step with left foot – to achieve the full pendulum swing. Others start further behind the disc, requiring an adjustment to start with a full step with the right foot instead of the small-step to arrive at the correct distances to achieve the full pendulum swing on their second step with the left foot. This technique of the cue starting in front of the body requires a somewhat left-hand side-step motion in the forward steps to keep the cue aimed straight forward at its target during the swing.

Other players aim by leaning over to the right to sight down the cue as it is held with the hand hanging next to the hip. No side-stepping is required when using this technique, but the player needs to keep the cue true to its straight path when the shoulders are straightened during the steps forward, against the tendency to pull the handle end of the cue slightly left. The lean to the right also slightly lowers the hand below hip level, rising back up in the first moment of the steps forward. The player must be careful that this motion upward doesn't cause the prongs of the cue to momentarily pull back slightly from full contact with the disc.

I don't employ either of these techniques. I simply make sure that my cue is pointed at the location I want the cue disc to arrive by looking between the shooting end of my cue and my aiming site (see next section Targeting for info about the aiming site). I shift, often more than once, my whole body, hands, feet, shoulders and arms all together, moving and turning slightly left or right until I am confident that everything is pointed properly and aligned in proper starting stance, with the prongs of my cue pointed exactly for the forward aim.

TARGETING

There are three main methods of aiming the cue disc to hit its intended target: target sighting; spot shooting and path shooting. For all three methods, your first action is to determine the intended target, which is either a location on a target disc (center, or left or right side, or outside edge, etc.) or a location on the board.

Once this target is selected, determine your aiming site, which is either the same location as the intended target itself or a location that is somewhat left or right of that to allow for the drifts of the court. The speed that you intend to use also needs to be considered, as the faster the shot the less the drift affects the path of the cue disc. The starting position of the cue disc within the starting area is also important since the amount and direction of drift will vary, sometimes greatly, depending on the starting position used. The needed adjustments to your aim due to the court drifts should be tested and memorized as best as you can during your practice shots before the start of a game and refined as game play progresses.

Most shuffleboard texts and coaches recommend the target sighting method: your eyes fixed on the aiming site from the moment you set your aim through to release of the cue disc at the end of your shot. The theory behind this method is that by keeping your eyes on the site, you won't waver in your aim. However, there can be court conditions, such as bumps or dips, dry spots (spots where beads are scarce) or obstructions (leaf, debris, etc.), which cause sudden shifts in the direction of the cue during the execution of the shot which you don't notice since your eyes are fixed only on the distant site. Similarly, there can be unintentional errors in your swing, such as a bend in the elbow or twist of the wrist, which go unnoticed and therefore uncorrected during your shot; or even an undetected problem with the end of the cue, such as a broken rivet on one of the prongs.

Some players for aim instead target a spot on the lines of the scoring triangle at the player's shooting end, such as the intersection of two lines or the middle of a line segment, sending the cue disc across this chosen spot on its way to the final target at the other end of the court. The theory behind this spot shooting method is that you get consistent results by crossing the same spot from the same disc starting position and can easily adjust slightly left or right of the chosen spot to make corrections in your aim as you learn more about the characteristics of the court such as its drift. This has the advantage over target shooting that the shooting end of the cue remains within your view during the shot, such that accurate last-moment corrections can be accomplished to overcome those last-moment errors caused by court conditions, errors in your swing or the condition of the cue. Yet there is a disadvantage to this method as it requires an intermediary targeting of the shot – first setting your aiming site and then calculating the spot on the close end of the court to cross. This requires a translation of the final target to the spot target, which takes a little bit more mental concentration, possibly leading to more mental fatigue as a match or tournament reaches later stages.

The method that I developed for myself, and found in use by a few other players, I call path shooting. After my intended target is selected and I have adjusted to my aiming site, I glance between the aiming site and my cue disc one or more times, adjusting my starting stance to the proper aim as needed, until I feel confident that I have properly set the straight path along which I must push my cue and the cue disc out to the end of my swing in order to impel the disc directly at the aiming site. Once I have set the path and my aim, I keep my eyes on the shooting end of my cue and its cradled cue disc, from the start of my forward movement all the way through my steps and swing, up until at the last moment when my arm is fully extended and the disc is leaving contact with my cue, at which point I bring my head and eyes up to look directly at the aiming site down the court.

Using this path shooting method, it is fairly easy to make those last-moment adjustments that are sometimes required during a shot. I also find that my results are very consistent – following the same

path from the same starting position with the same speed always brings the cue disc to the same destination, varying only for changes over time in court or disc conditions, such as dry spots developing on the court or increasing humidity in the air slowing the discs. For example, by shooting the same path from the same starting position with the same speed, I can place a disc in the perfect Tampa position multiple times – after the first successful placement, I can be confident of placing another Tampa without fully sighting for it again simply by pushing the cue disc along the same path as the last time. If a shot arrives left or right of its ideal, it is easy to adjust the path slightly left or right to correct that same shot the next time it is taken.

ONE-STEP SHOOTING

Sometimes a player has an infirmity that makes the two-step delivery difficult or uncomfortable. There is a valid one-step approach that is almost just as effective. For the starting stance, set your feet a small-step forward of the normal starting stance used for the two-step approach. This brings your arm and hand to the same position behind your hip that it would be in after the first small-step of the two-step approach. Everything else for setting the body, cue, disc and aim are the same. For the delivery, take a full step with the left foot and at the same time or at the end of the step make your normal full pendulum swing, thus completing the delivery in the same manner as the second step of the two-step approach.

SUMMARY

1. Choose your cue disc and position it in the best starting position for the shot.
2. Establish your proper stance to shoot the cue disc from its starting position.
3. Select your target – a section of a target disc or a location on the board.
4. Select your aiming site – adjust your aim as needed to left or right of your target based on the drifts of the court and the speed of your shot.
5. Make your smooth and steady step(s) forward, executing your pendulum swing.
6. Follow straight through to full extension of your arm.

VARIATIONS

You will observe many variations in stance, aiming, steps and delivery among players. I believe that many of these variations in the long-term limit how skillful a shuffler can become. Control of aim, speed and accuracy can each or all be limited by the physical limitations imposed by these variations. Still, you may find that you need to vary your own stance or delivery to fit your unique physical characteristics, limitations or abilities. Be careful to do this only out of need, not from inattention or ingrained habit. If you already have a style that differs from the ideal I have described here, it will be a challenge to change it. But the sooner you do so the better. The longer you stick to your current style the more ingrained it becomes, and the more likely you will be stuck with less than your full potential as a player.