

Just a Vent about Pool

Andy Walker

When 14.1 straight pool was invented in 1912, it immediately became the world championship game. Every ball potted counted as a point, and the player with the most points won. Initially, the game was played to 125 points, but this format had its flaws. A player could shoot after the break and run out, leaving the opponent without a chance to shoot. To address this, the game was extended to 150 points, though the same issue persisted. The solution came in the form of playing to large blocks of points. For instance, a game could be played to 1500 points, split into 500-point blocks over three days. This ensured that every player had an equal opportunity to score, preventing one player from breaking and running out without giving the opponent a chance.

However, with the advent of television, this principle was compromised. The format reverted to 150-point games, which sometimes led to unfair outcomes like Mike Sigel running 150 and out against Michael Zuglan, who never got to shoot. This legendary run can be viewed on YouTube and is considered one of the purest 150 and out games ever recorded. The shift back to shorter games was seen as a sellout to television, making the game sometimes as unfair as it was before the introduction of the larger point blocks.

Comparing this to golf, imagine telling 150 players they couldn't tee off because Tiger Woods had already run the course. They wouldn't have a chance to compete, which sounds absurd. Yet, this is the situation pool found itself in.

Snooker in England realized that to truly determine a champion, a player needed to be tested over a long period, allowing the rolls to equal out and giving every competitor an equal opportunity. This endurance test is mirrored in sports like tennis and golf, where tournaments span four days and finals can last up to five hours. In pool, however, matches were condensed for television, often lasting only an hour. To accommodate this, networks like ESPN chopped up matches, airing only select portions and inserting commercial breaks at inopportune moments. This practice diluted the essence of the game, similar to watching the Masters with Scottie Scheffler leading at the 14th hole, only to return from a commercial break to find him on the 18th in second place, with all the action in between lost.

ESPN's approach was largely driven by commercial interests, sacrificing the integrity of the sport for profitability. Matches were not only shortened but also poorly edited, with significant portions lost during commercial breaks. This lack of continuity made it difficult for viewers to engage with the game and appreciate the

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skill and strategy involved. In contrast, snooker championships in England maintained the sport's integrity by featuring long, grueling matches. From Wikipedia: "The length of the matches varies per round as follows: the first round is played as the best of 19 frames, spread over two sessions of play; the second round and the quarter-finals are the best of 25 frames, played over three sessions; the semi-finals are the best of 33 frames, played over four sessions on three consecutive days of play; and the final is a maximum of 35 frames, over four sessions on two consecutive days of play. For the first 12 days of the tournament, until the end of the quarter-final stage, two tables are set up in the arena to allow two matches to be played concurrently. For the last five days of the competition (the semi-finals and final), only one table is used." This format ensured that the crowned champion was truly the best, having proven their skill and endurance over an extended period.

By editing all of this, they put on the tele only the great games and matches. The stinko safe contests never got on the air. When Steve Davis ran 120 and out on Jimmy White, when Judd Trump ran 147 on Ronnie O'Sullivan, that got on. It showed them playing at a level of pool gods. It created idols and heroes, everyone got rich, the players and the promotor Barry Hearn.

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The differing approaches highlight a fundamental challenge in broadcasting cue sports: balancing the need for commercial viability with preserving the sport's purity. While snooker maintained its traditional format to honor the game's depth, pool compromised its essence for television, ultimately undermining its appeal and alienating its fan base.

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In America, the call went out to kill straight pool and bring on 9-ball. They wanted a game of explosive breaks and run-out action. Viewers wanted to see a player break and run 8 racks in a row, to witness the new jump shot. It was all a nice idea, but it never really worked.

I love 9-ball, but I understand the game for what it is. It's nothing but a great game to gamble on. It's quick, explosive; you can end the game quickly with a combo on the 9. A great gambling game, the worst possible game to determine who the best player is. As a test of skill, it's a hopeless sad joke.

That is why nobody has ever been able to dominate at it, which has occurred in all other pool games and in all other sports. 9-ball is a luck game, that is the bottom line. Making it the championship game was the dumbest and most stupid thing ever done in pool.

10-ball has removed some of the luck from the slop game of 9-ball. But the same problems persist. Short races, ball jumping, gambling money needed to make entry fees, alternating breaks, chopping in the finals and a lack of prize monies.

The evolution of straight pool and snooker reflects an ongoing struggle between maintaining the purity of the sport and adapting to the needs of television and audiences. While dull matches and safety contests can showcase the strategic depth of these games, they also pose a challenge for broadcasters and risk losing viewer interest. As cue sports continue to evolve, finding a balance that honors both the integrity of the game and the excitement for audiences remains a critical challenge.