Stay Above the Balls

I mean that quite literally, and I really mean it. If there is any doubt at all, select the shot that will keep you above the balls. That's why clearing the pocket paths is so important as well as being sure to not break big secondaries from underneath. It will let you stay above trouble, allowing you to shoot shots that will return you to the safety of mid-table play.

(CAVEAT) Yes, going into the balls from underneath (secondary break) can be suicidal in many cases, and the temptation to break them up must be suppressed when an insurance ball is not there. But, if the insurance ball is there, take a good, hard look at doing it if leaving the CB with a clear path to the insurance ball looks likely, even if there is a way to break up the balls from the top side. The reason I say this is that breaking up a secondary pack or cluster from the top is not without its own pitfalls - specifically, it can drive too many (or even all, when the cluster is smaller in size) of the clustered balls below where they can serve as a break ball for the next rack, and, relatedly, the balls that are driven down toward or to the foot rail can become tied up and unplayable without being broken apart again. Breaking from underneath can be done. It's a very technical and controlled way to play the game. You'll need to accurately control the cue ball throughout the break (very tough) and then methodically pick the rack apart. It can be done, there is a chance of pushing balls up, also, which is bad for other reasons.

But with that caveat, playing from the top is the way to go.

Pushing the balls down is also a legitimate concern. Scratching can be to, when breaking from the top/sides. Big breaks are very hard to make without SOME risks. Some people say that there is only one correct way to play straight pool. I disagree, especially at the amateur level. Play to your strengths. That being said, I think at a lower than stellar level, staying above the balls will allow for bigger runs for the average player.