

## **THE CARE AND FEEDING OF A FINE POOL CUE**

**Written by Richard Black**

A pool cue is like a fine musical instrument or a luxury custom car, they're well-made; they CAN be abused, but they shouldn't be! I say they can be abused, because you can hit the hell out of them, you can really just stand there and bang on them all day long and they're going to take it, BUT you can do damage; you can do damage to a fine car or musical instrument, so treat it with respect and it'll treat you the same way. Also, like a car or musical instrument, you ought to take care of it. Get it taken care of by someone who knows what they're doing - not just any shade tree mechanic, because they can butcher it real fast. And that hurts. I think it will hurt you if you have to pay the repair bill.

I want to start at the tip of the cue and work my way down and tell you my feelings on how things ought to be done in taking care of a cue.

First of all - there are a lot of different tips, different hardnesses, and you'll find from experience which works best for you. There are American made tips, French made; leather composition, you can only find through experience what you like. But, one of the most important things is the contour of the tip. Some people say it should be the contour of a nickel, others say a dime. I think the dime is the right contour. You get better action on the ball if you maintain them that way.

On the sides; any piece of leather is going to flatten out as it's hit on repeatedly. So you've got to do two things:

First, take your finger, spit on it, wipe it around the edge of the tip and then on the table rail just polish it back up. What this does is case hardens the side of that tip. It will help prevent flaring out. Still it will leave the top of the tip the way you want it so it will hold the chalk. Some people use files and scuffers to keep that real fluffy look - I never touch it. As long as I can get the chalk to stay on there, that's all I want. I don't want to mess it up. Anytime you start fooling with it, you run the risk of tearing open the pores of the leather and making a sponge out of it. You can't hit the ball good with a sponge. Keep your leather firm, shaped right, and hold your sides down. Second, these things will flare out - you may not be able to come by here and get it shaped, so here's the way to shape it. Take a piece of masking tape or scotch tape and wrap it around your ivory ferrule. Take some sandpaper and form a little cup and then start rotating the shaft around and sanding that little flare off. You have the tape on there because if you have an ivory ferrule you don't want to be sanding a taper into that ivory ferrule. All you're doing is taking that leather off not hitting your shaft wood, not hitting your ferrule, just hitting

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the leather. After you've got that down and smooth all the way around - you're rid of that flare - then do the same thing - spit on it, polish it on the rail cloth, bring it up to a shine and now you've got it case hardened again, and every time you play, you ought to do that at least once during the day's session. Then take your tape off and take some steel wool and clean off any of the adhesive that stayed on. Then you can polish that on the table rail too.

Quite often you'll find that a little ridge develops between the wood and the ferrule. This is a common thing on any cue, because we've got two different organic materials that are going to expand and contract at different rates, lose moisture, gain moisture at different rates. You don't like to feel that as it goes through your bridge, so you may want to take it down periodically. I find 600 grit sandpaper will work that down in pretty short order. Don't get in a rush, because if you do, you're going to get the whole thing out of whack. Just take your time and work that ridge down over the whole area. Once you've done that, you're going to find that the wood is all clean right there and back where you've been playing it's dirty, so that is going to bother you. I would suggest that as your final thing you go ahead with the 600 sandpaper and clean the shaft off. You've been playing with the shaft for a while and you've done something very important; you've gotten some of the oils from your hands into the wood. That's real important to work in there. At this point what I suggest is to take some lighter fluid, swirl it on a rag and then rub the shaft real good. Get that lighter fluid into it. Let it dry five or ten minutes - the lighter fluid is going to help to pull any moisture inside the wood - out. Then take a little piece of leather and just rub the daylights out of that shaft - I mean get it HOT. This is one time you can get some heat to a cue. You normally shouldn't, but when you're rubbing the leather on here you'll find that it brings all the hand oils right back to the surface and you've got a real fine finish on the shaft. Under normal conditions, if you're not having to go through the sanding for a little ridge at the ferrule, and you want to clean your shaft, take a slightly damp soft cloth - wipe the grime off, because it's going to happen. I mean playing on any table where there's chalk, or powder and all, you're going to get your hands dirty and it will transfer to the shaft. Use a slightly damp cloth, then take a dry cloth and rub the daylights out of the shaft. If you want to take leather over that and work it up hot and you'll find that you've got a real fine playing surface.

Sometimes you will get a dent or ding in your shaft - you hit a light fixture, or something else. If you get a dent in your shaft, you can raise it out, because remember all that's happened is that the wood has dented in, so the wood's still there - all you have to do is

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bring it up. Take a piece of fairly coarse sandpaper, rub it up against that point where you want to raise it to break the finish. Take a drop of water on your finger, put it on the dent and let it dry about 15 - 20 minutes. That will raise the wood right back up. Take 600 grit sandpaper - don't ever use anything coarser than 600 sandpaper on a shaft - I don't like to use any sandpaper, but when you have to, that's the coarsest you should use. When the wood is dry and the dent has come back up, sand off that ding over a wide area and rotate it around a little bit, then the leather - polish it up and you're right back where you started.

Not always are you going to come over here and get a new tip put on, so putting a tip on, particularly with an ivory ferrule - you get the old one off and then you, very carefully, because that ferrule now has a very straight surface on there - and it's easy in trying to clean a ferrule off to get it lopsided. You don't want to do that. What I suggest there, is, very carefully take some coarse sandpaper and clean as much of that glue off as you can without angling the ferrule. Now take a tip and put the sandpaper down on something solid and sand the bottom of that tip. Be sure and blow the dust off of that tip before you glue it. Otherwise, all you're doing is just gluing the dust together. So, blow the dust off of it, put a little white glue onto the tip and then put the tip on. Get it situated in the center of your shaft and then have a wide rubber band handy and all you have to do is stretch the rubber band over the top of the tip, hold on to the sides of the shaft and then wrap it around like that (demo). That rubber band will now stay there, hold the thing, let it glue good and solid and in a few hours you can work that tip. You can do this yourself.

If you have a plastic ferrule I suggest Super Glue with a primer stick. There is a Super Glue for leather and wood, it works real good, but it's got to have the primer stick. You put the primer stick on the top of the ferrule and also on the leather and put the Super Glue on and you can just stand there and hold it with your finger because in 30 seconds, it's ready. But don't use that on ivory, because there'll be a chemical reaction with the ivory. O.K. Now we've got our tip on here and it's wider than the ferrule, so we want to trim it down. All you have to do there is get a hard surface and a sharp razor blade and work your way around taking slicing, easy cuts straight down from the ferrule. Don't cut the ferrule, and try very hard not to rip the leather open - that's why you want to take slicing cuts across there. You are leaving a lot of tiny little ridges around there that you'll now put a piece of tape around your ferrule, take your sandpaper, cup it, smooth it up again, spit on it, polish it on the rail cloth. Now you have to crown it. Take a coarse piece of sandpaper, cup it, and then stand there and slowly rotate the shaft and hold the

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same angle all the way around. Remember I said spit on the side of that tip BEFORE you shape your crown. The reason being that you want some hardness around that side, because you want a very straight, even edge right where the crown meets the side of the tip. Without spitting on it, you aren't going to be able to see it that well. Shape it into a contour of a dime then you'll find you have to spit on the side of the tip again and polish it up one more time, and you're there.

Some shafts will warp; there's no getting around it. All that you have to do is sight the shaft. In sighting the shaft, hold it where you're sighting against something dark; you'll get a much better view of it that way - find the high spot, then holding at the joint, put your hand on the high spot, the tip on the table, and you can press that thing right in. You just sort of iron it out with your hand, press it right in, sight it again - see that you've got it straight - and 90% of the time, that shaft will stay straight. It may not - you may have to go through it several times; if it doesn't stay straight, then it's just a bad piece of wood and you're going to have to get a new shaft.

Now, on the butt of the cue, you really only have two areas to be concerned about - the finished area and the wrap area. On the finished area, I like to take just some Pledge, spray it on, take a soft paper towel and wipe it off. That's just the hand oils and grime from the table that get on there. On the wrap - if you're playing with Irish Linen wrap - a lot of people are concerned because they get dirty - well, forget it - they are designed to get dirty; they're designed to absorb the moisture out of the hands, pick up the dirt from the table, etc. It's just going to happen - you can't keep it clean, so don't be concerned. Some people like to try and clean a wrap. I advise against it for two reasons: 1. You're putting moisture into the cue - you can't clean a wrap without putting moisture into it. That's bad. 2. You're going to be destructing the Irish Linen, because if you get in there with a toothbrush or whatever, trying to get all that dirt off, you're going to be tearing the fibres of the linen. When it happens, if it happens, about the only thing you can do to get it smooth is go ahead and rub it down with some 600 sandpaper and then take some paraffin, or wax paper, and scrub the wax paper over the thing real hard, then get a piece of a grocery bag - brown bag - and rub that wax in real good. By now you've got it all pressed down and you have a decent feeling again. But I really recommend against anybody cleaning their wrap, because all you're going to do is make a mess. It's better NOT to do it at all.

If the butt should warp, there's not much you can do about it. Any good cue maker has taken all precautions to prevent it, so if it happens, it's one of those unfortunate things

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and if it's severe enough to make you want to get a new cue, that's what you ought to do.

On a cue there are several things you do not want to do - don't bang it on the table. You see, some people break the ball, start at the 9 ball, and - wham - they're down here like this (demo) - just scar the daylights out of the cue, they wind up like this, and maybe leaning on it in both directions. Great way to kill a cue. I know I don't have to tell anyone - don't throw your cue. Surely no one would get mad about not making a ball. (laughter). I've also seen people get hot and want to bend it! Don't. Here's another thing - a lot of people will see you clap your cue to applaud somebody - they made a good shot, or whatever - what about the guy who misses his shot and goes - wham - down like that (demo). He says I didn't throw my cue. No he just took the rubber bumper in the bottom of it and blew it open, and where's the butt plate going to go? It's going to blow wide open, too.

I think the best case for a cue is the George because they're virtually air-tight, heavy PVC walls inside, heavy leather, heavy sheathing. If I've got to leave my cue in the car, that's what it's going to be in, but you don't want to leave a cue in a car. If it's like today - 100 degrees out there - you're looking at 200+ degrees inside the car. That eats into the glues, the wood, everything, and it's hard to go in and start playing with a cue that's had every piece of glue just softened up. Anytime you go into a radical temperature change and you want to use your cue, give it a chance to get acclimated. That may be 15, 20, 30 minutes, depending on how bad it is, but it's brutal on a cue to leave it in a car. You go in in the winter time from the cold into a warm room, you have to do the same thing - you have to let your cue warm up, slowly - not fast. You go up there and you start pounding on the cue in a 9-ball game, or something, from the cold then the glues are brittle, just frozen solid. You pop on that thing, and the glue breaks. I don't care if it's in the very heart of the cue, it's still brittle as it can be. So don't leave it in the car, and when you do, out of necessity, just give it a chance to get back.

I know you've all seen people rack the balls by putting the cue between their legs and coming over and leaning on it. If you really need a wash-board, that's a great way to get it. You'll just destroy the lower part of your shaft. When you're racking the balls, lay your cue out on the table, or if your opponent has rolled the balls up against your cue and you don't like it, then lean it up against the wall. Get it out of the way, but don't lean on it while you're up against the table.

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Something else I don't think anyone should do is loan their cue. There are a couple of reasons: One is, the other guy doesn't have his money invested in it; he's not going to be as careful with it as you are. He won't intentionally hurt it, but it happens - whether it's up into a light fixture, or leaning on it while racking the balls - whatever – and you will not be very happy about it. But then here's something most people wouldn't think about is, believe it or not, the way you hit a ball, you have trained that piece of leather on the tip. So, if you let somebody else hit with your tip he's going to hit differently, and when you step back up there to hit with that tip, that poor tip is thinking "What happened to me, I was all trained and now I'm not, I'm all confused." It'll respond differently; because he's got different facets built in there for different reasons whether bone structure, muscles, whatever. So, you're just better off not to loan Your cue. Protect your cue, it's the best tool you own to Play better pool.