

Got Balls?

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In 1994, I founded Elephant Balls, Ltd. with my friend Joe Oshins. We invented, patented, and marketed the first balls designed for serious practice: **Elephant Practice Balls®**. Master Instructors found the product and told us these were great for instructors. I didn't know there were instructors! Wowee, I thought, and headed off to billiard instructor school. Little did I suspect that teaching pool would become my life's work.

Several years in, my partner passed away and we sold the company. Elephant Balls is still producing the Practice Balls and other billiard products, and McDermott Cues is distributing them. For your convenience, Practice Balls are available at my website. Every player should have a set.

The idea behind Practice Balls is simple. The problem is it takes us a zillion hours of playing, practicing, and watching pool to really get clear on how balls behave. Meanwhile, **to play good pool, we must understand and control what the cueball is doing when it gets where it's going.** When it hits a ball or rail, is it rolling, skidding, backspinning, or in-between, does it have sidespin and how much, and how fast is it going? With a white cueball, we don't get much helpful visual feedback on how the ball is moving, and how it's changing as the shot unfolds. This is the key stuff, and it takes us forever to get it – if then.

I realized we could cut years out of our learning curve if we could actually see how the cueball behaves. Put some kind of marks on the cueball! I bought all the rubber balls WalMart had and began marking them up and rolling and spinning them to see what might be most helpful to players. Eventually, I arrived at the simple design that's still in production today.

Shortly after Practice Balls first came out, an instructor called me, upset and raving that "Your balls don't work!" He had a film crew on hand, shooting an instructional video. He kept trying to use the stripes on the Practice Balls to demonstrate his belief that sidespin on the cueball "gears" the opposite spin onto an object ball. His complaint was that the Practice Balls seemed to only transfer a few percent of the spin to the object ball. I had to tell him, "That's because the **Practice Balls show the truth, every shot, like it or not.**" His myth was busted and he was not happy. Pool players often have mistaken beliefs about ball behavior because they can't clearly see what a white cueball is doing, and of course, most haven't studied ball physics.

One cueball features a 13mm black stripe around the ball's equator. That stripe is a big enough graphic element that you can see what the ball is doing as it's moving. If you set up the stripe vertically, you can see how close you are to accurately hitting the vertical axis of the cueball. This is tougher than you think, and misperceiving the vertical axis is a very common problem among players. With the stripe set up flat, you can easily see draw wearing off, skidding, and rolling. Controlling the skid zone is key to good position play.



The red circle target area, centered on the black stripe, represents the miscue limit. It may look small, but that's because we think with the center of our tip and hit with the edge. You won't get a chalkmark outside the red circle without miscueing. The miscue limit is half the width of the ball (1-1/8").

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We use Practice Balls in pool school every day. When you practice with balls that give you precise feedback, and you pay very close attention, your understanding deepens and your confidence goes up. After all, to play better you have to understand how you did what you just saw. Cue precisely. Observe closely. Find your chalkmark in the target area on the ball to help resolve any mysteries about how the cueball just did what it did.

Speaking of cueball mysteries, here's an interesting challenge. Set up the black stripe on a 45 degree angle. Hit the stripe near the red circle on the lower half of the ball. Hit straight down table and watch the stripe. See if you can make sense of what you see. It's quite surprising.

Another great cueball is the **Aramith Pro Cup** cueball, *aka* the "measle" ball (on the right in the photo). It uses six red dots on the ball to give you wonderful visual feedback while playing. The spots won't help you *make* a shot, but they give you the opportunity to *learn* from every shot you witness.

Watch your cueball as closely as possible. Always ask yourself "**How did I do what I just saw?**" And get some balls, will ya?