

# **Thesis on the Comparative Differences Between Professional and Amateur Snooker Game Play and Table Management, and Introduction of a New Training Method to Emulate Professional Strategy at the Amateur Level**

by Don Sitarski, ACES Snooker Club

Snooker, like many or most other sports, games, pastimes, and athletic endeavors (herein simply referred to as “games”) is played by a variety of individuals with widely varying levels of skill. As a rule, these skill levels will often be categorized in a general sense, such as “this person is an 'A' player, that person is a 'B' player”, etc. In reality, however, actual skill levels are as individual as personalities and so such categorization is by necessity very broad, meaning for instance that two players might appear to be at a similar skill level based on the accepted grading system in place but may in fact be dissimilar players due to strengths in completely different skill sets. In regards to snooker, this may mean a very good potter may be a 'B' player despite a weakness in shot selection for a given situation. And a very good safety player may also be considered a 'B' player although he may have trouble potting any but the simplest of shots.

For competitive events between players, the ideal circumstance would be to only allow competition between similarly skilled players, i.e., 'A' players against other 'A' players, 'B' players against other 'B' players, etc. despite the potential problems of any grading system as stated above. An obvious and perfect example of this would be Major League Baseball in which specific criteria allow a player to compete at the “professional” level, somewhat lower level players compete at the “Triple A” level, or “Double A” level, etc. This of course would require a large enough pool of players that they may be grouped together accordingly. There are three major problems with this concept for many games from a practical standpoint.

- 1) Unless a game is long established among a large group of players and has a universally accepted method of defining skill level criteria (as in the example of Major League Baseball), any categorization of the players is simply subjective, prone to error, and not likely to be agreed upon by the participants.
- 2) If the pool of available players is not large enough, each skill level may have inadequate participation for meaningful competition. For example, in a bowling league with 40 participants, based on average scores, 30 are labeled as 'C' players, 8 as 'B' players, and 2 as 'A' players. The 'A' players obviously have very limited competition available.
- 3) Since personal skill improvement is often one of the primary goals of game participants, yet another subjective method must be established to allow the participants to “migrate” between the skill levels as their relative skill levels change. People play the game for different reasons. One player may remain a 'B' player for a decade playing once a week, while another may devote 4 hours a day every day to honing his craft to go from 'C' level up to 'A' in a single season, but who and how to judge such a transition?

In social, local game leagues with low participation rates then, it is likely necessary to make

allowance for players of varying ability levels to play against each other using some sort of "handicap" system. This is certainly not a new idea and probably comes as no surprise to anyone reading this white paper that the main purpose of this writing is to propose and justify a system of handicapping to be used specifically for the game of snooker unlike any other system used in the past. As this new system, to be referred to as "Provisional Colours", is so different than currently accepted norms, a detailed explanation is required as to why Provisional Colours is beneficial to *all* the players of the game, of high, middle, or low level abilities.

Handicapping may be accomplished in a variety of ways for various games, but historically, snooker handicap systems have essentially been to give the acknowledged weaker of the two players a "head start" of some essentially arbitrary number of points which would need to be made up for by the stronger player in order to win, the theory being that the stronger player is more adept at scoring points anyway and so may or may not then be able to overcome the score differential to win the frame. This is akin to a 50 yard dash foot race between a fast runner and a slow runner and simply giving the slow runner a 20 yard head start. The slow runner may cross the finish line first, he may rightfully claim, "I won!", but he will have accomplished nothing toward the goal of learning what to do in order to be able to run faster than his current slow pace. I will strive to demonstrate that this commonly accepted handicap system for snooker is inferior, is counterproductive to its intended purpose, and in fact is detrimental to a player who is striving to improve his performance and thereby improve upon his handicap rating. I will propose instead a system which, while not quite as simple as a "head start", is still easy to understand and incorporate, provides definitive feedback as to performance improvement, and can also be made to self adjust based on easily verifiable data as players' abilities improve.

### **The real purpose of using handicaps**

To begin, I believe that it is necessary to actually define "What is the purpose of any handicap system in particular regarding a snooker match between two individual players?" If asked this question, I believe that most snooker players would respond with what I believe to be the wrong answer, and that is, "To make things even between the players," or, "To level the playing field," or possibly, "To be fair." Instead, my personal answer to this question would be, "The purpose of a handicap system in snooker should be to make the match interesting." A secondary, also correct answer would be, "To allow an individual player a grading system to compare his abilities against others and to provide a 'yardstick' with which to measure his improvement."

If one is under the impression that a handicapping system should make things "even", then in its very simplest form, the handicap will essentially relegate the match to an outcome with no more meaning than the flip of a coin. Why play a snooker match at all? If the handicap number is at perfection, then each player would have exactly a 50/50 chance of winning or losing the frame at hand and eventually the match. And if the handicap number is too high or too low, then one of the players may possibly win every frame of the match by being on the right side of the "mistake" that was made in the handicap number the first place.

Using the "head start" number as a handicap is basically just an arbitrary guess based on some acknowledged "expert's" opinion as to the strength of any given player. Then, later, this number will likely be adjusted based on the outcome of matches and the fact of whether the

frame score results were relatively even (such as the frames won on pink or black) or the frame scores were lopsided (such as frames won with reds still remaining on the table). I contend that while this line of reasoning seems intuitive, it is **absolutely** incorrect and backwards for players striving to improve their performance and skill level.

Instead of being “even”, I believe both players would prefer for the game to instead be “interesting” as viewed from their own perspective. For the stronger (lower or non-handicapped) player, a “head start” handicapped snooker match with a weaker player may well be uninteresting because the opponent's weaker potting skills and lack of strategic knowledge can make the game tedious. Unlike a true individual sport, (for instance consider golf,) snooker is a game in which your opponent's every action has a direct effect on your own game. Which ball or balls your opponent chooses to play at or moves about the table (whether accidentally or on purpose) will require for you to constantly alter your own game strategy based upon whatever the current lie of the balls happens to be at your every visit to the table. On the golf course, other than blatant unsportsmanlike conduct, nothing that one's opponent can do will have any effect on one's own performance. On the green baize, on the other hand, if a low skilled player simply bangs the balls around without a good perception of what the intent should be, many balls will end up in difficult positions against the cushions or tied up with other balls, and the frame will advance in a slow and boring manner for the stronger player who may well get no chance to showcase his talents compiling breaks. The “head start” handicapped match may be uninteresting for the weaker (high handicapped) player because the stronger player, recognizing that the handicap has left him a large deficit in score to recoup, is likely to play strong safety unless a good pot is nearly certain to start a good break. He will need to avoid attempting risky pots instead choosing caution to avoid the potential of an even larger deficit, and more importantly, fewer reds available with which to overcome that deficit. The weaker player may well constantly find himself in extremely difficult positions with virtually no chance of a pot in sight. The “head start” handicap method does nothing to avert these unappealing aspects of the frame. Even if in the end, the frame comes down to the final pot of the black, neither player is likely to be happier or wiser for the experience.

## **The Professional Game versus The Amateur Game**

Completely ignoring the concept of handicaps for a moment, let us examine an average professional frame of snooker as it develops as compared to the amateur equivalent. It is assumed that anyone who has shown the interest to read this white paper has surely witnessed snooker at a professional level, whether live, on television, or any other media, and it is also assumed that the reader is an avid, though amateur snooker player in his own right. It is my contention that there are three primary differences between an average frame of snooker at the professional level versus an average frame of snooker at the common amateur level (herein referred to as “amateur” and not to include high level amateur competition which may be considered to be nearly the same as professional):

- 1) Time – While there are certainly frames that may require significantly longer, professional frames of snooker will commonly complete in about fifteen minutes or so. On the other hand, there is no real average frame time for amateur level as this will depend entirely on the actual individuals playing. It can be said though that amateur frames are rarely shorter in duration than 30 minutes and can often extend to nearly an hour or even longer. The seemingly obvious reason for this would be that professionals

tend to score higher and faster, potting balls much quicker to bring the game to its conclusion. However, upon closer examination, that is only a small part of the reason for the time difference. I contend that professionals clear the table faster than amateurs because their pots are very often much easier to make than the pots of the amateur so the professional will make more pots and faster. How can that be? Of course, professionals have the skill to make the occasional very difficult pot when necessary, but the real strength of a professional snooker player is in his positional play which means that following a difficult opening pot to get a break started, the professional follows up with pot after pot always leaving himself a simple shot to follow. And thus the table is cleared quickly. The amateur by contrast may start with a difficult red as well (we have all made “amazing” shots that we are very proud of, and in fact we do so on a fairly regular basis), but with poor positional ability, will have little in the way of a colour to continue. Even if the opening colour is made, the next red is often difficult, and so, very quickly into the frame, the balls become scattered, colours off their spots, and pots become fewer and farther between leading to a long, drawn out, low scoring frame.

- 2) Score – To elaborate on a point made above, the amateur mindset generally seems to be that if a frame is decided on the pink or black ball, it must have been a “good game”. After all, it came all the way down to the end, could have gone either way, right? In fact, a professional frame rarely ends with one of the last remaining balls on the table. Much more common is a concession of frame either with reds remaining or after a partial or full colour clearance left snookers required a long while ago. Of course, one player score in professional play will quite often go to triple digits and it is not at all uncommon for one of the players to be whitewashed with zero points on the board. Contrary to the popular amateur myth, a frame won on the pink or black is probably not indicative of a good game. Instead, it is much more likely indicative of a couple of snooker players who tend to have difficulty potting more than just a couple of balls in a row. And that results in one player leading by a few points, then the other player taking a narrow lead, then the first recaptures the lead, etc. And so it goes to the end. A common progression of a professional match scoreline will be Player A winning a frame by several dozen points, then Player B coming back to win one or more frames by several dozen points, then Player A again, etc. with the occasional “scrappy” frame in the mix as well that may come down to the final colours when neither player could get in with an opportunity to score. The amateur game is virtually always “scrappy”--not because there was no chance to score, but because when there was opportunity to score, the amateur was unable to do so. So for amateur play, winning or losing frames on the pink or black regularly should *not* be considered as a badge of honor. Instead, such a circumstance should be viewed as a very strong signal the players' average PPV (points per visit) is in dire need of improvement. The professional mindset understands that the underlying strategy of snooker should focus on winning the MATCH; there is no dishonor in losing an individual frame even by a score of a hundred or more points to zero. Congratulate the opponent for a frame well played and move on to the next one.
- 3) Strategy (and Spots) – It is common fantasy among amateur players to survey the lie of the table before them and think or even say aloud, “Okay, so what would (insert professional player's name) do in this situation?” The truth of the matter is that the professional in all likelihood would never find themselves in that situation to begin with. The professional game progresses in a very controlled manner, generally, only with balls moving when they are intended to be moved. In a circumstance where control

slips away and a scoring ball, say black, gets tied up with reds or goes tight against a cushion, the professional will actively look for any opportunity to bring that ball back into play (unless doing so would be greater benefit to the opponent). Aggressive offensive shots such as cannoning into a trouble ball when potting red to bring it out, or aggressive safety shots such as specifically playing a red toward that black while bringing white back to baulk, whatever it may take to bring that scoring ball back into play so that it may be utilized later in the frame. On the other hand, the amateur game tends to slip into chaos, and usually very quickly. We have all been in a frame where blue is knocked to the side cushion on the opening shot, then doesn't move again until the frame is near completion. Have you ever seen that happen professionally? The amateur, with limited control of the white ball position after a pot, will tend to take a red, then select whatever colour happens to be the easiest and most readily available from whatever table position is left. And if that colour is not a simple, straightaway pot, it may well also end up in some unfortunate position like the blue following the break off. Amateurs tend to not develop difficult balls to better positions either through ignorance (not understanding how to, nor even realizing that they should do so) or fear (that in the attempt, they will leave open shots for the opponent to steal away the ball thus developed). To watch a professional frame, more often than not, the colours will be on their spots when the reds are cleared. This is critical to the success of a high break full clearance as the professional has practiced clearing colours from spots thousands, even tens of thousands of times in the past. If the colours are scattered around the table, even in relatively open positions, the full clearance is much less likely. In the amateur frame, finding all the colours still on their spots after the reds are cleared is about as rare as finding a four leaf clover. During the course of the frame, colours on their spots (or at least near, due to occasional nudging) is an absolute critical component to the higher average frame speed of the professional game as seen in bullet point 1) and the higher frame scores of bullet point 2). Colours continuously off spots lead to long, tedious, low scoring frames. Often in the amateur frame, when the colour clearance portion of the frame begins, the frame may still continue for another 15 to 30 minutes while the players have to chase down and play safe on every ball because so often, many of the colours are against cushions at this stage.

### **Learning to view the frame through the eyes of the professional**

So to simply sum up the above three major points, the professional player has painstakingly learned how the cue ball will travel when it contacts the object at any given angle, the professional player has learned to manipulate that travel line to position the cue ball such that the next pot will be a simple shot, and the professional player is particularly strong at potting colours directly off their spots meaning, by extension, that the colours remain on their spots throughout most of the frame. Not mentioned above is the fact that, if a professional runs a century break, nearly every colour of that break was potted off its spot (the break may have required several "sloppy" colours around the table that needed to be cleaned up in preparation for the full table clearance). Amateurs, on the other hand, tend to pot a large percentage, perhaps even most, of the colours of the frame from not on spot, i.e., from whatever position they happened to end up when they were either missed in a pot attempt, or else knocked about from uncontrolled play.

Let there be no mistake: every professional player has in the past and continues in the present to put in countless hours of practice to keep at the top of his game. Snooker is what

they do to earn a living so the tedious hours of practice are in essence how their paycheck is earned. Amateurs, on the other hand, are not looking to turn the game into a job. They may put in some short practice time with a few drills on occasion, but mostly they are looking for friendly competition to ply their skills against others.

So can there be a way to simulate professional game play even between two mediocre amateurs? The short answer of course is no, that is why they are professionals, but, with certain concessions, two amateur players may have a frame against each other that will contain many of the elements that are described in detail above. Specifically, yes, it is possible for amateurs to 1) complete frames in as little as 15 to 20 minutes 2) have one of the two players scoring 60, 70, even 80 points for the win (while the opponent may well score 20 or less), and 3) regularly reach the end game with colors on or near their spots and so perhaps run the occasional full table clearance.

### **The “Provisional Colours” System**

With this concept, a viable handicap system may also be developed to create interesting play between players of vastly different abilities. Methods of handicaps in various games can take on whatever form the players of the game wish. It need not be limited to awarding numerical point values. Remember, the purpose of the handicap is not to make things even between the players (because that simply cannot happen when players have different skill levels); the handicap is to make things interesting. So let your imagination run wild with methods of handicapping various games.....

If I wished to throw darts against Phil Taylor, how could we make the match interesting for both of us? I think that Phil and I would agree that if I were to play him straight up, it would not be very interesting for either of us. Even if he gave me a hundred to start, I still would not stand a chance. So what “number” handicap would actually make it interesting? The true answer is that there is none. If he gave me 499 to start and all I needed was a double ace to finish, he would probably still win the game virtually every time. We have to look at other avenues to handicap besides just giving a certain number of points.

Perhaps, I could stand the usual distance of a bit under 8 feet from the board, but he will surely be off his game if his line is 11 or 12 feet from the board so that might be interesting to see how he deals with that handicap. Or perhaps, we could throw our darts at two entirely different boards: his could be professional standard, but I can have a special dart board that is exactly double in size so my target zones are much bigger. This might actually give me a chance of managing to double out. Maybe I could even be out in nine darts on occasion. The point is, despite our tremendous difference in skill level, we can play a game that may not exactly be Darts as it is played at the professional level, but it does have the look and feel of darts, especially in the case that Phil is throwing at a standard board. And as my skill level increases over time, my board size can shrink in response until maybe one day my board will properly become standard size and I can give Phil a fair game without any handicap at all.

In a nutshell, this is the idea behind Provisional Colours; a game that is not exactly snooker, but in many ways, it has the look and feel of the professional game. And as players' performances improve, the handicaps can be automatically adjusted (like reducing the size of the dart board) in order to bring the players closer and closer to scratch (no handicap at all) which should of course be the ultimate goal.

To begin using Provisional Colours, each player is first assigned a handicap number which will fall in the range between 0 and 7. Of course the best player will be the benchmark and assigned 0, but as will be seen later, if 0 is not appropriate for this individual, the number will work its way upward automatically. To initially calculate other players' handicaps, they may be approximated by adding one Provisional Colour for about every 7 points that would be in the common handicap system (i.e., if a stronger player rated "0" will be giving 20 points to a weaker player in common handicaps, then in Provisional Colours, the weaker player is a 3; if the stronger player carries a rating of "1" and is giving 20 points, the weaker player should be a "4"). Within league play, all players will retain their numbers, NOT subtract out the difference between them for their match. So if a Provisional Colours 3 plays a 2, they will both be entitled to those Provisional Colour numbers during the match, DO NOT SUBTRACT down to "1" and "0".

With Provisional Colours, both players begin the frame from zero points as in a proper frame of snooker, rather than a "head start" at the beginning of the frame for the weaker player. (Following the concept that the purpose of a handicap is primarily to make the match more interesting, "head start" points may also be appropriate depending on the circumstance.) As the frame progresses, the players may have opportunity to claim additional handicap points to be added to their scores in certain circumstances to be explained in detail later. Whether these points are added to the score will depend on the player's game play decisions and shot execution. The root concept of Provisional Colours is that following the pot of the Red, a Provisional Colour is assumed to be the next play unless the striker verbally declares, "Natural (name of Colour)". If the striker pots the nominated colour as normal, then the Provisional Colour points remain unclaimed, the player simply receives points for the pot and continues the break without the loss of one of his Provisional Colour values. BUT...if the player fails to pot his Provisional Colour, he will still continue his break, and he may be able to claim those handicap provisional points based on the outcome of the next shot, for which Red will again be the ball on (exactly as if he had potted Colour in the first place). If the striker played the Provisional Colour wisely and made specific effort to properly leave himself position on the next Red, then the next stroke should be simple. To claim the handicap points associated with the missed pot Provisional Colour, this next Red MUST be potted at which time the previous Colour and the just potted Red are then added to the break score and the break continues on another colour. The Provisional Colour count for the player is then reduced by one (in other words, that Provisional Colour is "claimed"). Another Provisional Colour will then be assumed for the next stroke if there are still any available. As always, the striker may nullify the Provisional Colour play by verbally declaring "Natural (Colour)" prior to the stroke. If a natural colour is declared, then the stroke following is identical to normal snooker, no special rules at all; the striker may play for the pot or play a safety stroke off that colour if so desired. The third and final possibility when striker plays a Provisional Colour is that the pot of the colour is missed, but then the player also fails to pot the following Red, so that the handicap points still remain unclaimed, the break is finished, and player receives any break points acquired up to, but not including, the missed Provisional Colour stroke. This system while initially seeming complicated will become indoctrinated in very short order and will surely be quite simple to understand within just a single frame or so. A major advantage of this system is that "normal" snooker between unequal players means that the "good" player will spend much more time at the table because he is much more likely to pot balls and continue his breaks. In "normal" snooker with traditional handicaps, a weak player is simply given a lot of points at the beginning of the frame, but does not actually spend much time at

the table because he is very likely to miss so many pots, and his stronger counterpart is certain to pot most of the Reds. The weak player in this scenario just stands around watching the good player pot balls and counting his score. Provisional Colours allows this weaker player opportunity to improve and spend more time at the table with this “second chance” concept. Provisional Colours has proven to lead to rapid skills improvement in my experience as it greatly promotes the understanding of proper positional play.

Upon first reading, the above paragraph will surely seem complicated so following are examples of the ONLY THREE possible outcomes when a Provisional Colour is played:

- 1) Player A has a Provisional Colour available and pots Red. Break is at 1. Provisional Colour is assumed. Player A pots Black, break is at 8, no handicap has been claimed (Player A retains whatever his Provisional Colour value had been before this sequence). Player A continues break as normal now playing for another Red. This is absolutely unchanged from normal snooker.
- 2) Player A has a Provisional Colour available and pots Red. Break is at 1. Provisional Colour is assumed. Player A misses the pot with the Black rattling the jaws of the pocket, but in attempting the stroke, the striker interpreted the roll of the cue ball perfectly leaving himself very well set up to pot a following Red. The proper score call at this point is, “Provisional. Break is at 1.” Player A may have the opportunity to claim the point value of the Black (7 points) toward his score. However, this handicap point value claim is not automatic; it is dependent on the outcome of the next stroke. Player A then attempts to pot the next Red exactly as he would if he had actually potted Black on the previous stroke. Player A pots the Red and the break continues. Break score is now at 9 (1 plus handicap 7 plus 1), and the player's Provisional Colour value is decreased by one for this frame (for instance, if Player A started the frame as a “3”, he now has 2 more Provisional Colours available for this frame).
- 3) Player A has a Provisional Colour available and pots Red. Break is at 1. Provisional Colour is assumed. Player A misses the pot with the Black rattling the jaws of the pocket, but in attempting the stroke, the striker interpreted the roll of the cue ball poorly so that there is not now a good, simple play at Red to follow. The proper score call is, “Provisional. Break is at 1.” and Player A continues his break as in 2) above. At this point, with poor position, the striker may abandon his effort to claim his potential handicap points and simply play a safety off the next Red. On the other hand, he may, if he wishes to attempt to pot some difficult Red anyway in an effort to claim those handicap points. In any case, if the following Red is potted, whether on purpose or by fluke, the situation is that of bullet point 2) above, but if the following Red is NOT potted, the break ends with score being as last called (in this case, break is 1) and the Provisional Colours count remains what it had been before the sequence (no handicaps were claimed).

There are a few more specifics to be noted. As can be seen in the above examples, handicap point values can only be claimed by the action of actually potting a following Red. Therefore, it follows that when there are no Reds remaining on the table, no Provisional Colours can be played. After potting the last Red, a “natural” colour must be played even if the player has unused Provisional Colours remaining in the frame. However, if there is one Red remaining, but then a foul and “free ball” situation arises, the incoming striker (assuming that he still has Provisional Colours available,) may pot a free ball, nominate a Provisional Colour, and if he misses the pot of that colour, he may still claim the handicap points IF he pots the following



last Red.

It is possible that a striker may play a Provisional Colour with literally every single colour that he attempts to pot throughout the course of a frame. For instance, if a player is rated as a "3", and in a particular frame, he happens to pot a total of 7 out of the fifteen Red balls. After every single one of those seven Reds, he is assumed to be playing Provisional Colours (he is obligated to declare "Natural Colour" is that is his intent), he proceeded to pot every one of those colours. Not a single one of those handicap values were claimed; in fact, he finished the frame still retaining 3 possible Provisional Colours. The "claiming" of (and thereby, reduction of the available) Provisional Colours will only occur when the striker plays a Provisional Colour, misses the following pot of that colour, but proceeds to pot the following Red (the situation in bullet point 2) above).

A player is certainly not required to play a Provisional Colour after potting a Red if he doesn't wish to in a given circumstance, though if Provisional Colours are available, they are assumed to be the play unless verbally declares verbally otherwise. For instance, following the pot of a long "shot to nothing" where the White returns to the baulk area in no useful position to continue the break, the striker may simply nominate a colour as usual and play a roll up safety behind a baulk colour if he believes that is the more appropriate shot for the situation. In such case, the striker is obligated to declare, "Natural Yellow" (or whatever colour). Or perhaps the player does not want to "waste" a Provisional Colour on a low value baulk colour, instead preferring to save the Provisional Colours for higher value Blues, Pinks, and/or Blacks so he may prefer to simply attempt to pot, say, a "Natural Green" which, by rule, will require verbal declaration as such.

When the striker plays a Provisional Colour after he pots a Red, what that truly means is that he is GUARANTEEING that his break will continue after this stroke (unless he commits a foul), whether the pot is made or not, although he may or may not be rewarded with the handicap point value of the colour. What end that will accomplish is that it will relieve the pressure of the pot from the mind of the striker so that he can be freed to fully devote his concentration to how the cue ball will move during the course of the stroke, and so the player will ultimately gain a much better understanding of how to leave himself better position on the next Red. Over time, this will allow lower level players to learn proper positional play and improved snooker overall. In many "normal" situations, not utilizing Provisional Colours, an amateur attempting to pot a colour is so focused on trying to be certain of the pot that he may devote little effort or concentration on positional aspect of the stroke for the following Red. Or on the other hand, he may be so worried that the pot is difficult so he will purposely NOT position himself well for a good following Red just in case he does miss that colour pot. The Provisional Colours System allows the amateur player to free himself of the pressure of an individual pot in order to learn how to string simple pots together for a sustained, high value break.

### **The Big Dart Board: How Provisional Colours is similar to, but not exactly, Professional Snooker**

Remember that, at the end of it all, Provisional Colours is a skills development system and can also be used to handicap play between unequal players. It is not meant to allow players to play the game exactly like professionals because that is an unrealistic goal. So for amateur players to have game play resembling that of professionals, concessions (such as the "big

dart board” example) must be accepted. In the case of snooker, the concession that is required of amateurs is to humbly admit that we do not have the control of cue and object ball positions that the professionals do. Therefore, if we incorporate that concession into our skills development system, the amateur game will begin to resemble the professional game, the amateur player will begin to think like the professional player, and, over time, the amateur player's skills will improve allowing any individual's handicap level to gradually be lowered and eventually eliminated completely. To accomplish this lofty goal is a lengthy process, not something that can be accomplished overnight.

In order to simulate the ball control of the professional snooker player, it is required that the amateur players in a frame also display such control. Of course, this would best be done with amazing talent and incredible skill, but until we amateurs reach that level, we will have to be content with a little bit of assistance in this area. That assistance will come through the Provisional Colours System. When a Provisional Colour is played, the striker will play the stroke with every honest intention of potting the ball, but his greater focus will be leaving the cue ball in proper position on the next Red. Therefore, by the rules of the system, if he does miss the pot of that colour, we will concede him those handicap points AS LONG AS he is able to pot the following Red and thereby continue the break. However, when he attempted that pot of the colour, he had every intention of actually potting it, therefore, we will also concede that the colour (after allowing for it to fully come to rest,) will also be respotted to its proper position exactly as if it had been actually potted in the first place. By this action, the colours will remain under good control of the players and not find themselves so frequently in the difficult positions as demonstrated in the “Professional versus Amateur Game” section. By having the colours routinely available on their spots, the lower handicap player will now have opportunity to make significant breaks rather than spending so much time chasing after the bad colours trying to bring them back into play. And now in a positionally controlled environment, the high handicap player will begin to understand what it is like to truly “compile” a break rather than just haphazardly stringing several pots together as is the usual case for high handicap players.

### **Player development and the reduction of Provisional Colours**

Professionals tend to play snooker with emphasis on potting balls, scoring high breaks, and having very high confidence in their ability to accomplish these things. Amateurs tend to play the game timidly, with much greater emphasis on safety play. Generally, amateurs are more fearful that poor safety will give away higher scoring potential to the opponent than they are confident in their own ability to score. Normally, to fully take on a pot of a colour is an inherently risky stroke because, not only does the striker wish to pot the colour, but also to leave an easy Red next meaning that if he misses the pot, but gets the desired position, he is automatically handing a good scoring opportunity to his opponent. If he lacks confidence in the pot of the colour, he will very likely play poor position as well or might decide to play a safety off the colour, thereby pushing yet another colour to the cushion and out of active play. By encouraging offensive strategy over safety by lowering inherent risk in the shot on a colour, Provisional Colours will put the high handicap player frequently in the position of playing for that professional leave on the next Red even when he is not perfectly placed for a high confidence shot at the colour. The colours remain in the game and the high handicap player gradually becomes comfortable with the offensive minded strategy. Even if the Provisional Colour stroke goes awry and there is no good leave on the next Red, the player can still choose to play a safety with no harm, but at least now, that safety will be off of a red,

helping to keep the scoring colours in play for a continuing offensive minded frame.

Adjustment of the Provisional Colour numbers becomes a simple matter based on the scoring level of the handicapped player. Using this skills development system, the Provisional Colour player should find himself beginning to score breaks in at least the twenties and thirties with some regularity by claiming handicap points as required. Occasionally, these breaks will be made with no claim of handicap points (i.e., the colours were potted naturally without claim of Provisional Colour necessary); this would be termed a “natural break” as opposed to a “handicap break”. To automatically adjust handicap values, plateaus will need to be established to trigger either addition or subtraction of the Provisional Colour value for a player for a frame as required (bearing in mind that each new frame will reset the Provisional Colour value for each player back to its current start point). For instance, in the ACES Snooker League, participants play matches of five full frames against a scheduled opponent (not a “best of...” or “race to...” format). It is expected that every player in the league should be capable of compiling breaks of 21 points or better in one or two out of each of those five frames. (21 is chosen as a plateau because that is a simple average of three reds and three pinks whether a natural or handicap break.) If a player compiles such breaks in three separate frames, that is considered a signal that his Provisional Colour value may be too high and will thereby be reduced by one. To gain a handicap point value is not as easy as losing one however; to have a Provisional Colour added to your value will require going the course of two matches (ten frames) with less than two frames scoring breaks of 21 or better. These plateaus will be subject to change as more data about the Provisional Colours System is learned. In this way, it is expected that every player's proper Provisional Colour value will evolve naturally so that the benchmark handicap zero player may rise to a one or higher over the course of time and weaker players starting at a value of 7 should develop skills to bring their number down some. Note that these plateaus are based on FRAMES with breaks of 21 or better. Snooker is a game of momentum, whether positive or negative. It is very common for a player to score a break of, say, 25 or 30, be very comfortable with his position in the frame and so rattle off another break of 25 or more before the frame is completed. This will only count as a single instance of “21 or better” for the purpose of handicap adjustment.

Using Provisional Colours, you will find that frame scores may swing dramatically from one player to the other, and oftentimes, a player (or players) will finish the frame not having actually claimed any handicap points anyway, either because he potted his Provisional Colours or because with the other player dominating the frame, he never had much opportunity to score. As an example of the possible score swing, myself personally, I was in a match in which I lost one frame by a score of 84 to 2, then returned the favor the following frame by winning the next with the margin of 65 to 24. This type of situation is to be expected, as referenced in the Professional Game versus Amateur Game section. This type of frame swing is actually much more “professional” than frequently winning on the Blue, Pink, or Black which so often occurs at the amateur level.

### **Requirements and Restrictions of the Provisional Colours System**

Common practice in snooker is that, after a Red is potted, if the intended colour to be played at is clear and obvious, often the player will make no audible verbal declaration. However, with Provisional Colours, then striker will need to make a decision with EVERY POTTED RED as to whether he wishes to play his chosen colour as Provisional or Natural. When the game is played properly, the handicapped striker ought to be playing the colour as Provisional in

nearly all cases; it only makes sense. The striker is really just playing “normal” snooker....he should align on his colour and play at it with every expectation that he will pot it and continue on to play at his next Red. Provisional Colours should aspire to not disrupt this thought process at all. Now, of course, a low level amateur will very often miss the pot of that colour; Provisional Colours acts as an “insurance policy” of sorts. Even though the pot of colour is missed, the striker maintains a positive mindset and now plays a stroke at his next Red. This begins a positive mental spiral as more and more frequently, what occurs on the table surface becomes exactly what the striker pictured in his mind beforehand and the Provisional Colours eventually are no longer necessary.

This positive spiral is the polar opposite of learning snooker in the “normal” way. Far too often, an inexperienced player approaches the shot at colour with a negative mindset, thinking that he is not likely to pot the colour and therefore, the approach to the stroke is different and the position for the next Red is very likely to be poor whether the pot is successful or not. And when this striker misses his pot of the colour, his mindset becomes, “Well, at least I didn't leave a simple Red for my opponent!” And this then sets up a NEGATIVE mental spiral in his mind which will be more and more difficult to overcome in the future. For this player, it just becomes “normal” to not leave good position on Red following the pot of his colour. This is exactly the poor mindset that Provisional Colours is seeking to replace.

So when a player has any of his allotted Provisional Colours remaining, it will simply be assumed that after pot of Red, he WILL be playing a Provisional Colour UNLESS HE VERBALLY DECLARES that the following stroke is to be considered as “Natural”. As for the Referee (or the opponent acting as referee), there are certain verbal cues that should be used when calling aloud the break score for the striker. These will be discussed later in this document.

When replacing a missed pot Provisional Colour to its spot, it is required to let all balls come to rest before retrieving the colour and returning it to its spot (or the designated spot if its own spot is occupied). This process may be expedited if it is perfectly clear that there will be no more possible collisions with other balls so the Provisional Colour may be retrieved while it is still in slow motion if desired. There will be times when the striker plays his Provisional Colour with intention of leaving on a specific Red, the missed pot may rebound from the pocket and strike that Red, thereby changing the table position in an unexpected way and perhaps causing the following Red to become unpottable. Such a circumstance is unfortunate, but it should simply be considered as “part of the game” in the same way as when a fluke pot occurs. In a similar vein, if the nominated Provisional Colour ball is not potted in the intended pocket, but rebounds and flukes into another pocket, it is exactly the same as a natural pot with points scored so that the handicap points remain unclaimed and the break continues as normal.

**The specific colour that may be nominated as a Provisional Colour is restricted.** The nominated colour must be available in a clear, straight line contact with the cue ball. The nominated colour must be available to pot in a clear, straight line to a pocket. The striker must endeavor to actually pot the nominated colour. The striker may not play a double, a cushion first, an in-off, or any other unusual shot with a nominated Provisional Colour. If such a shot is the only shot available to the striker (for instance, if the cue ball is snookered on every colour), then a normal colour nomination must be made, but it may **not** be played as a Provisional Colour. The Provisional Colours System is intended to allow the striker to devote

attention to the positional aspect of a shot. However, by the rules of Provisional Colours, the striker must make an honest and reasonable effort to pot the nominated ball. The nomination may well be a very difficult pot; for instance, if the cue ball is near yellow spot, the striker may play (no verbal declaration required) Provisional Blue which is on spot and attempt to pot it in a top pocket (near black), while at the same time, leaving the cue in the middle of the table for a Red near a middle pocket. This is admittedly a very difficult shot and the striker may well miss by quite a distance, but it is a perfectly reasonable shot and as an honest effort was made, it is allowed. As to judging this “honest effort”, ideally, a referee would be required. Without a referee, the “honest effort” judgment is then left to the players who are expected to treat the situation as gentlemen and consider previous experience with such shots. In general, when a Provisional Colour is played, it is expected that the power of the shot will be such that, if not potted, the intended colour is at least driven to one of the adjacent cushions of the intended pocket, and within perhaps one or two ball diameters of the pot. (“Ball diameters” is a better unit of measure for this purpose than “inches” because, for instance, if the object ball is, say, one inch from the cushion but four feet away from the intended pocket, in the pot attempt, the object ball may strike the cushion a distant two feet away from the pocket, but it may have been within a quarter ball diameter of being potted because of the very narrow angle of approach.)

Another potential controversial circumstance in which intent must be judged is in the speed of a Provisional Colour shot. As stated above, it is expected that the object ball will be driven to a cushion if not actually potted, but, as we all know, there are times when a soft stroke is required so judgment again must be made. For instance, if the situation calls for a “soft pot” of the black, and the striker rolls the black ball within several inches of the pocket, this should be accepted by the opponent as an “honest effort” although the cushion was not reached. On the other hand, if the striker wants to be sure he leaves himself without covering the next red hanging on the jaws of a pocket so he strikes the black such that it only rolls ten or twelve inches off its spot, then that was quite clearly not an honest effort to pot the black ball. Likewise, if a miscue occurs during the course of the Provisional Colour stroke, this will be treated as failure to make an honest effort, or a foul if proper contact is not made (unless of course the miscue is minor so that the Provisional Colour actually travels a reasonable line and distance to the intended pocket). Another possibility is that the Provisional Colour in traveling the general line toward the intended pocket may also contact some other ball that may have been near to (but not directly) interfering with the intended line. Again, this may well alter the anticipated lie of the table afterward for the striker (similar to the unfortunate Provisional Colour rebound example above), but, as a reasonably attempted shot, it should be accepted.

In a refereed match, the referee shall keep a running tally of the current break score, indicating handicaps and potential handicaps as required. For instance, a typical break may be called, “**One**” (the player then lines up on his intended Provisional Colour, Black for this example, but misses pot), “**...provisional, break is one...**” (after the missed pot colour is spotted), (next Red is then potted) “**...eight, nine...**” (the Referee first calls that the previous handicap points for Provisional Black have been added (“eight”) immediately followed by another point for the Red (“nine”); if a marker is keeping score, one Provisional Colour value is subtracted from those available to the player), “**...sixteen...**”, (called immediately as the Black was potted naturally), etc.

If the “honest effort” rule for Provisional Colours is judged to have been broken, it is not a

case where a penalty is assessed, it simply ends the striker's visit. The referee shall not call "foul" and the opponent will not receive penalty points.

A final note about the "honest effort" requirement of Provisional Colours: as in all things related to snooker, the players are expected to conduct themselves as gentlemen and not wait for the referee to call or for the opponent to challenge if a breach of the rules is committed. As in committing a "push stroke" or some similar situation, when the player has done something wrong, the player knows he has done something wrong and it certainly should not be necessary for someone else to tell the player he has done something wrong.

If a foul occurs during a shot in which a Provisional Colour was nominated, penalties will be assessed as usual with the difference that the Provisional Colour thus nominated will be returned to its own or the required designated spot prior to the next stroke. The situation is to be treated as if the Provisional Colour was potted, then the foul occurred. For instance, Provisional Black is nominated, the pot is missed, but the cue ball falls into a pocket for a foul. The referee will call foul, any points from the striker's visit to the table will be awarded, and the Black will be returned to its spot prior to the next stroke. Another example would be if the nominated colour is very close to another ball, say Red, and the Red ball is struck first before the Provisional Colour. Foul, assessment of points, and the colour is returned to its spot after coming to rest and prior to the next stroke.

Provisional Colours allows for a player to attempt shots that he otherwise would not such as the object ball one inch from the cushion and four feet from the pocket in the example above. It encourages offensive strategy, as it encourages regularly bringing the scoring balls back into play whereas with normal snooker, scoring balls knocked into bad positions will have a tendency to remain out of play for most of if not the entire frame.

## Summary

Snooker is a pastime enjoyed by millions. We watch in amazement the game at the professional level and imagine that we may one day reach such a pinnacle. Then, in attempting to put into practice that which we have seen, we are regularly faced with disappointment and begin thinking that there is no way that we will ever play the game even remotely like a professional. And yet they make it seem to be so easy. I believe that before we can learn how to *play* this game like a professional, we need to learn how to *approach* this game like a professional.

The Provisional Colours System allows us to completely change our approach to the game. It is a work in progress and subject to change, but with the primary goal of allowing players the freedom to develop the strategies of the professional game early on while they still have only lower level skills. The ultimate evidence of the success of the Provisional Colours System will be when a handicap player returns to his seat after a good run and hearing the break call of over 50 points, as he has a number of times in the past thanks to the use of Provisional Colours, but upon reflection, the player comes to realize that in fact every pot of the break was natural. That will be the player's very first natural half-century break and he may not even recognize it immediately as he has already become accustomed to seeing thirty, forty, even fifty points added to his score at a single visit through use of the Provisional Colours System.

Any comments, questions, or other feedback regarding Provisional Colours may be directed to [snooker@acesmachinery.com](mailto:snooker@acesmachinery.com).