

CHAPTER XIV

PROBLEMS OF THE DRIFTY COURT

Thousands of games are played each year on drifty courts, and, many times, the better player has lost the game because he did not understand, or could not play, the drift. All shufflers avoid the drifty court; many never develop a technique for handling the drift, although their teams must play on these courts during the shuffling season. Perhaps a shuffleboard club should consider itself fortunate to own one drifty court simply for the experience its members get from playing on it.

This chapter has been written to show that playing a drifty court can be exciting, if not completely rewarding. The relative success with certain shots no longer applies, and a few shots that would be disapproved on a normal court can be used sometimes by one player or the other when there is a favorable drift in the court.

COURT DRIFT

The surface of a shuffleboard court should be level and of uniform texture, but it is difficult to construct a concrete slab having the dimensions of a shuffleboard court and meet the requirements of a good court. After a rain, one may see pools of water standing in several places on a court, revealing low spots that were not noticeable on the dry surface. Those imperceptible low spots may cause an unpredictable drift of the cue disc, to the right in some places, to the left in others. It is difficult for a player to adjust his aiming to the irregularities of that kind of court. In other instances, where the drift is caused by an uneven settling of the entire slab, the drift will be more uniform, and a playing technique can be developed to master it. This is the kind of drift that will be discussed in this chapter.

A drift of three to six inches is common on many courts; it may be much more on some others. To detect the drift on a strange court, the player watches the cue disc carefully as it comes to a stop. In the last two feet of its journey down the court, the disc will move the farthest off its course. The drift is more noticeable when the cue disc is aimed directly at another disc or at a definite point, such as the

apex. Then one may observe the disc swerve to one side, perhaps completely missing the target.

When describing the characteristics of a particular court, one should not say that the court has a drift to the right or to the left, since the truth of that statement depends on whether the player stands at the head or the foot of the court. Rather, one says that the drift is toward the yellow side of the court, or toward the black side, whichever is the case.

A peculiar characteristic of court drift, especially when it is uniform, is that it always favors one player over the other. If the cue discs drift toward the yellow side of the court, the player of the black discs has a real advantage in every game played on that court. Such a court is called a black court, and the opposite is true, of course, on a yellow court.

Remembering that the cause of drift on a court is that the discs are actually sliding down hill, we shall, in this discussion, designate the opposite sides of the court as the high side and the low side. On a black court, the black discs are started from the high side, and all moving discs tend to drift off their course toward the yellow side. On a yellow court, the opposite is true.

The advantage that one player has over the other derives from the fact that the player on the low side of the court has serious difficulty hiding a disc beyond a St. Pete guard, while, in some instances, the high-side player finds the matter of hiding a disc to be easier than it would be on a level court.

When a game is to be played on a strange court, the players must determine by means of practice shots the amount and the direction of the drift. Once this is determined, a player will compensate for the drift by a two-step process. Before every shot, he will: 1. Consider what his aiming point would be if he were making the shot on a level court; 2. Choose a new aiming point as far toward the high side of the target as he suspects the drift to be. This is called playing the drift.

Another principle the player must keep in mind is that a slow shot drifts farther off course than a fast shot. The reason is obvious. The

amount of drift is proportional to the length of time that the disc is in motion. Therefore, good hides and long kitchen shots into the deep 7-area, where the cue disc must come to a stop or almost to a stop before the impact, are difficult shots to make on a drifty court.

To help with his understanding of the following discussions, the reader should actually perform the shots that are described therein.

PLACING THE ST. PETE GUARD AND HIDING THE SCORE

The problems of the two opponents on a drifty court are quite different, and they must be described separately. In Figure 73, each player desires to shoot his St. Pete to position B, but, in each case, the cue disc may stop at C unless the player plays the drift. If either player overcompensates for the drift, the cue disc may stop at A. On the low side of the court the cue disc tends to drift too far from the apex; on the high side, it drifts too close.

For the high-side player, hiding a disc beyond A or B (black disc) is no problem because there is ample hiding space in that part of the shufflegram, but the hiding area beyond C consists of only a corner of the 7-area. Therefore, the high-side player would prefer to err in the direction of A than of C, when placing a guard in the St. Pete position. His opponent on the low side cannot safely use an alley shot, even when the guard is at A, because the tendency of his cue disc to drift toward the sideline makes scoring difficult (Figure 74).

But how different the problem is for the low-side player! His guard tends to drift toward the apex (Figure 75). Despite his efforts to compensate for the drift, some of his guards may stop at C; and for his opponent on the high side, this is a situation that can be exploited. The opponent discovers that an alley shot past C is comparatively safe—an easy shot to make because the cue disc drifts toward the center of the board, across the sideline, and away from it. Although a suicide alley shot is seldom recommended in play on a normal court, it seems to have been made to order for this particular situation.

But is it wise for the high-side opponent to make the alley shot and let the low-side player have a good hide on the other side of the guard? It turns out that the player on the low side seldom has a real good hide beyond a normal St. Pete guard. If he does succeed in placing a well-hidden disc, a certain amount of luck has been

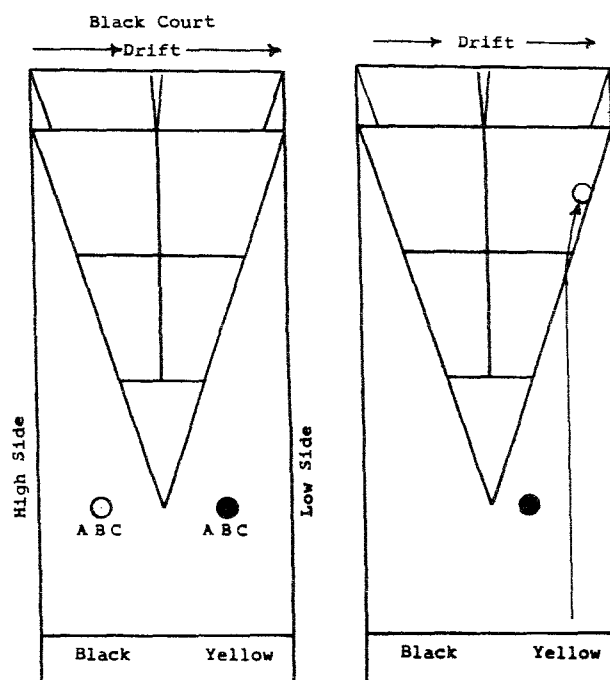


Figure 73

Figure 74

with him. The reason that the low-side player has difficulty hiding a disc beyond this guard is twofold: His cue disc must be hidden with a slow shot, which, because it is slow, has the maximum amount of drift; and to spoil this score, his opponent will use a fast shot, which, because it is fast, will have the minimum amount of drift. To make a good hide, the low-side player must shoot very close to the guard, and he cannot fully compensate for the drift without taking the chance of nicking the guard.

Another Technique Used in Hiding. Some players have discovered that the low-side player has somewhat less difficulty when placing his hide if he shoots his St. Pete just over the deadline (Figure 13). This position allows the player more room in which to compensate for the drift without the danger of nicking the guard, although it gives him less hiding room on the board. The chief difficulty of this shot is that the cue disc may easily stop short of the line and have to be removed from play. The result is a wasted shot with the initiative going to the opponent.

This shot has real merit, however, and it is an easier shot to make than the Tampa shot,

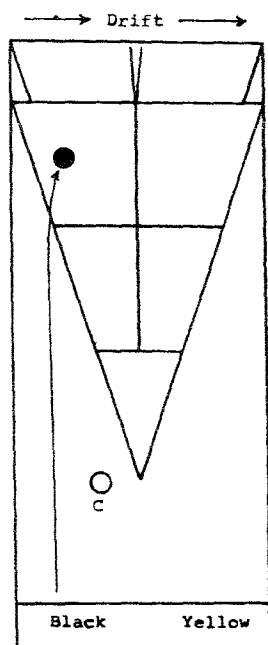


Figure 75

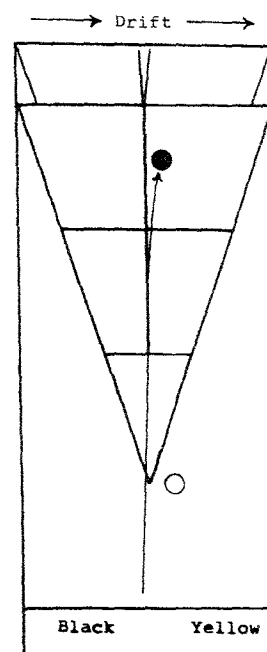


Figure 76

which is described below. The choice of this shot in preference to the Tampa may depend on the amount and the location of the drift. Other than this particular shot and the Tampa, the low-side player has little choice for a guarded score except to use a bunt or a glance.

Bunt Shots and Glances. The low-side player, being at a disadvantage, must gain his scores by using more difficult shots than those required of his opponent. The opponent, playing the high side, seldom needs to use a bunt to score. And he seldom does use it because the bunt is a difficult shot to make on a drifty court, but the low-side player should look for opportunities to use this shot because good hides can be obtained by its use. It is best to use a bunt when the score can be protected by a double guard, but often the double guard can be preplanned.

Glances, too, can be useful if the player can control them. Usually a glance is more difficult to shoot than a bunt.

THE TAMPA ON A DRIFTY COURT

The high-side player can get very good hides beyond a Tampa guard. His cue disc drifts safely out of sight from his opponent. The only worry for the high-side player is that his cue

disc may drift upon the centerline. That reason, and the fact that the high-side player really has no need for another kind of guard, accounts for the unpopularity of the Tampa as a high-side guard.

As a low-side guard, the Tampa has been denounced by many players, but its use for that purpose should not be rejected without a thorough study of the low-side problem in each particular situation. Since the primary purpose of this chapter is to discover strategies that will be helpful to the low-side player, we shall consider this special use of the Tampa.

The Tampa As a Low-Side Guard. Some players are not aware that it is possible for the low-side player to use a Tampa successfully as a protective guard, but even if a low-side player prefers not to use the Tampa systematically, he should be attentive to its incidental use.

Before going further, the reader should examine again Figure 24, which shows the hiding area beyond a Tampa on a normal court. The effect of the drift is to move the hiding area several inches toward the low side. This displacement is somewhat farther toward the low side in the 7-area than it is in the 8-area. So in the lower 8-area and in the 7-area, there is protection for the low-side player's cue disc,

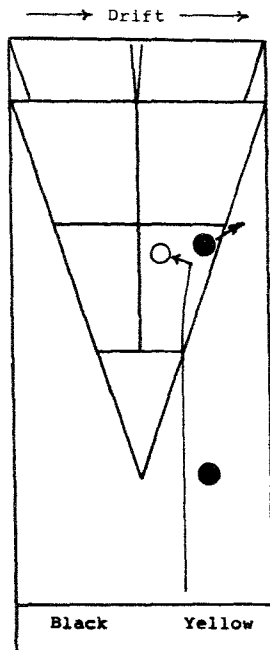


Figure 77

despite the drift. A well-placed Tampa provides adequate hiding area for the low-side player's score, and the opponent is compelled to shoot at an unfavorable angle to spoil it.

But the Tampa is Risky. The argument against the Tampa is that it is a difficult and a rather high risk shot. If the Tampa is misplaced only three or four inches from the apex, the opponent on the high side of the court can shoot a disc so that it will drift over the centerline, making a beautiful hide in the 7-area beyond the player's own guard (Figure 76). This shot can be made repeatedly by many players, and it can be a game loser for the low-side player. The only protection the player has against this shot is his skill in shooting a good Tampa. But one should realize that the person who shoots well enough to exploit a misplaced Tampa in this manner also shoots well enough to shoot a good Tampa. The former is the more difficult shot.

This shot (Figure 76) can be made only by the high-side player, of course. To make the shot successfully, the opponent will usually use the intersection of the centerline and the 8/10 line as his aiming point. The exact spot depends on the amount of drift. The opponent will plan to have the center of his cue disc pass over the intersection, as shown in the drawing. He shoots

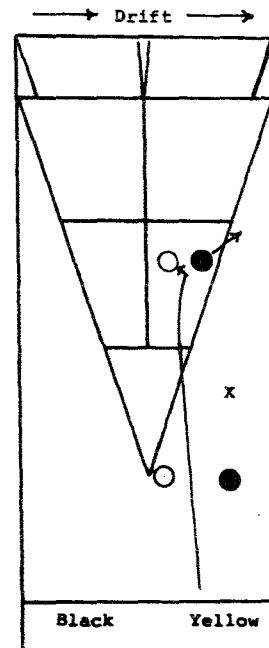


Figure 78

for the 7-area. It is exciting to watch the cue disc glide close by the Tampa and smoothly drift across the centerline to a stop just inside the opposite 7-area.

Spotting the Tampa. A point in favor of the Tampa shot is that there is a very good aiming point for this guard. After determining the amount of drift near the Tampa position, the player can use the apex to spot his shot. He shoots either at the apex or at a point an estimated distance to the high side of the apex, to make his Tampa guard drift correctly into position.

SHOOTING FOR A HIDDEN DISC

Because there is a hook at the end of a slow shot, it is possible to shoot close to the high side of a guard and gently bunt a disc that seems to be safely hidden beyond it. The contact of the two discs is gentle and the discs spread apart usually not more than a foot, like shooting for a double score (Figure 77). If the hidden disc is close to a line on the low side, the shot effectively spoils the score. This shot is useful when the cue disc can be made to glance to a score in the shelter of other discs on the board, and this leads us to a little different emphasis on

the Tampa as a low-side guard. Consider now the Tampa block.

THE TAMPA BLOCK

On a level court the Tampa can be an effective block of a St. Pete that has gone too far (Figure 33). On the low side of a drifty court, the Tampa assumes a much greater importance in this play. Its effectiveness as a block is enhanced by the drift of the court, and its importance as a protective guard is increased by the great need of the low-side player for a useful hide. In Figure 78, Black, the high-side player, has shot a St. Pete. The normal reply to this shot is to clear the board, but because the court drifts to his side, Yellow has replied with a Tampa block that leaves enough room between the two guards for a disc to pass through. Of course, this would be a better situation for Yellow if Black's guard were farther down the court, as at x; but Yellow still has a real advantage. Black should knock the Tampa away on his next shot, but what would happen if he chooses to hide a score by shooting between the guards?

1. There is a good chance that, because of the drift, the cue disc will nick one of the guards.

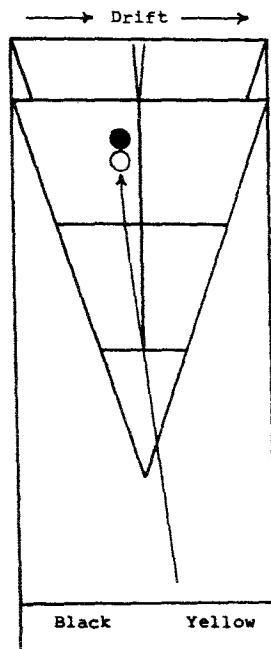


Figure 79

2. If the disc gets through, there is a chance that the score will be only partially hidden and can be spoiled by Yellow, as explained in Figure 77. If that turns out to be the play, Yellow has his Tampa in place to protect his score.
3. If Black succeeds in hiding his score so well that Yellow cannot spoil it by a direct hit, Yellow still has a chance to hide a score in the same area. There will be room for Yellow to hide another score in this area, too; but not so for Black.

But the important consideration in this situation—one which should not be overlooked—is that, because of the drift, shooting a disc between the two guards is more difficult for the high-side player from his angle than for the low-side player. If the St. Pete happens to be a few inches farther down the court, the matter of hiding a disc becomes much more difficult for the high-side player and is easier for the low-side player.

Thus, one sees that the Tampa, which is inherently a risky shot, is also a very aggressive shot for the low-side player on a drifty court. How much it should be used depends on the shooting skill of the player, the skill of the opponent, and a number of intangibles which the player must try to evaluate.

OTHER SHOTS

Compensating for the Hook. Besides compensating for the drift in a court, it may be desirable sometimes to compensate for the hook at the end of the shot. Some shots have a greater chance of success if the cue disc is traveling straight forward over a particular part of the court. The low-side player can accomplish this by shooting his cue disc obliquely from near position 2. For example, when the player shoots his hammer at the disc in the 7-area (Figure 79) so as to stick to score and to kitchen the target disc, the cue disc should be moving straight forward lest it glance and spoil the shot. Starting the shot from position 2, compensates for the hook so that at the instant of the impact the disc is moving in the desired direction. The aiming point, of course, is slightly to the high side of the target.

In Figure 80, by shooting from position 2, the player causes the cue disc to move straight forward into the pocket.

Shooting Disc No. 7. On a drifty court one of the better places to put disc No. 7 when the board is clear is on the centerline, just beyond

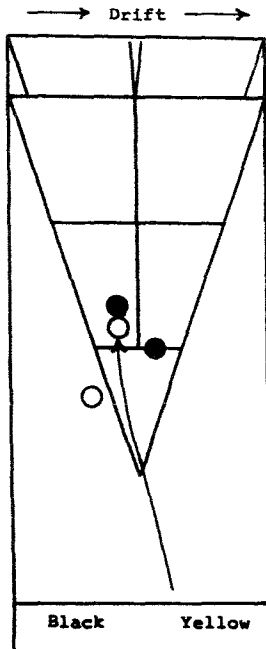


Figure 80

the 10-area (Refer to C in Figure 68). If the opponent shoots his hammer for a score of 8, there is a real danger, because of the drift, of his nicking the liner and giving the player a score, or having his cue disc drift upon the side-line, depending on which 8-area he shoots at. The opponent would be using good judgment to shoot for a score of 7 in this situation.

When making this shot with disc No. 7, the player must be careful to have his disc stop completely out of the 10-area lest it serve as a backstop for the opponent's hammer shot.

PRACTICE IS NEEDED

Another problem of the drifty court—and this must be the greatest problem—is the lack of practice on it. Players always pass up that court when they have a few minutes to themselves for solo practice, and seldom does a foursome start a game on it. Two players, however, who are interested in the improvement of their technique, can help each other by agreeing to spend a definite amount of time on a drifty court; and, of course, they will change colors after each game.

It is more rewarding to win on the low side, and it can be done quite regularly after one begins to find his way around on the court.

Round robin is a good game for practice on a drifty court, since each player has a chance to shoot both colors at the head and the foot twice in each round of play.

In the following chapter the reader will find some additional suggestions on practice.