

Pool Table Buyer's Guide

Choosing the right table



BILLIARD CONGRESS
OF AMERICA

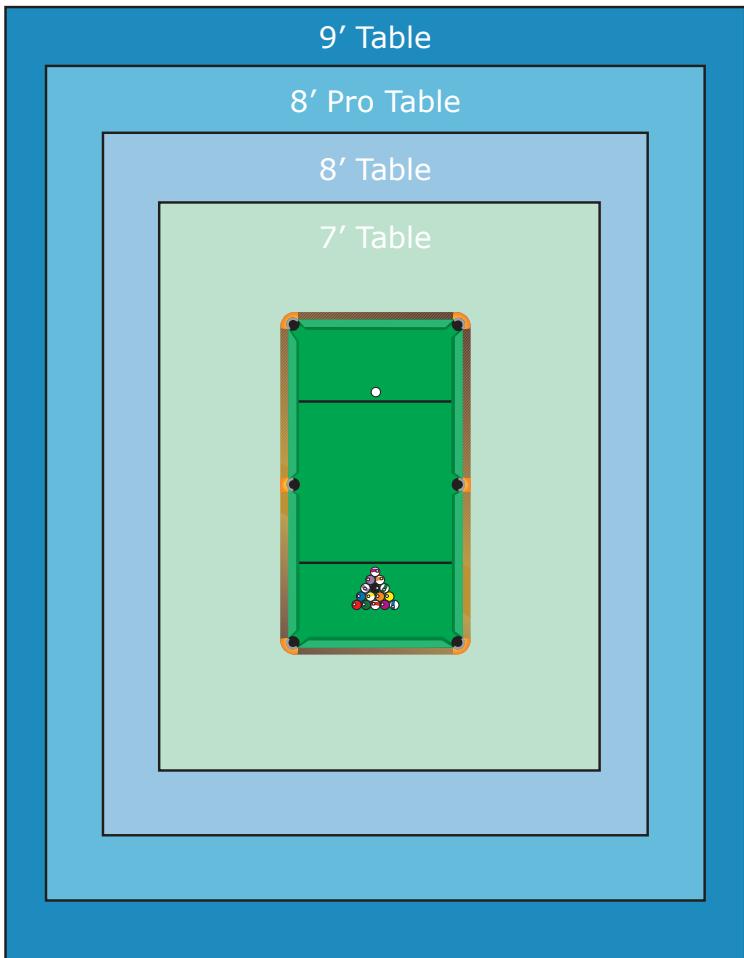


Diagram 1 – Room Size Chart

7' Table 38" x 76"		8' Table 44" x 88"		8' Pro Table 46" x 92"		9' Table 50" x 10"	
cue length	room size	cue length	room size	cue length	room size	cue length	room size
48" CUE:	11'3" x 14'6"	48" CUE:	11'9" x 15'4"	48" CUE:	12' x 16'	48" CUE:	12'3" x 16'4"
52" CUE:	11'9" x 15'2"	52" CUE:	12'4" x 16'	52" CUE:	12'6" x 16'6"	52" CUE:	12'10" x 17'
58" CUE:	12'8" x 16'	58" CUE:	13'2" x 16'9"	58" CUE:	13'6" x 17'6"	58" CUE:	13'8" x 17'10"

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So, you're thinking about buying a pool table?

There are many decisions to consider before making such an investment. What you don't know about pool tables and pool table construction can make the difference between a lifetime of playing enjoyment or years of regret.

If you think you are ready to make the commitment, see if you can answer these questions: Why do you want a pool table? Who is going to be playing on the pool table? Is all slate created equal? Do the cushions really need to be rubber? What are the best materials to use for the table's frame? What is directional nap? What are the dimensions of the rooms in which the table will go?

If you're stumped by any of the questions, the following will arm you with the knowledge to make an informed purchase.

Furniture vs. Game

When purchasing a pool table you should determine if the table will serve as a center piece that decorates your home, a place to crown neighborhood champions, or both.

If the table will be a family heirloom it will probably be installed in a room such that its appearance is a major factor. You should consider how the table complements the room or how it can be the centerpiece. In this case, aesthetics, design and colors will most likely have priority over other sporting factors. But as with many heirlooms you should take careful consideration on what materials are used in the construction of the table, as well as the warranty to ensure its quality.

If the pool table is to be used by kids and décor is not as important, then appearance and intricate woodworking may not be a factor. Additionally, you may want to find materials that are more durable than elegant and that will be able to withstand occasional dings and dents. There are tables that are both durable and elegant, however, the selection is slim, and the price is usually above average.

Design & Room Diagram

Size does matter. One of the biggest problems with buying a pool table is settling on a size. If the room is undersized be prepared for cues continually marking, scratching and banging into the surrounding walls and furniture.

Many people want a "regulation" size table for their entertainment room. The only Billiard Congress of America specification for a "regulation" table is that the playing surface is twice as long as it is wide. Tables come in many different sizes: 6 foot, 7 foot, 8 foot (home size), over-sized 8 foot (pro size), and 9 foot (tournament size). The size of the room and the table's surroundings should determine which size table is right for your entertainment room. A great rule of thumb is to allow between 4.5 and 5 feet on every side of the table. More is better and less means using shorter cues.

Refer to Diagram 1 (inside front cover) to determine how big of a table will fit in the space you have available.

Parts of the Table



Diagram 2 – Parts of the Table

Wood

Wood is an important element in table construction and decoration, unless you're going for a post-industrial concrete or steel look. The type of wood used and the intricacies of the woodworking on the table will directly impact the value. Tables that are constructed of laminates, particleboard, and plywood will not have a long life span because they will require more repairs, and as staples and screws are reapplied the wood will begin to chip and break.

Wood will determine the cost of your table. The highest quality and most expensive wood tables employ solid hardwoods in ALL components of the table: legs, cabinet, frame, and rails. Very simply, a hardwood table will cost more than soft woods and laminates. (Hardwoods include cherry, hard maple, oak, poplar and walnut.) The visible parts of the table – rails, cabinet and legs – require a smooth hard wood such as cherry, maple and oak.

If solid wood is used under a veneer laminate the table's construction will still be solid. If the wood veneer is glued over particleboard, plywood, or Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF) there is a chance for moisture causing deterioration of the structure. A veneer laminate alone will provide no strength to the table; the strength comes from the construction material underneath it.

Many times a salesperson may refer to the table as "cherry" or "mahogany." What they are referring to is the wood's finish or coloration and not the wood itself. Make sure the salesperson clarifies this during your visit.

Solid hardwoods shouldn't be compromised on the frame or the rails. If you need to cut costs, try laminated components that won't compromise the structural integrity of the table.

Remember: The type of wood used and the intricacies of the woodworking on the table will directly impact the value of the table.

Slate

This is where it all begins. A pool table without slate is like a refrigerator without a door, it will still work – just not very well. A slate surface is the only playing surface recognized by the Billiard Congress of America and that is suitable for tournament play. Slate rolls truer, lasts longer, and is much more durable than any other playing surface on the market.

There are many tables manufactured without slate surfaces. However, these tables are not for serious players, or as family heirlooms. Tables that have a wood playing surface are more likely to warp and deform with time, temperature and humidity, and will not have the longevity of a slate based table.

A common misconception regarding the thickness of slate is that the thicker the slate the better. Many experts will agree that one-inch slate is all you need.

It is also recommended that the slate be installed in three separate pieces, allowing for more accurate leveling and easier handling. One-piece slate is big, awkward, difficult to level, and can warp over time. Three-piece slate allows for more accurate play because it will remain level for a long period of time.

The majority of slate manufactured today is diamond-honed matched and registered. Diamond-honed slate results in a smooth, level-playing surface. Matched and registered means that the three slate sections were cut from the same slab of slate.

Remember: Three-piece slate allows for more accurate play because it will remain level for a long period of time.

Frame/Cabinet

One of the most important factors to consider when purchasing a pool table is what the construction looks like from underneath the table. The frame platform should support the slate beneath the table, and ensure that the playing surface remains level. When analyzing the table's support system it is important to look at how the table fits together. The sturdier the cabinet's frame, the less likely the slate will shift.

Solid hardwood is by far the strongest, most desirable, and most expensive frame structure. The frame supports 500+ pounds of slate, so the construction and the strength are crucial. It is best if the slate is screwed or anchored to the frame, and the frame is mounted directly to the table cabinet.

The design of the frame is important and varies by manufacturer. If the table utilizes cross beams supports within the frame that run both the length and the width of the table make sure those cross beams support the slate on ALL surfaces. The cross beams have two functions: first they will pull and tie together the cabinets so that there is no flexibility in the frame or the cabinet, and second they will provide the base support system for the slate. You DO want the slate to rest on the cross beams within cabinet. (*see Diagram 3 (pg 4) - Table Frame Cross Section*)

The slate should be screwed down and securely attached to the frame/cabinet. If you notice

that the slate is not secured to the cabinet then you should question your retailer about the stability of the 500+ pound slate.

If you are not buying a custom table, ask the retailer if the frame is assembled in their warehouse before delivery. This is preferred as it will allow the retailer to check for defects and correct them before the table appears in your home.

Remember: The frame supports 500+ pounds of slate, so the construction and the strength are crucial.

Sights/Inlays

Functionally, sights are the markers on top of the rails used for reference points when aiming. The sights are placed around the table in precise geometric locations to help players aim and gauge angles.

Cosmetically, sights can range in shapes, sizes, and materials and add to the look and design of the table. However, depending on the material used for the sight and the level of the detail required to create the sight, sights can increase the expense of the table. Most manufacturers will offer a wide variety of sights and price points from which to choose.

Remember: Table sights will have a direct impact on the cost of the table, but not on the playability.

Cloth

Billiard cloth (sometimes erroneously called felt) is a specific type of cloth that covers the top of the table's playing area. Billiard cloth is generally made of either a wool/nylon blend or a synthetic nylon.

Cloth can be described as either tournament quality or recreational quality. Cloth is weighted by thread count; the higher the count the better the quality. For recreational use 21-ounce cloth is standard, we recommend no less than 18-ounce cloth for consistent play.

Recreational quality cloth should last a few years. It will take some abuse, but will tear with hard cue contact. This cloth will have a natural directional nap that will have a direct impact on ball play. Due to this directional nap the playing surface of the recreational cloth is more difficult to clean. Recreational cloth can be as much as 35 percent nylon.

Tournament cloth can easily be compared to racing tires – it will deliver better performance but wears out much faster. Tournament cloth has a much greater thread density than

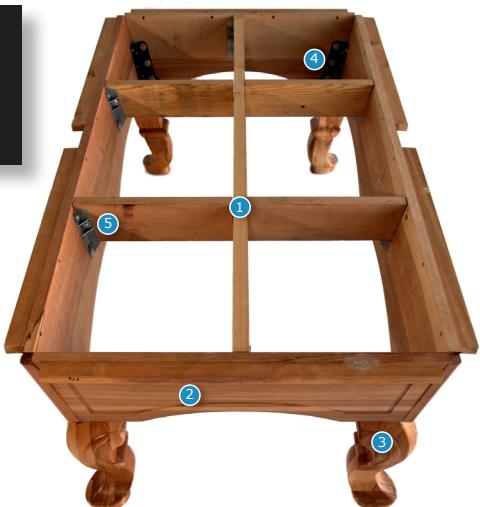
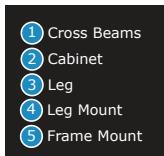


Diagram 3 – Table Frame Cross Section

recreational cloth and it has practically no directional nap. This cloth will play faster, will be easier to clean, and be able to withstand aggressive cue strokes. Tournament cloth has also been known to be difficult to install, so make sure the person installing the cloth has installed tournament-grade cloth before. Tournament cloth is generally 80-90 percent wool.

Remember: For home use, consider an 80/20 wool/nylon blend in an 18-21 ounce weight.

Pockets

Billiard pockets must be strong enough to hold the weight of many pool balls and cushion the balls enough so they don't bounce back up onto the table.

Pocket openings can vary as much as a quarter inch and still fall within Billiard Congress of America specifications. The manufacturer's recommendations for the table's pocket size are important to consider because of the discrepancy in pocket sizes.

Most tables come with pockets that match the table style. If you don't like those pockets you should consider that not all pockets match the pocket openings on the table and it is probably best if you review all the manufacturer's recommendations.

Most home and tournament tables have drop pockets and are made of plastic, durahyde, vinyl or leather, all of which can be replaced. Leather drop pockets are the most expensive and can come in a variety of styles. The best leather drop pockets will have iron bracings for the outward arch of the pocket. Leather pocket bracings made with plastic, or aluminum are cheaper than iron bracings and will not have the same durability.

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Cushions

Cushions are the inside walls on the playing surface of a pool table, and are critical for the reputation of the table. Quality cushions will provide years of accurate and consistent play, while bad or dead cushions can negatively affect the table's playability.

All top quality cushions are pretty similar in terms of performance. K-66 is the most common profile cushion, although K-55 is also popular. Both K-66 and K-55 profile gum rubber cushions are recommended by the Billiard Congress of America.

The cushion should adhere firmly to the rail, completely parallel to the table free from any waves.

Remember: Both K-66 and K-55 profile gum rubber cushions are recommended by the Billiard Congress of America.

Rails and Blinds

Rails are the top part of the table and are attached to the cushions, pockets, and in many

cases will also be fastened to the slate. The rail is virtually connected to every part of the playing surface, and the stability of the rail mounts is crucial for accurate play. The rail will provide support to players when they are shooting near the edge of the table. The rails and the playing surface should be as one, if any rail is loose, wobbly or vibrates, play will be inconsistent and inaccurate.

Solid hardwood rails should always be preferred when considering the longevity and playability of the table. When the rubber cushions need to be removed and replaced a particleboard rail will chip and become unsuitable for re-gluing a new cushion. Also, when the cloth needs to be replaced, solid hardwood rails will hold staples better than any other type of wood, particleboard, or available substitute. Solid hardwood rails will allow the table to have unnoticeable repairs done and continue to have balls rebound faster over longer periods of time.

Some manufacturers have a two rail piece system (a top and bottom) and many times the bottom will be a pine or poplar rail base. Poplar is the preferred base rail because it has a unique characteristic of recovering after a staple is removed and will continually accept restapling better.

Because the cloth is stapled to the base rail, materials such as particleboard and fiberboard will not have much longevity. If particleboard and fiberboard are used for the base rails they will begin to crumble and disintegrate after the table has been recovered a number of times.

The blind rail or side rail will receive a lot of bumps, and bruises from players continually leaning into the table. The blind rail should be securely fasten to the top rail and should have the same construction.

Remember: The rail is virtually connected to every part of the playing surface, and the stability of the rail mounts is crucial for accurate play.

Legs

The legs on a pool table can come in many shapes and styles, but no matter what the legs look like the most important factor is how well they will support the table. When analyzing the legs on the table, give the table a good nudge, if the table appears wobbly then it probably is.

There are endless variations of table legs: pedestals, hollow tapered, solid turned, and solid carved, to just name a few. Most tables are made of either four free standing legs or two pedestal-style legs. Either way, solid hardwood is always preferred over particleboard or plywood. Intricately designed or hand carved legs can increase the cost of the table.

Examine the leg mount or leg bracket carefully (*see Diagram 4 – Table Leg*); there are many different kinds and qualities. Some mounts can be flimsy metal brackets while others are heavy duty metal that can add strength and rigidity to the table. Leg mounts can impact the life of the table and the quality of play.

Remember: The best advice is to give the table a nudge to see how well it absorbs impact. If it feels loose, than it probably is.

Price Comparisons

Pool tables vary greatly in price, depending on quality of materials and the construction. How can you tell a difference between a \$1,500 table and a \$10,000 table? Here are some general price points and what to expect when shopping.

Toy Table - \$600-\$1,400

A table in this range usually isn't meant to last more than a few years. It is lightly constructed, uses poor-quality slate or a slate substitute, and is easily knocked off kilter by roughhousing or by folks sitting on the rails.

At best it's perfect for the kids' rec room, but not meant for anyone serious about enjoying the game.

Basic Table - \$1,500-\$2,400

This is the minimum you can expect to pay for a table providing reliable play without bells, whistles or fancy trimmings. You should be able to bang around on this table for years (with proper care), but you're not likely to pass it on to your kids. Be careful to scrutinize the slate, cabinet materials and construction for features previously discussed. Also be wary of extra cost, which might not be included in the stated price, such as installation, cloth, and accessories. Design options may also be limited in this price range.

Medium Grade - \$2,500-\$3,400

In this price point range you will find tables that are substantial, well constructed and fancy enough to show off to your friends. You should expect high construction quality in this price point range. Here, the price can fluctuate quite a bit depending on the level of finishes and decorative work.

Heirloom Grade - \$3,500-and above

This is the cream of the crop. In this range you are buying a top-quality table that you can display in your home as a fine piece of furniture. All of the materials are top-notch, including hardwoods throughout the body, lively rubber for the cushions, and three-piece, one-inch slate with strong framing and center-beam support. You also should receive a long-term warranty. Your design options in this range will be endless.



Diagram 4 – Table Leg

Final Advice

Don't just read up on pool tables. Go to the retailer armed with questions. If your retailer can't answer these questions to your satisfaction, you should question his or her ability to sell you a quality pool table.

- How long have you been in business as a billiard retailer?
- Do you have dedicated pool table installers?
- What will it cost to install the table?
- How long have you been carrying the brands on your showroom floor?
- What kind of slate do your tables have?
- How thick is the slate?
- How are the rails attached to the table, and are they canvas backed?
- What kind of rubber are the cushions made of?
- What kind of wood is used to make the frame?
- What kind of wood is used to make the leg? Rails?
- Do you have any tables that are disassembled that I can see?
- How are the legs attached to the table?
- What kind of cloth comes with the table?
- Is the pocket brand recommended by the manufacturer?
- What kind of warranties do your tables carry?
- Are you a member of the Billiard Congress of America?

Professional Billiard Instruction

Do you want your game to improve? As with any sport the more you learn and the more you practice the better you get and the more fun you have. Since 1992, the Billiard Congress of America has had high quality professional billiard instructors at your disposal. Please visit the BCA Web site at bca-pool.com and go to the Learn Pool section, and then select Find a Instructor. You can search for BCA Instructors by zip code, by city, or by state. If we don't have an instructor in you local area, give us a call and we'll find one for you.

Notes



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