

Pool Table Buyers Guide

When choosing a pool table, there are several questions that you must first answer for yourself. These questions are geared to several different categories.

Pool tables sizes and material of construction

Select the size of the table by how big a table you want to play on, and how much room you have where you will put the table.

Industry people commonly refer to pool table sizes as 4' x 8' or 4 1/2' x 9', but the external dimensions of the table itself are larger. Tables come in four different sizes:

Common Pool Table Dimensions

Common Size	Actual Playing Surface	Outside Dimension
3 ½' x 7'	39" x 78"	52" x 91"
4 x 8'	44" x 88"	57" x 101"
4 x 8' oversized	46" x 92"	59" x 105"
4 ½ x 9'	50" x 100"	63" x 113"

Focus mainly on the playing surface measurements. The balls will never travel beyond this perimeter; therefore, your shots always come from within those dimensions. Then allow room around the playing surface for cue stick clearance. If you have room for your cue sticks, you will have plenty of room to walk and move around your new pool table. Here are some questions to help you in making these decisions.

How big is the room in which I wish to place the table? This is the most important question you can answer prior to shopping for a pool table. Many people think they have plenty of room for a pool table, only to find, after delivery, that they actually do not have enough room to play around the table.

What size table do I have room for? Refer to the [room dimension chart](#) to make this determination.

What size table do I wish to own? If you want to hone your playing skills, the largest possible table is recommended.

Style and wood type

There are several factors to consider when deciding what style of table you wish to purchase. If you are buying the table mainly to entertain the kids, then the styling may not be as important as the quality and durability. If mainly adults will use the table, then you may want the largest size available to you along with the fancier styling. If you are buying the table as a piece of furniture for your home, then obviously, you will want to get the most attractive table that your budget will allow.

Tables are generally produced from three different types of materials.

- **Mica laminate or vinyl melamine coating.** The least expensive pool tables use mica laminate or vinyl melamine coating. They usually have particleboard underneath the surface material and are not manufactured to as high of a standard as more expensive tables. This type of table usually uses only 3/4" unframed slate, a lesser quality leather or plastic pockets, and does not have the styling of more expensive pool tables. Mica or vinyl tables cannot be stained and therefore come in a limited number of colors. If you were looking for a table to last only for a few years, this would be a good choice.
- **Veneer laminates.** Some tables are built with a veneer laminate over another type of wood. The underlying wood may be made of particleboard, MDF board, or laminated layers of solid wood. With solid wood laminates under the veneer you should not have to worry about the veneers peeling or bubbling. This type of table usually has 3/4" to 1" slate and the pockets are of varying quality. It may still use the lesser expensive leather pockets or it may have the best leather pockets. Since veneer can be stained, these tables usually come in a wider range of finished colors.
- **Solid wood.** The best-built pool tables employ solid wood in all of the wood components. They range in style from simple to very fancy and are made in a wide range of woods, including Oak, Maple, Cherry, Ash, Poplar, and Mahogany. Manufacturers can apply a range of finishes on each of these woods. The slate on these tables will vary from 3/4" with some manufacturers to 1" with others. Some tables have no framing for the slate while others use particleboard or solid wood. 1" slate with solid-wood framing would be the best choice.

BUYER BEWARE: Many times when a salesperson refers to a pool table as a "cherry" or "mahogany" table, they are simply referring to the finish of the table, not the wood type. Be sure to ask specifically about the wood type and finish.

QUALITY OF CONSTRUCTION

Now that you have decide what size pool table and what wood type you prefer, it is time to investigate how good the table is that you are about to purchase. There are many factors involved with the quality of a pool table. How well your pool table is built will have a direct

impact on how well your table will play. The areas that you need to look hard at include; slate, rail construction, cushions, frame construction, pockets, and aprons.

Pool table slate

Number of pieces

1-piece slate is cumbersome and difficult to level. It is generally only ½" in thickness and may warp, preventing a flat surface. Many coin-operated and very inexpensive tables use one-piece slate.

3-piece slate section is better because it allows for more precise leveling. With three different sections of slate, each can be leveled individually to achieve an overall level table, allowing better play. 3-piece slate is available in several different thickness including ¾", 7/8", and 1".

Slate thickness

¾" slate, when in the 3-piece configuration, is generally used to give the convenience of leveling and handling while keeping the cost of the table as low as possible. This slate is usually, but not always, used on less expensive tables.

7/8" slate is often used as a substitute for true 1" slate. It comes only in three pieces and it is hard for the untrained eye to tell the difference between 7/8" and 1". A table with this slate should be a little less expensive than a table with 1" slate. This can also be a good indicator that a manufacturer is trying to save money on the construction of the table.

1" thick slate is the only slate approved by the Billiard Congress of America for tournament use. It comes only in 3 pieces. It will provide the truest and most accurate play of any of the three slate thicknesses. It is the very best slate, as it is the only slate guaranteed by the slate mines not to warp. Although it is only slightly more expensive than 7/8", it is 12.5% heavier. The weight of the table has a direct impact on how true a ball rolls and rebounds.

Frames

Tables are made with a wood framing attached directly to the bottom of each piece of slate or without any slate framing at all. Tournament level tables must have a wood framing attached directly to the slate. When inspecting a table for purchase, be sure to ask about the framing, since the cloth on a pool table generally covers the slate, and it will not be obvious to the naked eye.

Unframed slate sits directly on the frame of the table. Some table manufacturers use a "slate frame liner" - a horizontal board that attaches directly to the top of the table frame, not the slate. One problem with this is that when shims are used to level this type of table, the slate becomes separated from the board. A more serious problem is that the slate is only screwed to the board instead of directly to the table frame.

Framed slate tables have a wood liner attached directly to the bottom of each piece of slate. This liner is commonly made of particleboard, plywood, or solid wood. The slate framing gives a solid, secure location for stapling down the cloth. The best line is solid wood, as it holds staples much better than the alternatives.

Attachment of slate to the table

The slate should be screwed directly to the wood frame of the table. In addition to screws around the perimeter of the slate, there should be screws located on both sides of each slate joint in the middle of the playing surface. These "center slate screws" help eliminate movement of the slate if the table settles over time. The center slate screws also function as additional attachment points for use in leveling.

SLATE SUMMARY

There are many variations when it comes to the type of slate available on your pool table. The best way to distinguish between these variations is to refer to the BCA Rule Book's requirement for tournament play. The BCA specifically states that the slate on a tournament table should be "1 thick, 3 piece slate, with a wooden frame attached directly to the slate". With this being such an important part of your table, you should be very wary of manufacturers who are willing to make sacrifices in this area.

Rail Construction

The rail construction is the "heartbeat" of a pool table. The rail is made up of three main sections; the cushion, the sub rail, and the rail cap.

Type of Cushions

The cushions are the most critical aspect of the rail system. In order for a pool table to be tournament-approved, the Billiard Congress of America requires that "Rubber cushions should be triangular in shape and molded with conventional K-66 profile with a base height of 1 3/16" and a nose height of 1", with control fabric molded to the top and base area of the cushion." Look for all of the following features to be sure you are buying the best table on the market.

1. K-66 STYLE CUSHIONS are required and approved by the BCA for tournament play. They are time tested for correct speed and accuracy.
2. Live Gum Rubber Cushions. The best tables have "live gum rubber" cushions. The higher the percentage of live gum rubber, the more consistent the rebound.
3. Control fabric should be molded into the top of the rubber with approx. 3/16" of nose cushion exposed. This allows the ball to rebound with the same speed no matter where the ball strikes the cushion. Not all tables have control fabric on the top of the cushion, so be sure to ask the salesman about this.
4. Live air space is space on the back of the cushion where they are glued to the sub rail. It assists the cushion in controlling the speed and accuracy of the ball. It also allows the cushion to breathe from the front to back, maintaining rubber consistency. Without this live air space, the cushion will harden due to its inability to breathe.
5. BCA Standards: If you are interested in top-quality tables, make sure that your table meets or exceeds all tournament standards set forth by the BCA.

Sub Rail

The rail liner or "sub rail" is the part of the rail that you cannot see in an assembled table. It is what the rubber is actually attached to and it is the part of the rail that fastens

to the slate. The mechanism used to fasten the rails to the slate is critical. The tighter the rails are fastened to the slate, the better the table will play.

Solid wood sub rails allow for the most accurate rebound. Some manufacturers may use particleboard, so be sure to check closely before buying a table.

Bolting of rails to the slate

There are several ways in which the rails can be fastened to the slate. The quality of these can be extremely important to the play of your table.

- **"T-Nut Attachment"** is the most secure method of fastening the rails to the slate. T-Nuts are permanently embedded into the rails, giving perfect alignment, and cannot come loose from over-tightening. They have over twice as many threads for securing the bolt as nut-plates. These features allow for maximum torque on the connecting bolts making the rails as tight as possible. T-nuts that are 3/8" in diameter provide the best results.
- **"Floating nut plates"** have become very common. This method literally has a nut plate in the rail, which is not secured, and actually moves around until fastened with a bolt. This can create a problem with the nut hole in the plate being aligned incorrectly and causing the rail bolts to become cross-threaded.

Rail bolt washers

The rail bolt goes from under the slate in an upward direction into the rail. How the washer meets the underside of the slate is important. If the table has wood framing on the slate, then there should be a hole in the wood larger than the rail bolthole in the slate. The washer should fit flat against the slate. Dome washers are the best; as the rail bolt is tightened, the washer then flattens against the slate, creating the most secure form of attachment.

How is the cloth attached to the bottom of the rail?

The cloth that covers the cushions will be stapled to the bottom of the sub rail. It is important that the manufacturer provides a recessed area for those staples to be attached. This area is called a tack strip. Without a tack strip, the staples will prevent the rails from sitting flat on the slate and therefore will change the angle and raise the height of the cushion. This will cause the rebound of your table to seem very slow or "dead".

Rail Cap

This is the wood section of the rail that is visible and affects the looks of your pool table. During play, rail caps take a lot of scratching from cues being scraped across the rail.

Cap Material

The rail caps on a pool table can be made of solid wood, mica laminate, or vinyl melamine covering.

1. **Vinyl laminate** will only be used the very least expensive tables on the market. If torn or scratched, they are not repairable.

2. While **mica** is the most durable, it will only be used on inexpensive furniture style tables, or very expensive, commercially designed tables.
3. The **solid wood rail cap** will combine durability with the most beautiful look to enhance the furniture appeal of your pool table. One benefit of solid wood is that it can be refinished if scarring does develop over a period of many years.

Rail profiles refer to the actual shape of the rail cap.

4. **Commercial profile rails** are very wide and have corners that contain plastic pockets. These are used on commercial tables or very low priced home tables.
5. **Standard profile rails** are the most common type of rail. These rails use leather pockets and have a straight edge on the rail between the pockets. The total width of a rail with this type of profile will average about 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".
6. **Wide profile rails** will be slightly larger than the standard profile. They will typically measure from 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " - 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " in total width. The advantage is that you have a larger area to place your hand for bridging and they create a much nicer piece of furniture for your home.

Sights

The sights are the markers on top of the rails. Sights are used for reference points on the table for aiming. They will either be round or diamond shaped. Even though they do not structurally impact the table, they do affect the overall furniture appeal of your pool table. The sights can either be placed in the rails before the rails are sanded and stained or after the finishing process is complete.

Round sights or diamond shaped sights

Most pool tables will come with a round sight as the standard style. These manufacturers will then offer the diamond sight as an option, for an additional charge. There are a select few manufacturers who will actually give the diamond shaped sight as their standard style sight. While either style will serve the same purpose, the diamond sight will create the more expensive furniture look.

Pre-finished sights versus post-finished sights

Pre-finished sights are ones that are placed in the rails prior to the wood having any finish applied. Post-finish sights are sights that are placed in the rails after the rails have passed through the finish process. Once again, even though neither process creates any structural advantage, the pre-finish sights are a much more difficult step. If the sights are already in place when the rails are stained, then that sight is going to absorb the color of the stain. Once this happens, each sight must then be cleaned individually, while in the rail, to remove the stain. The reason that a manufacturer would go through this trouble is to create that fine furniture look and feel. You can tell which process was used on a table simply by running your finger over the sight. A pre-finished sight will feel so smooth that you might not even be able to tell it is there, with your eyes closed. A post-finished sight will have very defined edges to the fingers. The reason that this is so

obvious is that a pre-finished sight is sanded smooth as part of the rail system.

Frame Construction

There are two types of frames most commonly used in the pool table industry, tapered and straight. Each style is unique in the way that it is built, but both are of equal strength and stability.

Tapered Frames

Tapered frame tables are defined as those tables which have a frame which tapers from top to bottom. The legs are then attached to the underside of the frame. There are many variations in the way manufacturers will produce this type of frame so it is very important that you investigate each table very carefully.

Corner bracing construction

1. **Solid wood corner bracing** is the least common, but most effective way to build a tapered frame table. By using all wood bracing in the corners, the table becomes extremely stable and structurally sound for supporting the weight of the slate. The legs are attached to wood leg blocks, which are built into the corner of the table. The frame is factory assembled and usually pre-checked for level. The table will not wobble when bumped strongly with the hip. One thing you may need to check on this table is whether the frame is made in such a way as to allow it to be taken apart, for access around tight corners, when being installed.
2. **Metal, angle iron bracing** is the most common form of corner bracing used in tapered cabinets. This is the quickest and least expensive way to produce a pool table. It is not, however, the most effective. When the frame is compressed between the weight of the slate and the legs, it creates an extreme amount of stress on the corner. Usually the angle iron is of a very lightweight material and is attached to the frame using wood screws. This corner brace then flattens at the bottom to allow the leg to be attached to the metal bracket. If you plan to move your table very often this can cause a problem because, each time you remove the screws the integrity of that corner is weakened. The convenience of this type of frame is that it takes less space for storage and shipping. These conveniences are most noticed by the dealer.

How are the legs attached to the frame?

There are three methods routinely used to fasten the leg to the corner brace or leg block.

1. **Embedded "T-Nut"** involves drilling a hole in the top of the leg and then inserting a plug with a 't-nut' embedded in the bottom of that plug. The plug is glued into the leg and held in place with cross-pinning dowels to allow the legs to be bolted to the frame with 3/8" bolts.
2. **Using lag bolts** involves inserting a wood screw into the leg with the threaded end protruding from the leg. A nut is then used to fasten the frame to the leg.
3. **Using threaded inserts** is a method that involves drilling a hole in the leg and then screwing an aluminum barrel into the leg with threads on the inside of the

barrel. There is one very glaring problem with this method. If the installer over-tightens the bolt, the barrel will unscrew from the leg.

Does this table have corner caps on the corners?

While you have to crawl under the table to see what kind of bracing is used in the frame, an indication can be found on the outside of each corner. A table with metal bracing will have caps on the outside of each corner, which covers the gap between the side frame and the end frame. A cabinet made with solid wood bracing will likely have mitered corners. The mitered corners give a finished furniture quality look to the table.

What type of material are the beams made of?

Since the beam construction is an extremely important part of the construction, only the best materials should be used. You will find tables that have plywood beams and tables that have solid wood beams. Solid wood is the most stable material and is what you should require in your table.

How thick are the beams?

The thickness of the beams can vary from only ½" thick up to 2" thick. The thicker the beam, the stronger the support. One of the best combinations of size is 2" x 6" made of a solid wood.

Does the table have a beam running the length of the table?

While most table manufacturers place cross beams in their pool tables, only the better quality tables will have a beam running the length of the frame. This beam is referred to as the "center beam" and provides added support to the entire frame structure. This beam helps stabilize the frame as well as adding additional slate leveling contact points.

Is the wood on the underside of the frame sealed against moisture?

You should be able to answer this question by simply looking at the underside of the table. If the beams and the backside of the frame is raw wood, then the table has not been sealed. The sealing process is important in that it will help prevent the wood from absorbing moisture from the air. Any time you have moisture moving in and out of wood it can create problems.

Straight Frame Style Tables

Straight frame style tables are identified by the frame being mostly vertical as opposed to tapered. The legs will actually extend all the way to the top of the frame and will have the slate resting directly on the legs. The frame sections will then bolt directly into the sides of the legs. Many of the questions that should be asked about the frame construction for this type of frame are the same as the ones asked concerning the tapered frame

- What type of material are the beams made of?
- How thick are the beams?
- Does the table have a beam running the length of the table?
- Is the wood on the underside of the frame sealed against moisture?

Pool table aprons

The apron, also known as the skirt, is the wood which mounts vertically from the rail. The apron covers the raw edge of the slate and the staples that attach the cloth to the slate. If not properly attached, the apron can be pulled off or broken off very easily. Although the apron does not affect the structural integrity of the table, there are some key questions to ask when choosing a table.

How thick is the material used for the aprons?

The thickness can vary from ¼" to ¾" with thicker material being more durable.

How do the aprons mount to the table?

Interlocking aprons: Some tables interlock the apron with a channel cut into the rail. This allows the apron to align perfectly and creates a furniture-quality joint. These joints are quite strong.

Factory mounted aprons: Other tables are made with the aprons attached to the rails at the rail factory. Many installers find these to be more troublesome to work with when trying to cover the rails and pack your table for relocating.

Are the aprons screwed into the rail, or do they use mounting blocks / brackets?

Screwed directly into the rail: One way of table makers attach the aprons is to simply run a screw horizontally from the outside directly through the apron and into the rail. While this is the least expensive type of construction, it leaves the apron vulnerable to being broken off the table. The screw heads also show outward, damaging the aesthetics of your fine piece of furniture.

Attached via mounting blocks or brackets: This method involves a block or bracket mounted to the backside of the apron. The screw then goes vertically, directly into the framing on the underside of the slate. This method creates a very strong joint and does not leave any exposed screws. If a mounting block is used, it should be attached to the apron with wood glue and staples and interlocked on the backside of the apron. The mounting block is the most solid, yet also the most time consuming and costly process. When the mounting block is combined with the interlocking rail you have the very best of both types of attachment.

Pool table pockets

Pockets come in several styles and materials including plastic or leather, enclosed or exposed, and they can affect the way your table will play.

What style of pocket is used?

Three basic styles of pockets are used in modern billiard tables. They differ mainly in how they mount to the table.

#6 and #3 pockets both have the pocket cover wrapped around a metal iron that forms the shape of the pocket. The #6 has pins that insert into the end of each rail. A bolt is then inserted from the underside of the rail to secure the pocket. The #3 has pins which usually flush mount to the top of the rail. Many antique tables have #3 pockets. Both of these style pockets are exposed to the eye when looking at the table. They actually form a joint, which connects the rails. Because of the shape of the iron, they will play better than other style pockets.

Does this pocket use "cast iron" or "aluminum" to form the irons?

Cast iron pockets are the strongest type of pocket. They are extremely heavy and are the least likely to be broken from people sitting on the corner pocket of the table. The weight of the cast iron pocket adds to the playability of the table. The aluminum iron is very light in weight and can be easily broken. Be sure to ask the salesman what the irons are made out of. You cannot identify the difference unless you can pick up a pocket in your hand.

Enclosed pockets are totally enclosed within the rail system. The pocket is actually inserted within a cutout inside the rail. These are usually used on very inexpensive style tables, commercial style tables, or modern style tables. The pockets are generally made of plastic or rubber, but may be leather on more expensive tables.

Is the leather dyed or painted?

If the table you are looking at has leather pockets, then you need to determine whether the leather is dyed or painted. If the color of the leather is a painted, it will scuff very easily when a cue stick is drug across the top of the pocket. This will result in your tables looking very worn in a very short period of time. Dyed leather will help eliminate this problem because the dying process penetrates the surface of the leather.

Does the color of the pocket coordinate with the finish of the table?

Today, pool tables are considered a piece of furniture. Along those lines, everything on the table should coordinate. This includes the pockets. Many table manufacturers will use one standard color of pocket (usually black) for all of their finishes. Other manufacturers will color coordinate the pocket color with the finish.

Do the pockets have a decorative fringe or a solid shield on the outside of the pocket?

The purpose of the fringe or shield is to cover part the webbing in the pocket and to give the pocket a more finished look. Whether you prefer fringe on your pocket or a shield is up to your personal preference. In general, you should expect to pay more for a shield pocket.

SUMMARY

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A billiard table is a major purchase. You should assume that the table you purchase would last the rest of your life. Take the time to compare tables from several different manufacturers and be sure that you are getting the best quality table that your budget will allow. Armed with a little knowledge, you should be able to ask the right questions and make the best choice for yourself.