

THE GENII SESSION

ROBERTO GIOBBI

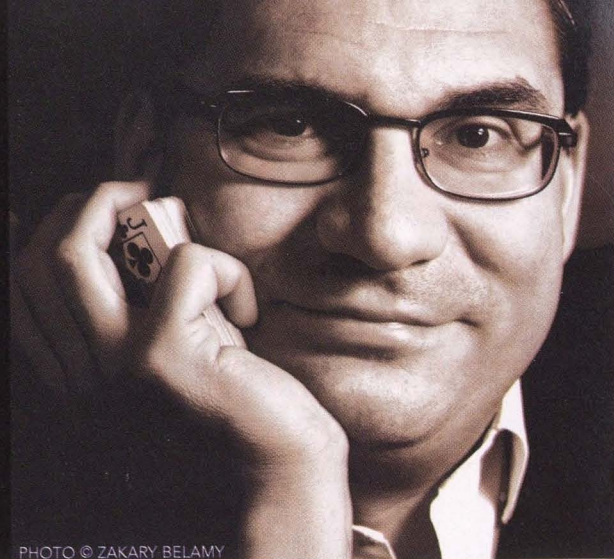


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DAI VERNON'S CUPS AND BALLS ROUTINE

An Alternative Final Stage

IN MY OPINION DAI VERNON'S routine for the Cups and Balls is the most magical of all the routines of its type that I've read or seen in over 35 years of studying and practicing magic. It has been described in a separate booklet called *The Dai Vernon Cups and Balls*, but also in Lewis Ganson's *The Dai Vernon Book of Magic* and if you go to YouTube and enter "Vernon Cups and Balls" you can see his performance in Mark Wilson's *Magic Circus*. In case you don't know the routine by heart, you might want to take a few pleasurable and instructive minutes by watching it before reading on so you will better understand what follows.

I have analyzed the routine in depth in my lecture book *Homage to Dai Vernon—Life & Work* (obtainable through H&R Books), that accompanies the seminar I've been giving in the past few years, and I won't repeat myself here. I would simply like to restate here that I consider the final loading sequence of the routine one of the most perfect creations in all of magic.

Some years ago I watched a recording of Dai Vernon performing the Cups and Balls on *The Dick Cavett Show* and I noticed that he used a different structure for precisely this final sequence. I have not been able to find out why he did so. Maybe it was one of the many finales he had, as he had different ways of doing his tricks but published only one or occasionally two brilliant versions, or maybe he was acting under time restrictions imposed upon him by the circumstances of TV. We will never know. However, I have transcribed the handling for myself and would now like to make it available to all those who share a similar taste as I do for things magical. The actions and text will be described exactly as Dai Vernon used them on the clip of the TV show.

This alternative sequence starts at stage five of the routine as it is described in Lewis Ganson's *The Dai Vernon Book of Magic*, p.133, but it can obviously be used to end almost any other routine that uses three cups and three balls (plus one extra ball) and which climaxes with the production of three or four loads.

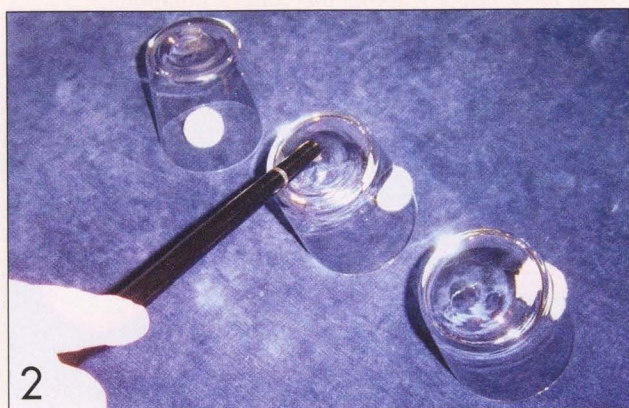
The starting position can be seen in photo 1, where each cup is resting with its outer edge on a ball. The extra ball is hidden in right finger palm and protected by holding a wand. Four loads—personally I prefer fruits and vegetables, especially nowadays where artificial products make their use practical—are in the left trousers hip pocket. For clarity, and only for didactical purposes, the cups in the accompanying photographs are transparent—don't even think of using transparent cups in performance (unless you're Penn & Teller). The cups will be referred to as left



cup, center cup, and right cup—all directions and photographs are from the performer's point of view.

Dai Vernon's opening line for this stage is: "You know, the old shell game came from this little trick. This is really an Egyptian trick. It dates back to ancient Egypt."

With the aid of the wand, tip each cup forward and over its respective ball; photo 2 shows this happening to the center cup, while the left cup has already been tipped forward and the right cup is about to be treated in the same way. Dai Vernon says, "I'll convince you that there is a ball under each cup, right. Now the reason this fools people is because it's confusing. There are three cups, three balls, a magic wand, and I talk a lot of nonsense. Naturally. So I'm going to simplify it so that even a small child would understand it."



The right hand places the wand on the table. Simultaneously the left hand lifts the right cup, transfers it to the right hand, which secretly loads its palmed extra ball and places the cup back on the table. At the same time, the left hand, having thus been freed, picks up the visible ball from the table. The ball is then transferred to the right hand, which immediately throws it into the air and catches it again. Apparently place the ball in your left hand, really retain it in the right hand in a loose finger palm. The left hand then goes to the hip pocket to apparently leave its ball there and comes out obviously and visibly empty. This is what Ascanio would have called an "action of conditioned naturalness," as it establishes the going of the left hand to the pocket as true and harmless, everybody being able to see that it's empty when it comes back out of the pocket. In subsequent travels to the pocket, however, the left hand will always carry a load when it emerges, but it will get little attention, as the action has previously been proven harmless. This is an immensely important concept in magic—having it understood in this context will allow you to install it as a strategy now and use it in all of your magic from now on.

Try to visualize this sequence, or even better, go through it with the cups and balls in your hands. Look at the whole action from the beginning, where the left hand picks up the cup, to the end, where you apparently place the ball in your hip pocket, and imagine it is a sentence that has to make sense to somebody when you say it aloud. Like a sentence, there will be verbs and nouns, the major bearers of information, but also adjectives, which color the situation, as well as articles, prepositions, conjunctions that

make it grammatically correct, but are not so important to understand the meaning of the sentence and remember it in order to tell it to somebody else. Identify the main actions and those that are secondary, merely "in-transit actions," as Ascanio called them, and interpret them accordingly. You will see that everything makes sense and the effect is crystal-clear while, at the same time, the method is well-protected. (I will write more explicitly about this concept in an upcoming essay.)

Repeat this same sequence with the left cup, apparently putting its ball in the hip pocket, but secretly loading the ball finger palmed from your right hand under the cup as it is replaced on the table. However, as the left hand goes to the left trousers pocket to seemingly leave its ball there, it seizes the first load.

Situation Check (photo 3): There is now one ball under the left and the right cup, both being supposedly empty, and there is still one "legitimate" ball under the center cup. Notice in the photos how the right and left cups have been set slightly back in respect to the center cup, thus anchoring information to space, another polyvalent concept that makes for less confusion and more clarity, hallmark of all good magic. The left hand just obtained the first load, while the right hand has the extra ball finger palmed.

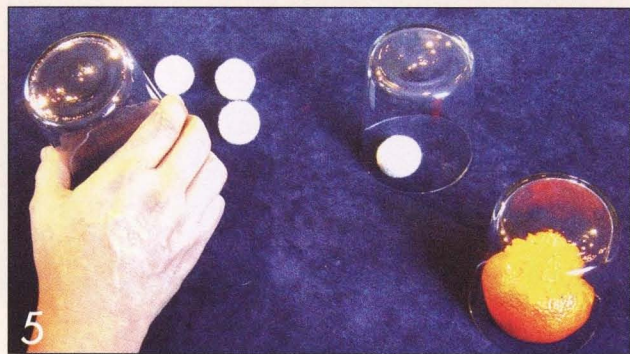


Here's the first alteration of the original published routine, because the right hand with its palmed ball, instead of lifting the center cup and loading it there, lifts the right cup and reveals a ball under it. Apparently the ball that was first put away has magically come back. The right hand transfers the cup to the left hand, which loads it, places it back on the table as the right hand picks up the ball.

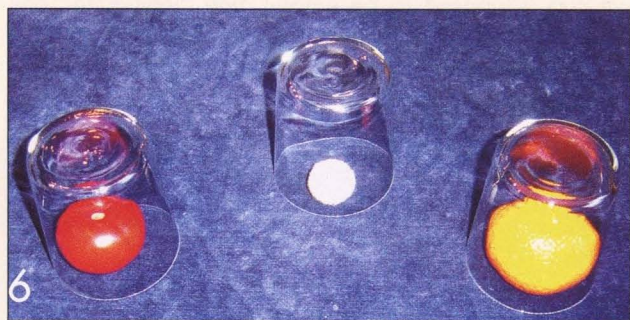
Situation Check (photo 4): There is one ball under the left cup (supposed to be empty), one "legitimate" ball under the center cup, a load under the right cup (supposed to be empty), and the right hand has one ball finger palmed while it displays a visible ball.



Dai Vernon now goes into the false explanation as in the Ganson description, however, with the difference that in this case he has the extra ball finger palmed in his right hand as he does so. To wit: He says that the ball is only apparently placed from the right into the left hand, but really retained in the right hand as the left hand just pretends to put the ball away. Since there is a ball already in the right hand, the French Drop cannot be exposed as clearly as explained in the Ganson text. So he simply does a clumsy looking fake put of the ball into the left hand, really visibly retains it in the right hand along with the other ball, puts the empty left hand into his hip pocket, saying so, and secretly obtains the second load. Then he lifts up the left cup with the right hand and drops both balls underneath, so that there are now three balls revealed under the left cup which was supposed to be empty (photo 5): *"I only pretend to put the ball in my pocket, but keep it here and when I lift the cup I load it under there."* This is delightfully surreal, as three balls appear, whereas the audience would only expect one ball to show up, namely the ball dropped in the false explanation. So this is quite a surprise and obliterates the whole false explanation. To those who know the original version this might sound confusing and even a bit illogical, but I can assure you that it looks good and gets an excellent reaction (if expertly handled).



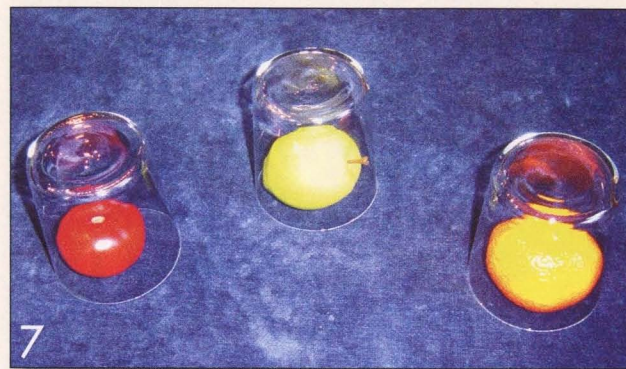
In the offbeat, the cup is transferred to the left hand, which loads it with the second piece of fruit it just stole from the pocket and places it back on the table. Simultaneously, the right hand picks up the three balls and transfers them openly to the left hand, which places them away in the hip pocket. The situation now is seen in photo 6.



This is accompanied by saying, *"But if I actually put the balls in my pocket, how many over here?"* Point to the center cup. Whatever the spectator says, the center cup

is lifted with the right hand and one ball shown under it. This is humorous because the audience would probably expect something to have happened, but nothing has actually occurred—there is still the one "legitimate" ball that is supposed to be there. This situation creates another offbeat moment during which the cup is transferred to the left hand, which has already dropped its three balls in the pocket, seized the third piece of fruit, and now surreptitiously loads it into the cup that it subsequently placed back on the table in its central position.

The right hand simultaneously picks up the ball just exposed under the center cup, genuinely transfers it to the left hand, which places it into the hip pocket, stealing the fourth load. Photo 7 shows the current situation.



"And if I put this in my pocket, how many are there under the center cup? How many?" In the recording I have, Dick Cavett seems to be confused at this point, as he had just picked up a small ball Vernon had accidentally dropped, so Vernon, sensing his embarrassment, says, *"Well take this cup, how many under this cup?"* With this he points to the left cup and then lifts it up with the right hand to reveal the first load. *"One—a big one."* With the same hand he smoothly proceeds to lift the center cup to reveal the second load. He transfers this cup to his left hand, which loads the fourth piece of fruit and replaces the cup in its central position on the table as the right hand lifts the right cup to reveal the third load. After pausing for a beat or two he eventually lifts the center cup to reveal the fourth and last load. Dick Cavett and the studio audience react accordingly!

I think that Dai Vernon planned to reveal the central load first, then the left, the right, and eventually the fourth again under the central cup, as he usually did in the complete version of this final stage, but somehow got thrown off by Cavett's unexpected hesitation. However, I must say that it probably doesn't matter—if all is well done, it can be done many ways, if it *isn't* well done, doing it "properly" wouldn't change much. There is a lesson here.

Frankly, I believe that the original version of this final stage—I urge you to look at it either on YouTube or much better in the *Dai Vernon Book of Magic*—is superior and more elegant in all its aspects. It only matters to TV that you saved 30 seconds, since in any live situation nobody, and I really mean nobody, would notice, let alone sense, that it was too long—nothing is too long if it is interesting (meaning appealing to the mind) and fascinating (mean-

TENSION, FOCUS, AND DESIGN IN CARD MAGIC

The Bottom Palm (the gravity of the situation): As you learn the palm, pay close attention to the specifics of the high dealing grip—the cards rest above the palm and forward in the hand. You'll need the extra space below the pack to hold the card.

During the action, make sure not to extend the second and third fingers any more than absolutely necessary. You'll have to stretch them a bit to grip the pivoting card, and the deep right hand grip will certainly provide plenty of cover. That said—don't push it. If the audience sees your left fingers flailing beneath the pack, you're sunk.

Also, remember to slant the deck to the right before the palm. This helps lends a soft, elegant look to the sleight. Consider that with the deck nearly on its side, the left fingers proved the only barrier between card under the break and the floor. So in a sense, you don't have to actually pull the bottom card in order to pivot it. Simply allow the card to do what it already wants to do. The fourth

finger simply pivots the card on the thumb base so it falls the way you want it to—in a clockwise direction. The left second and third fingers allow the card to move, then re-establish control as the card moves into palm position.

On The Slow Motion Ace Assembly: Don't take the introduction of this article to mean that Michael Skinner was the only card man capable of a wonderful Slow Motion Assembly (his routine "Sentimental Aces" is published in *The Collected Almanac*). Many will attest that Ricky Jay uses the plot with great success. He performs the effect sitting alone, under lights and a proscenium arch. Jay's show takes place on a stage, albeit a small one, and platform aesthetics affect his choice of material. When you work within a few feet of your audience, as do most cardicians, different rules apply.

If you work as a close-up magician, keep process to a minimum. Engage your audience—physically, wherever possible. •

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ing appealing to the heart). When Einstein explained relativity, he would say, "If you hug a loved person, a minute is like nothing, but if you sit on a hot oven, a minute is like eternity."

Nonetheless I think there is much value in studying variations of a trick or technique, especially if they come from a genius such as Dai Vernon, and I leave it to you to recognize why this is so.

(My in-depth analysis of the complete Dai Vernon Cups & Balls Routine can be found as part of my lecture book *Homage to Dai Vernon—Life & Work*, obtainable through H&R Books, or stick \$35 between two postcards in an envelope and send it to me at: Roberto Giobbi, Schlossbergstrasse 5, 4132 MuttENZ, Switzerland. I'll send you a signed copy plus a signed photograph, if you ask for it, all airmail postpaid. Mention this offer, please.) •

We know what Misty will pick...Which one will YOU pick?

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