

Suggestions for improving and enjoying Squash.

By

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(These suggestions are, of course, my own opinions. Others may differ.)

First - the ball. I put this first because I think it is the most important point of all. Far too many people play always with a yellow spot - because it is used in the major championships and they think it is “the right thing to do”. In a cold court it isn’t. One should use the ball best suited to the court temperature - and in an English winter this is usually a blue or red spot, perhaps a white spot on a warm winter day, or in spring or autumn. It is impossible to play proper squash with a yellow spot in a court temperature in the 30s or 40s. The right speed ball is one which, when hit fair) hard, goes to a good length, i.e. its second bounce would be near the bottom of the back wall. Championships are played in heated courts; watch one of the matches on the T.V. and see how fast the ball is - it is often played after coming back off the back wall. Playing with a suitable speed ball is also more enjoyable; there isn’t much fun in rallies of two or three strokes, nor can one get warm.

Service. There is no point in exhausting oneself with a very fast service - other than for an occasional surprise. Unlike tennis, it won’t score a winner against a good player. A highish soft service is the best. It should be enough to the side to be near the wall if and when the receiver tries to volley it, and deep enough to reach - and “die on” - the back wall if he doesn’t. You can practise this by yourself, of course.

Returning service. Volley it if you can. Straight along the wall is probably best. Then move sideways towards the centre (behind your opponent as he comes across, so as not to get in his way) and then forwards to a central position in the court.

Defensive play. This is the basis of squash. I don’t mean that you should never try for winners - that would be very boring. But you must have a good defence to fall back

on. And the basis of such play is straight up and down the adjacent side wall - played to a good length but not hard, and as close to the wall as you can. If it is really close it may easily be a winner. This isn't as easy as it sounds, and needs practice. If the ball doesn't go straight back near the wall, it is better for it to go straight back a foot or so away from the wall rather than for it to hit the side wall early and come out towards the middle of the court - which will give your opponent a good opening. If you are out of position you can make time to get back by playing a lob or semi-lob which goes above shoulder height to your opponent's backhand. Not many people can make an aggressive shot with a backhand of this height.

Attacking shots. There are all sorts of shots you can try.

Here are some:

The "length" shot - to the back wall or cross court to a side wall - the second bounce of the latter being at the bottom of that wall.

The hard low short shot - which is self-explanatory.

The boast shotⁱ - off a side wall. This should be played to "die" at the bottom of the other side wall. (If played badly it gives your opponent a good chance to score a winner with a drop shot.)

The drop shot. This can be played either to cling to the side wall or to "nick" - i.e. land where the side wall meets the floor. The nick is practically a certain winner but you can't expect to achieve it often. It is usually attempted on the nearer side wall, but you can also try for a cross-court nick which is even more unlikely.

The drop shot can be played from anywhere, but is easiest to play off a short ball. A drop from the back of the court is most effective, but difficult to play well.

The lob - a high shot out of your opponent's reach, aimed to land in a corner - and stay there. This is easiest to do from a position about half way up the court.

The reverse angle shot. - played usually off a short ball (opponent's drop shot, say) hitting it onto the further away of the side walls so that it comes back roughly to where you hit it from - a useful surprise shot, but don't overdo it.

ⁱ Angle shot

The object of attacking shots in general, apart from scoring outright winners, is obviously to hit the ball where your opponent isn't or where he can't get to in time. Cross-court shots reduce the chance of getting in your opponent's way - and so entail less movement on your part; but they are more likely to give your opponent a good opening. Straight up and down is safer.

Positioning I have already mentioned this. I do so again because it is very important.

After you have hit the ball don't stand still admiring your shot. Apart from moving towards a central position, try to get in a place where you can see your opponent's racket hitting the ball. Unless he disguises his shot you can then see where he is hitting it to - and go straight there.

But don't get in his way or impede his stroke. There seem to me to be far too many lets and penalty points in top class squash nowadays. If you hit the ball where you mean to hit it, you should always have time to get out of the way. (If you mis-hit you may not be able to do so.) Making sure of not impeding your opponent does quite often entail extra movement on your part - unwelcome if you are getting tired - but for an enjoyable game it is essential.ⁱⁱ

The Rally. Volley, or half-volley, when you can, so as to give your opponent less time -and try to prevent your opponent volleying by putting the ball out of his reach.

Squash is a game for patience. Owing to the difficulty of scoring winners, you must be prepared to rally indefinitely (100 strokes or more) working for an opening for a winner - or your opponent's exhaustion or loss of patience! You therefore need to be very fit - able to play at a good speed for an hour or more. You can't do this without training - perhaps running - rather boring. It depends on how keen you are. Anyway, squash is more enjoyable the fitter you are, as you get less tired.

Match play. I haven't really gone into this. The question of winning against an opponent of roughly equal ability is - as in all games - probably 80% mental (the will to win, and calmness in a crisis), 10% skill, and 10% luck. However, in an "ordinary" game one might as well use one's intelligence. It makes the game more interesting. For instance,

ⁱⁱ And don't stand right behind your opponent when he is making his shot and then ask for a let. You shouldn't be there.

study your opponent's game, and - unless he is worse than you are and you want to be kind - don't give him the shots he likes; and use the shots of your own that seem to be working on the day.

Two final points:-

Hitting the ball when close to the wall. Your main object is probably to avoid breaking your racket. So don't hit hard. Try to pick the ball off the wall gently, looking at it carefully. Sometimes when in difficulty on the back wall you can save your racket by placing its head against the wall and then pushing it forward into the ball.

And lastly - we come back to the ball - look at it when you are hitting it - the vital point in all ball games. However beautifully you execute the stroke the result is not likely to be as intended if you look up before hitting the ball. Looking up is probably more likely to occur when you are tired, so try to remember to concentrate on it them.

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