

A SHORT GUIDE TO SQUASH RACKETS

By

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Chapter	1.	Introduction.
“	2.	The Strokes - in general.
“	3.	Service and receiving service.
“	4.	The main ground strokes.
“	5.	The volley and half volley.
“	6.	The Strokes - miscellaneous.
“	7.	Tactics and positioning.
“	8.	Match-play.
“	9.	Training.
“	10.	Obstruction.
“	11.	Equipment and Clothing.
“	12.	American Squash

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Squash is an easy game. Or perhaps one ought to say that it should be easier to become good at squash than at other games played with a racket, bat, club or stick, because the accuracy required to keep the ball in play and so avoid losing the point - is small. One can hit a squash ball in almost any direction and it still goes up. Lawn tennis requires far more control of direction, elevation and strength. And the inaccuracy with which one often hits a squash ball without incurring any penalty would be unlikely to escape so lightly on the golf course.

So squash should be an easy game. All one needs to become reasonably good is to be able to run hard for a long time and to be able to hit the ball somehow - not necessarily with the strings; the surprise angle shot off the wood is an almost infallible winner.

To become very good, of course, is rather a different matter. To achieve this one needs to be able to run hard for a very long time - an hour or more - and to hit the ball with great accuracy. Leaving exhaustion on one side for the moment, a winner can normally be scored against a very good player only by an extremely accurate shot. But, given speed, agility, good foot-work, a good eye, natural timing and great endurance, one ought to become very good indeed, provided one also has those other attributes required for achieving excellence at anything: keenness, determination and patience.

In the following Chapters we will consider some ways of improving one's game, even if one hasn't all the attributes just mentioned. We will consider them under three main headings: strokes, tactics and match play, and training. It is not only the strokes that count. Tactics and training count just as much, if not more; and, of course, temperament is probably most important of all. One will often see, in the report of a match, that 'A' was the better stroke player, but that for some reason 'B' won: perhaps better tactics, fitter, or a better temperament. Well, 'A' may well have been the better stroke player. But 'B', unless his win was due to a lot of lucky nicks or shots off the wood, was, on that day, the better squash player.

The views expressed in this book are of course, personal views. They are not necessarily right, and indeed are not necessarily held by the majority of good players. But they are the result of about twentyfive years experience of the game.

CHAPTER 2 - The strokes - in general

Look at the ball

Before considering the various strokes, remember that the golden rule of all ball games applies to squash just as much as the rest: look at the ball. However beautifully you execute the shot, the rest is liable to be not, as intended unless you look at the ball. This applies most particularly when in difficulty on the wall or in the corner, and when playing a drop or other delicate shot.

Grip

I think the best advice that can be given on the grip is to hold the racket in the way that feels most comfortable. The further up the handle you hold the racket, the more control you have, but the less reach. Hashim Khan holds it a long way up, but his terrific speed more than compensates for his lack of reach. A squash racket being light you can obtain several extra inches of reach, when necessary, by having the heel of your hand right off the end of the racket, the end being in your palm. But for a hard shot, or a delicate one, you must hold the racket firmly. For a drop shot, particularly, a vice like grip is desirable.

So far as the actual details of the grip are concerned I found, on starting to write this paragraph, that I had no idea how I grip the racket myself, so I had to go and get a racket and find out. I find that the basis of my forehand grip is to clasp the handle firmly with the last three fingers, and on the backhand to grasp it firmly between the lower half of the forefinger (the part nearest the hand) and the upper half of the thumb. The rest of the hand in each case comes on to the racket at the moment of impact, but you don't have to think about it. Just remember to grip it firmly, however you hold it. But, a squash racket being so much lighter than a tennis racket, there is no need to get the handle right into the palm of the hand, with the ball of the thumb touching the racket, as one does at tennis. One can keep a much more flexible wrist, which is a great asset at squash, with the handle held more with the fingers, as I have suggested.

The backhand grip I have mentioned is equally good for a plain or out shot. But my forehand grip is not suitable for a cut, for which you need the thumb and forefinger grasping the racket. This brings us to the next point: whether to play cut or plain shots as the basis of one's play.

Cut or Plain

In the early days of squash most of the experts were people who had first played rackets, and the cut shot was regarded as the “correct” way of hitting a squash ball. Later, squash was taken up by lawn tennis players and by many who were first of all squash players. For the “ex-tennis” player the plain shot is probably more natural than the cut. Again, I think the best advice is to use whichever comes most naturally to you; or, of course, use both. The advantage of the cut shot is that the spin imparted to the ball makes it go more downward from the front wall and so makes the ball “die” more quickly. It is therefore more likely to achieve a “semi-nick”; i.e. it will die rapidly if the shot approaches being a nick on the side wall. With a plain shot most people can hit harder, get a better length, and are less likely to hit the ball down. Perhaps the best combination is the plain hit for most shots, but a cut when playing a drop or trying for a nick.

We will now go on to consider the various types of shot individually.

CHAPTER 3 - Service and receiving services

Service

The best service is the lob. The hard overhand service is not so difficult to take a well placed lob, and it is more tiring for the server - an important consideration in a long match.

The perfect lob service should be sufficiently angled to hit the side wall before the receiver can volley it, and its strength should be such that it “dies” after hitting the back wall. This is a counsel of perfection, but is the ideal to aim at. It is not easy to achieve without hitting it out, above the line on the side wall, and it is still more difficult to achieve if there are natural hazards in the structure of the court, such as a low roof or beams. When there is a low roof, the service becomes a semi-lob hit rather harder than the high lob. It pays to take a lot of trouble with the service, rather than using it simply as a means of getting the ball into play. One can practise serving by oneself.

The best place to stand for serving is well forward, with only the rear foot in the “box”, and near the centre of the court. From this position one can get a good service and one is in the best position to start the subsequent rally - in the centre of the court.

Receiving service.

If you can reach the ball before it hits the side wall, the best way to return service is to volley it. This prevents you from getting into immediate difficulties on the back wall, and also gives the server less time to position himself. If you can't reach the ball before it hits the side wall, it is safer to let it bounce, as a volley off the side wall is difficult to time correctly. But if you have a good enough eye to be able to do so, then do it.

With the volley return the most effective is the straight shot down the wall – either a soft one clinging to the wall or a hard one, in the nature of a smash. But the easiest, and therefore safest, volley return is to hit the ball back in the direction from which it is coming, i.e. cross court. One can't expect to score a winner with this shot, so it is not worth exhausting oneself hitting it hard. Hit it firmly and fairly high, so that it will go well back to the corner of the court. Your opponent won't then be able to do very much with it, unless he is a very good volleyer.

A useful surprise variation return of service is to hit the ball hard and low to the opposite side wall, near the front wall, so that the ball then travels rapidly across the front

of the court away from the server's side (see later description of reverse angle shot). This is not an easy shot to do well, and if done badly gives your opponent a good opening for a winner. So, unless your opponent is slow, use it sparingly. One can also try an occasional drop shot return of service.

CHAPTER 4 - The main ground strokes

Once the rally has started the object of every shot should be to beat one's opponent and win the point; or at least to get him into difficulties. Don't just hit the ball without thinking; though, of course, if you are in difficulties yourself you may just have to try to get the ball back somehow. Assuming, then, that you have time to hit the ball where you want to, you should select one of the following:

- (a) a shot. which your opponent cannot reach., which may be either a hard low one, a drop shot, or an angle shot off the side wall.
- (b) a good length shot to either the back or a side wall, the good length shot being one which hits the joint of the wall and the floor with its second bounce.
- (c) a shot which clings to the side wall.
- (d) a nick, i.e. a shot which hits the joint of the side wall and floor with its first bounce.
- (e) a lob.

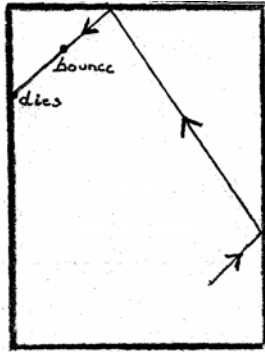
The above alternatives are all you need worry about. We will take them separately.

The shot out of one's opponent's reach

- (1) The hard low shot. This, I think, is self-explanatory.
- (2) The drop. This can be a straight drop shot or a cross court drop. The straight drop is easier, and any drop shot is easier the nearer you are to the front wall when you play it. The drop played from the back of the court, when you are behind your opponent, is very effective, but is difficult to do well. Remember, for any drop shot, hold your racket tightly, look at the ball, and use some cut.
- (3) The angle shot. This is a shot played off the near side wall¹ in such a way that it eventually dies near the other sidewall in the front of the court; or an angle drop shot which dies in the middle of the court near the front wall - see diagram below. The angle shot is a useful variation, but should not be used too much. And if played badly it gives your opponent a good opening for a kill. So it is not a safe shot, unless you are very good at it.

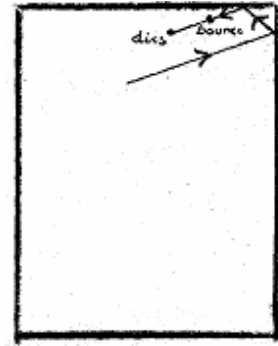
¹ The term "near side wall", wherever used, means the side wall nearer to where the player is standing.

Angle Shot



Both diagrams show the forehand shot. The backhand shots are similar.

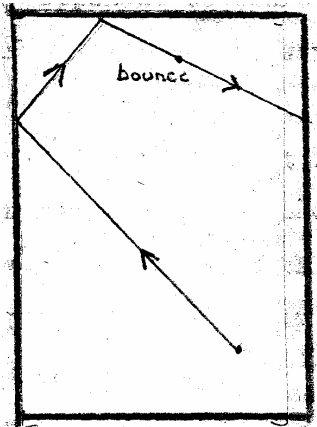
Angle Drop



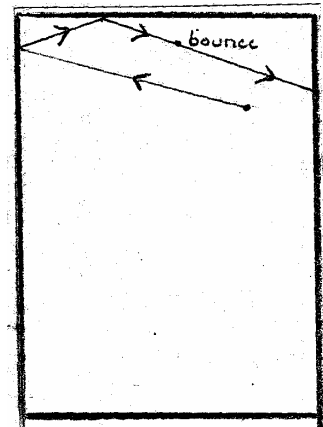
The reverse angle shot is one played on to the far side wall first. Played from the back of court it is similar to surprise return of service already mentioned. It is not an easy shot to play during a rally, though, because, for one thing, your opponent is quite probably in the line of fire. And it is difficult to make the ball come far enough back towards the side wall after bouncing to make it effective.

Played from the forecourt it is sometimes a good surprise answer to a drop. In this case the ball will come back near to where you hit it from, so move quickly after hitting it, to avoid getting sandwiched between your opponent and the wall when he comes up to play it.

Reverse angle from the back of the court.



Reverse angle of the fore-court.



The good length shot

The length shot to the back wall has to be hit hard to be of any real use. It is obviously possible to get a good length shot by hitting high and gently, but its length won't then come into operation as your opponent can easily hit the ball before it gets to the back wall. The length shot to the back wall should be hard enough to tempt your opponent to wait for the ball to come out off the back wall; and if it is a good length it won't.

The length shot to a side wall is really the basic cross court shot, and should become one of your standard shots that you play more or less automatically. It can be any angle across court that you like, the object being to make your opponent have to hurry to take it before it reaches the side wall, because it will be too low for him to take it after it has come off the wall.

The side wall shot

This is the best shot to make the basis of your whole game. It is a useful attacking shot, because if it is close enough to the wall your opponent may well miss it, or at least play an indifferent return. And as a defensive shot it is the basis of defensive play, as it is extremely difficult for your opponent to score a winner off a ball near the side wall, and it keeps him away from the dominant position in the centre of the court.

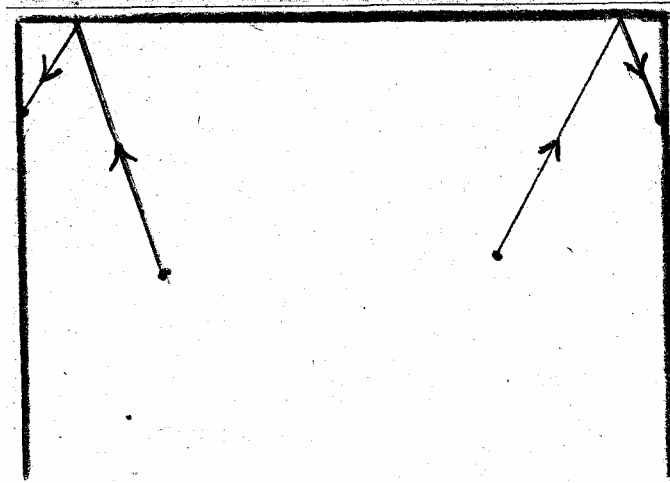
As an attacking shot it should normally be played hard, as a length shot to the back wall i.e. so that its second bounce will be in back corner. As a defensive shot it can be played quite softly and high, the object being to make the ball hug the wall.

The side wall shot is, of course, a straight up and down shot, played from close to the wall you want your return to adhere to. Like the service, it is a shot you can practise yourself, as you don't have to rush about the court to retrieve your own return.

The nick

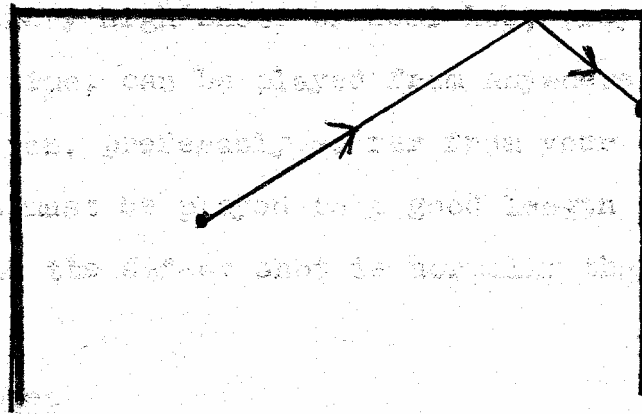
The nick near the front of the court, which is the only type one can reasonably try for, is really a species of drop shot, which hits the joint of the floor and side wall, doesn't bounce at all, and so is a certain winner. Indeed, against a very mobile and fit player, it is the only certain winner. One should always try for a nick, then, when one has an opening. Even if it doesn't come off it will be difficult to return if it is nearly a nick.

The best position from which to try for a nick is when standing rather forward of the centre of the court, and slightly to one side. From this position you should try to nick with a forehand shot to the forehand wall, or a backhand shot to the backhand wall. The nick should occur quite near the front wall. The shot is illustrated in the diagram:-



As with the drop shot, hold the racket firmly, look at the ball, and use some cut.

It is also possible, but more difficult, to a cross court nick, as illustrated below:-



The nick is another shot that can be practised by oneself, but don't be disheartened if you never get one. In the course of a match you will be lucky if you get more than one or two, however many you have tried for.

The lob

One should perhaps differentiate between the lob proper and the high shot merely played to gain time to recover position or to slow the game down. The real lob is a shot played from the forecourt, played high enough to prevent or make it difficult for one's opponent to volley - but not so high as to hit the roof - and aimed to drop in one of the

back corners of the court if he doesn't volley it. It is therefore an attacking stroke, and can well be a winner or near the corner. It is preferable to play it cross court, i.e. from the forehand forecourt to the backhand back corner, and vice versa. If you play it straight down the side of the court you are on it is much more difficult to get it to die in the corner, and also you may get hit by your opponent's return if he does volley it.

The lob does also, of course, gain time for you to recover position, and so is a good defensive shot as well.

The lob must obviously be played with the face of the racket facing more upwards than usual, and is more of a push than a hit. Whether you change your grip for it is a matter of taste. As for all soft shots, watch the ball and hold the racket firmly, but this time do not use any cut, as you want the ball to rise off the front wall.

The ordinary high shot, or semi-lob, played to slow the game down or gain time, can be played from anywhere in the court, in any direction, preferably as far from your opponent as possible. It must be played to a good length to the back of the court, and the safest shot is normally that along the side wall.

Summary of the strokes

We have now covered most of the shots likely to be required in a rally, except for the volley, half-volley, and shots under difficult circumstances in the corner and on the walls. Before going on with them it may be useful to restore a sense of proportion by giving a suggested order of importance of the shots we have described, because in describing them more space has unavoidably sometimes been given to shots which one can quite well do without altogether.

The basic shots for the rally, then, are the side wall shot and the length shot, the latter being either straight down the wall to a length at the back of the court or cross court to a length on the side wall. A straight length shot down the wall is, of course, also a side wall shot, but the latter term is intended to imply that the main object of the shot is to make the ball cling to the wall.

Using the length and side wall shots as the basis of one's game, one then needs some of the other shots for variety and, surprise. Of these, the most used are probably the hard low shot, the drop, and the ordinary angle shot. And finally, to complete your repertoire, add the reverse angle shot and the lob.

CHAPTER 5 - The volley and half volley

The Volley

We have already discussed the use of the volley as the standard return of service. So far as the rally is concerned one can try, with a volley, any of the strokes mentioned in the previous chapter, though the majority of volleys will be attempts to win the point by a drop shot, nick or hard shot out of one's opponent's reach. The great and obvious advantage of the volley is that it gives one's opponent less time to recover position after his shot, and so increases the chances of scoring a winner, even if it is not quite so accurately placed as a ground shot would be. Most volleys will be hit downwards from between waist and shoulder height, and when trying a drop or nick the shot will be more of a push than a hit. Sometimes when returning service or playing an opponent's lob, the volley is in the form of an overhead smash, which can either be a hard hit, for a speed winner, or a push for a drop shot.

The volley is also useful as a defensive shot when any high shot of one's opponent, if allowed to bounce, might die in the corner or nick on the back wall.

The half volley

It is difficult – though not impossible to play a delicate or accurate shot with a half volley so its main purpose will be to win the point by hurrying one's opponent. The half volley also periodically forced on one by the opponent's shot coming fast to one's feet. When one half volleys rather hurriedly under these circumstances it is very easy to lift the ball out of court, particularly if the ball is rather in front one at the moment of impact, because then the racket head will be traveling upwards. So when half volleying a ball in front of you remember to keep the racket head more or less vertical by getting the handle forward above the ball.

CHAPTER 6 - The Strokes - miscellaneous

One can obviously invent any shot one like's at squash, and one will often do some quite remarkable shots inadvertently. But under this heading we will confine ourselves to some suggestions as to how to play the ball when in difficulties in the corner or on the walls. The best answer, of course, is don't let it get there; so if you can prevent the ball getting near a corner or wall by taking it early, half volleying, or volleying, do so.

If, however, the ball does get in the corner, so that you can't use a back swing, you have to play it either with a sort of flick of the wrist - if your wrist is strong and flexible enough - or with a push. The flick is the more effective, but is probably only acquired after a lot of practice. For the push, hold the racket firmly and place the head against the back wall, and then push forward to hit the ball. This prevents you from destroying your shot by hitting the back wall in the course of it.

Apart from the corner, the other main difficulty one is likely to encounter is the ball which clings to the wall. The intrinsic difficulty of this shot is added to by one's natural disinclination to break one's racket. For the ball which is practically touching the wall there is obviously only one answer: to try to hit it with the end of the frame of the racket. A good eye is required. If the ball is a little bit away from the wall one can either try to pick it off, with the end of the racket, or play it on to the wall. The latter shot is executed without hitting the wall with the racket. Get the handle well forward, so that the racket makes quite an acute angle with the wall (well under 90°, which it makes with the wall in the "pick off" shot). And then play the shot in a forward direction, not hitting into the wall. The ball, of course, will in this case hit the wall, and then, we hope, go up. Care must be taken not to get the racket too far forward, because then one is liable to hit the ball again, after it comes off the wall. And one is only allowed to hit the ball once.

Finally, there is one more shot which should be mentioned as quite a number of players use it, though personally I am doubtful of its efficacy. That is, when the ball gets behind one, near the back of the court, it can be returned by hitting it hard and upwards on to the back wall. It is bound to finish up well in the forecourt, so giving one's opponent a good opening, but it can be used in extremis. But you may find it easier to hook the ball back from behind you.

CHAPTER 7 – Tactics and Positioning

Tactics and match play are clearly, to some extent the same subject. But perhaps one can differentiate between them by describing tactics as the choice of stroke and positioning in the court that one will normally employ, whoever one's opponent is, and by describing match play as the adaptation of one's normal tactic for the specific purpose of defeating a particular opponent. So in this chapter we will discuss choice of stroke and positioning; in the next, match play or strategy.

Choice of stroke

In describing the strokes themselves, we have already said a good deal about when to use them, and there is really little more to say on this subject. In general, it is obviously best to play the shot which will send the ball as far from your opponent as possible, and to use a shot which you are in a position to execute easily. These are platitudes, but one often sees someone attempt a shot which is difficult from where he is placed, and which his opponent is well placed to receive.

Remember that you are less likely to make an error if you hit the ball back roughly in the direction from which it is coming. For instance, if you are picking up your opponent's angle shot in the forecourt, it is easier to play a cross court shot or reverse angle shot than to try a straight drop.

One must, of course, vary one's play. If you always do the same thing from the same place your opponent will be ready waiting for it. Variation in pace and in the nature of the hit - plain, cut or slice - may also lure your opponent into errors. And, of course, by a surprise placing, you may succeed in wrong footing him.

If you are brought up to the front of the court by a drop shot, the best reply is probably either another drop or a hard straight one down the near side wall, the latter particularly if your opponent has followed up in the centre of the court with a view to volleying your return. If you play a cross court shot it must be a wide one, to get it out of the volleyer's reach. If you can pretend to do a straight drop, and do a hard cross court shot instead, you may deceive your opponent, but take care not to hit the ball into yourself off the front wall. A lob is also good reply if your opponent has got you out of position in the forecourt. It gives you time to recover. Lob to your opponent's backhand whenever you can; very few people can do much with a high shot on their backhand. If

you want to speed up the game, get as far forward in the court as you can and use the volley and half volley, or at least hit the ball early after bouncing. Don't be disheartened if you don't score a winner with your first volley; a quick opponent will probably get it back. So, unlike tennis, the volley is more a means of making your opponent run faster than of winning the point outright. And don't snatch at your volley in an attempt to score a winner before your opponent can recover position. It is useless trying to hit the ball before it is there to be hit: you will merely hit it down.

If you want to slow up the game, use the lob, semi lob and soft high side wall shot.

To sum up your choice of stroke:-

If on the attack –

- (1) Always try for a shot which may win the point: by good length (on back or side wall), hard low shot, drop, nick, or wall-clinger.
- (2) Play the shot which will take the ball as far from your opponent as possible, provided that you are in an easy position to play it from.
- (3) Vary your play.
- (4) Get well up the court and take the ball early, volleying if possible.

If on the defence -

- (1) Give yourself time to recover by using the lob, semi-lob, or high soft side wall shot.
- (2) By the same means prevent your opponent from volleying - or lure him into error by enticing him to volley a difficult one.
- (3) Seize any opportunity to gain the initiative yourself. It is much more restful attacking than defending.

And, whether attacking or defending, look at the ball.

Positioning

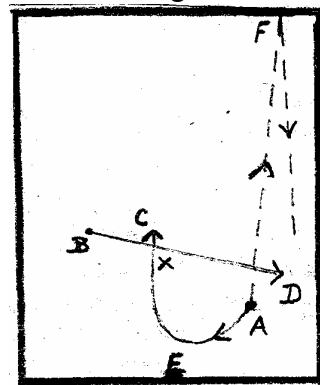
If you are trying to win, and not just out for exercise, the pleasantest way of playing squash is to stand in the middle of the court while your opponent rushes in all directions after your shots. However, unless you are a lot better than he is, you are

unlikely to attain this ideal. Nevertheless the ideal position is the centre of the court, or slightly back from it, and you should gravitate towards that position after every shot. I don't mean that you should rush madly to the middle of the court immediately you have hit the ball, but you should be moving in that direction, while remaining balanced and ready to go into reverse if necessary. Similarly by playing your shots to the side walls and corners, you should try to prevent your opponent from monopolising the centre position.

Apart from gravitating towards the centre, the other main point about positioning is to get in such a place that you can see where your opponent is hitting the ball to, and such that you can move straight to the place where you are going to hit it, without having to run round or over your opponent. In other words, don't stand behind him. Get well clear, and forward of him, so that you can pass in front of him to play your shot, if he hits a straight up and down one. (This, of course, does not apply if your opponent is leaning on the front wall).

This can best be illustrated by some diagrams. In diagram I, you hit the ball at point A, playing a side wall shot as shown by the dotted line. Your opponent comes from B to D to play his shot, as shown by the straight line. After you have hit your shot, you should move as shown by the curved line to C, the centre. You are thus well out of the way of your opponent, both when he is moving to the ball and when he is hitting it, and at C you are forward of him and can see what he is doing, and you are in the best position to intercept his return wherever he hits fit. Do not remain at A, nor retire to E.

Diagram I



If both players elect to play a succession of side wall shots up and down the same wall, and both adopt these positioning tactics, the result will be that they are both moving in a circle, following each other, as shown in diagram II. They will not be moving to and from, one in front all the time and the other behind all the time, as in diagram III.

Diagram II

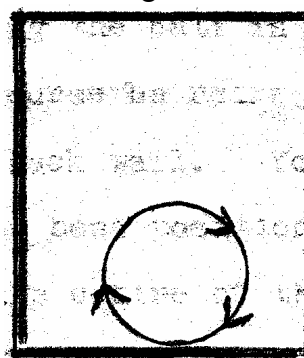
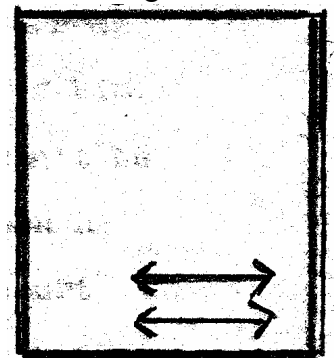


Diagram III



Correct positioning requires a certain amount of energy. Going back to diagram I, after playing your shot at A, it is much more restful to lean against the wall at E, but you are badly placed if your opponent plays a drop shot to F; and if instead he plays another side wall shot back to D you will have to wait till he has got out of the way before you can see what has happened, and then it may be too late. So, if you have any energy left, some of it is well expended in moving up to C.

If your opponent is playing the ball from the back of the court, you cannot of course get far up the court in the middle without restricting his choice of shot, or else getting hit and so losing the point if he doesn't restrict it. So long as he is in the back half of the court, though, you can always get slightly forward of him without getting in the way of his shot.

In diagram IV, with your opponent playing from A, your correct position is B. With your opponent playing from C, your correct position is D, but not E. At E you are preventing him from playing a reverse angle shot without hitting you.

When your opponent is playing the ball in the front half of the court, you will of course be rearward of him. By "rearward" I mean nearer the back wall. You won't be "behind" him. In this case your best position when he is hitting the ball is as near the centre of the court as you can get while still being able to see the ball when your opponent is hitting it. To do so, you will probably have to be rather towards the side of the court nearer to the ball. In Diagram V, with your opponent (O) hitting the ball at A your best position is B. With your opponent playing a drop shot of yours at C, your best position is D, well to one side so that you can see what he is doing. At both and D you are well forward, ready for a drop shot by your opponent, or anything else.

If you have played a drop shot yourself, when in the front of the court, to get back to the right position move first towards the middle of the court and then back, as shown in

Diagram IV

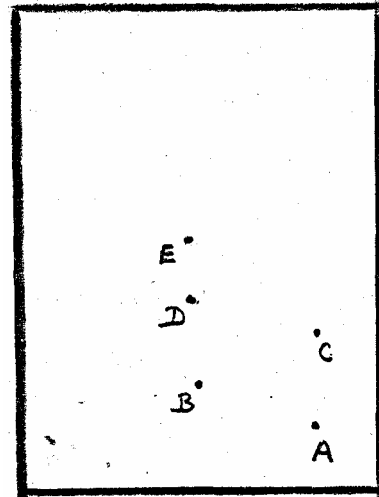


Diagram V

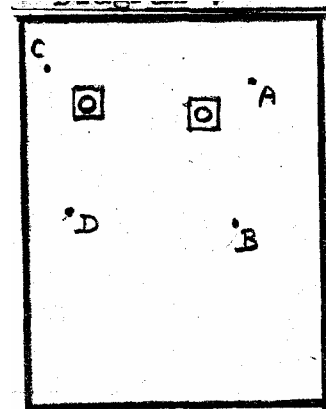
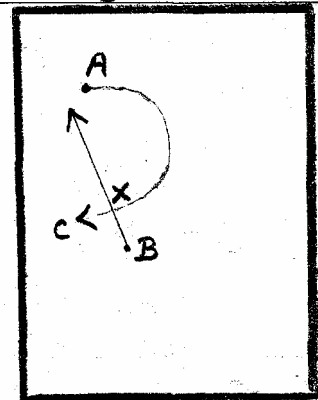


diagram VI. After playing a drop at A, move as shown by the curved line to C. Then your opponent, moving up from B, will not run into you; he will pass X before you get there. In fact it is the same movement as in diagram I - first sideways to the middle of the court. While moving to C you must, of course be ready to go into reverse if your opponent plays a cross court length shot or a cross court drop. Moving towards C, though, you are best placed to take his most likely winning returns - another drop or a hard one down the wall.

Diagram VI



Similarly, in diagram I, if you go straight from A to C there will again be a collision at X. Admittedly, if in this case your opponent were leaning against the wall at E your (correct) movement will go straight into him.. So if you know he is there, then go straight forward to C. But he shouldn't be there. As we have said before, do not get immediately behind your when he is playing his shot.

CHAPTER 8 - Match play

We have described match play as the adaptation of one's normal tactics for the specific purpose of beating a particular opponent. If you are playing someone, who is not as good as you are, any such adaptation will probably be unnecessary, of course. You can just play your "normal" or natural game, and win. And there are other possible circumstances which will, make it unnecessary. For instance, if you are fast enough to retrieve anything in a squash court, and have unlimited endurance, there is no need to worry about any adaptation. You are unbeatable. But most people have their limitations, and they can often beat someone who is reputedly a better player by intelligence – or match play.

In discussing this subject, we should perhaps draw a distinction between match play and "gamesmanship". On the latter there are excellent treatises to which the reader can refer (for instruction or amusement), so here we will confine ourselves to match play, as applied to playing squash, and will exclude verbal, sartorial or other ruses calculated to lower the morale of one's opponent.

In order to decide what strategy to pursue against a particular opponent, you obviously need to know something of his capabilities and weaknesses. If he is someone you have played before, you should know the answers. If he isn't, you can learn quite a lot about him by watching him play. If you have no opportunity to do this, then you must try to discover his weaknesses during the early stages of the match. Most players are more liable to break down on some shots than others: perhaps the backhand, or the shot out of the corner, or the shot close to the wall, or playing a high volley, and so on. Unless you can obviously win comfortably, try all types of shot during the first game, and see which reaps the biggest harvest in your opponent's mistakes.

One word of warning, however, about exploiting your opponent's weakness: if you hammer it too much, an erratic shot of his may become quite steady, through practice. Generally it is better to use the shot he particularly dislikes fairly sparingly, using it when you are really in need of a point.

Against an opponent who appear to have no particular weakness, you may be able to disrupt his game by more subtle variations in pace and length. For instance, after

playing two or three similar shots, play another which is apparently the same, but it is rather shorter, or rather faster, or has more cut on it.

Your opponent's temperament, too, repays study. If he is impatient to win the point, you may upset him by persistent lobbing. Even if he is of the type that likes to go on forever you may worry him by placidly settling down to play the same game, hitting the ball more slowly and higher than he does.

If the match is likely to be close, and your opponent is a steady player, a lot depends, of course, on your relative powers of endurance. If you are fairly certain that you can outlast him, then there is no point in taking unnecessary risks in trying to score winners. But if you know that he can outlast you, then you obviously have a much more difficult problem. You will probably have to take rather more risks in trying for winners than you normally would, but just to go all out for winners, regardless of risk, will rarely succeed, if your opponent is any good. There are several possible plans of campaign to meet this situation. The simplest, of course, is to make your opponent run much more than you do, but this will be difficult unless you have more accurate and faster shots than he has. Failing that, you can try slowing the game down to a pace at which you can last as long as he can, by lobbing and using the high shot up and down the side walls. Alternatively, you can set a fast pace and try to rush him off his feet and win in three games. And finally you can try a combination of all the three methods we have mentioned: for instance, go all out for the first, third and fifth games, and in the second and fourth games either slow the game down and rest, or else make your opponent run, not minding much if you drop the games because of the risks you have to take. There are clearly many practicable combinations of these methods. But just throwing a game away while you have a rest doesn't help much. Your opponent will be given a rest too, and his morale will go up. If you decide to rest, still make your opponent run.

If, because of inferior stamina, you have to work out some such plan, remember the rests between games. You are allowed one minute after each game, and an extra minute after the fourth; i.e. you can have two minutes rest between the fourth and fifth games. It is perfectly legitimate to take the full time allowed; but even two minutes is not much good to you if you are really exhausted.

Finally, remember the value of good footwork and anticipation in the conservation of energy, so practise them.

By good match play - exploiting your opponent's weaknesses of stroke or of temperament - you can beat someone who is supposed to be a better player than you are. By an intelligent plan of campaign you may succeed in beating a fitter man who is your equal in shots and steadiness, But on the whole, squash being "an easy game", the fitter of two equally matched stroke players will win, provided he does not get rattled by his opponent's strategy. So physical training, which we discuss in the next chapter, becomes all-important for the would-be first class squash player

CHAPTER 9 - Training

Training for squash consists of two things: actual practice at squash, and ordinary physical training. To some extent they overlap, in that the best form of physical training for squash is probably to play squash.

So far as practice is concerned, this, as in most forms of human endeavour, is the way to improve. To become really good at anything one has to work hard at it. Squash has an advantage over most ball games in that it is possible to practice quite a lot by yourself, as the wall automatically sends the ball back to you. You can easily practise by yourself serving, hitting the ball up and down the wall trying to keep it close to the wall, getting a good length and so on. It is, of course, much more fun practising by playing someone else, but if your opponent doesn't turn up there is no need to go home in disgust.

But, while many of the strokes can be practised solo, other aspects of the game cannot: such as positioning, mobility and anticipation. Speed about the court is not so much sheer speed as the ability to anticipate your opponent's shot, to start quickly, and to go automatically to the right place arriving there at the right time. The latter quality also conserves your energy. One must also be able to go into reverse quickly if one has anticipated wrongly, or if one's opponent has not hit the ball where he meant to. All this comes with practice. It is quite possible for someone, who can't do the 100 yards in under 12 seconds to achieve much greater "speed about the court" than someone else who can do even time. So, whenever you are playing, even if you can beat your opponent quite easily, try to improve your mobility. Be ready all the time to move instantly in any direction, and practise anticipating your opponent's shots.

As for actual physical training, most people probably regard squash as a means of keeping fit, and the idea of going into training to get fit for squash will probably be novel to them. However, if you are going in for competitive squash, there is no doubt that you will do better if you have trained hard for it. You will also enjoy it more. Being prostrated, with exhaustion, is not conducive to enjoyment of the game.

The best form of physical training for squash, as we have already said, is to play squash, provided you play it hard. You are then exercising the right muscles and also increasing your powers of endurance. The ordinary rules of training - moderation in smoking, drinking and eating, and plenty of sleep - of course apply to squash, as to any

other sport. Similarly, doing something else periodically - golf, skiing, fishing, anything you like - prevents staleness. Whether you do any other form of actual physical training, such as long distance running, in order to strengthen your legs and lungs for the endurance test of a long squash match, must depend upon your own physical - and mental characteristics, and probably on your geographical location.. If you live in London, you probably have access to plenty of hard squash, so have little need to run around Clapham Common or Berkeley Square. If you live in the depths of the country, far from any squash courts, you may find it necessary to go for runs, provided you don't mind being thought eccentric by your friends and can bear the undisguised interest of the passers-by you encounter en route. You can console yourself with the thought of the pleasure you are giving to any stray dogs which join you in your travels.

This chapter has been short, but it is really the most important of all. Practice and training are the basis of all success at the game.

CHAPTER 10 - Obstruction

It is perhaps a pity that obstruction can be considered to be considered to be of importance to warrant a chapter all to itself. But when two large bodies are moving at high speed in a confined space a certain amount of unintentional obstruction is almost inevitable, and as it does spoil the game a few words about it are, I think, justified.

Provided both players follow the suggestions on positioning given in Chapter 7 there should be a few actual collisions. Probably the most fruitful cause of a collision is the player of a drop shot moving backwards towards the rear of the court after playing, or not moving at all. Remember in this case to move out of the way sideways towards the middle of the court, and to move quickly: don't "linger" over the shot. If you do, you will find that a heavy body projecting itself into the small of your back is uncomfortable.

Apart from actually getting in the way of your opponent when he is trying to get to the ball, there are two ways of "obstructing" his shot which you must guard against. One is "crowding" him i.e. getting so close to him when he is playing that he is unable to play his shot freely. The other is standing in such a place that his choice of shot is restricted. We have already discussed this in Chapter 7 - diagram IV.

There are almost bound to be times when you do get in the way because you haven't hit the ball where you meant to. For instance, when intending to hit the ball down the side wall, you miscue and the ball hits the side wall before the front wall and comes back straight at you. A let is the only answer.

As one gets more tired it is increasingly difficult to make the effort to get out of the way quickly, of course. Nevertheless, apart from the fact that a series of lets spoils the game, the more tired you are the more it is to your advantage to avoid lets. A let at the end of every alternate rally will double the length of the game, and so double your exhaustion.

So much for getting out of the way yourself. Now, how does one deal with an opponent who repeatedly obstructs you? If it is a "friendly" game, depending on how friendly it is you can either (1) ignore it (2) ask for lets or (3) suggest to him how he should get out of the way. If it is a match, and your opponent's offence is getting in the way when you are going for the ball, you may be able to circumnavigate him, if you can get used to his ways. If you can't, ask for a let. If his offence is crowding you, there is no

alternative to asking for a let, if you want to have freedom of movement to play your shots. If he is restricting your choice of shot by standing in front of you, or nearly in front of you, you can either (1) accept the situation or (2) ask for a let or (3) hit the ball at him. You may not be able to afford to accept the situation, in which case course (2) is the more gentlemanly. If, however, he persists in the obstruction, recourse may be necessary to course (3). Then, if the ball hits him and would otherwise have gone up on the front wall, it is your point. If it would have gone up, but off a side wall first, it is a let.

In the case where your opponent mishits and the ball comes back to you apparently through or under him, if your reaction is quick enough the most gentlemanly course, again, is to refrain from hitting it and ask for a let. But if you do hit it, and so almost inevitably win the point by hitting him, you really have nothing to reproach yourself for, as it was a bad shot of his anyway, so he deserved to lose the point.

With good will and good humour unintentional obstruction should rarely spoil the game, and we will assume that no-one does it intentionally. Without good will and good humour it is better not to play squash, or any other game.

CHAPTER 11 - Equipment and Clothing

The equipment required for squash is not expensive. As the racket is not subjected, as a tennis racket is, to the hazards of damp grass, rain and the grit of a hard court, the strings should last for years. And, a squash ball being light and soft, the frame should last for many more years. That is, of course, provided you don't hit the wall or your opponent too hard with it. But, with reasonable restraint and accuracy, one should very seldom break a racket. Most rackets will stand up to a good deal of contact with the walls without injury.

And so far as expense is concerned squash has a great advantage over, say, tennis and golf, in the longevity of the ball. Admittedly, whereas a ramble on the golf course may reward the keen eyed searcher with enough balls to last several rounds, a ramble in the squash courts is unlikely to yield a rich harvest in lost squash balls. But one squash ball lasts a very long time.

Nor is any great outlay required on clothing for squash. It might, however, here be mentioned that, though almost any clothing, such as dirty rigger shorts, is usually accepted as adequate for a friendly game, the correct wear for a match is white. This is not due to excessive dandiness on the part of the framers of the rules, but is to prevent the possibility of your opponent losing sight of the black ball against the background of your dark clothing.

Apart from the sartorial aspect, much the most important item of clothing is the footwear. The floor of a squash court not being very resilient - particularly when it is made of concrete, as some of the more ancient still are - it is easy to blister the feet and bruise the heels. The shoe must therefore be well cushioned, but in a long match one does not want to carry heavy weights attached to one's feet, so the shoe must also be light. These requirements are incompatible, so a compromise must be sought. The best solution is probably a pair of fairly light shoes with well cushioned heels, and wear with them two pairs of socks, of which at least one should be of thick wool. The sole of the shoe, incidentally, should be white, to avoid making dirty marks on the floor.

CHAPTER 12 - American Squash

American and British Squash are so different as to be virtually two different games. Thereby the home side in any international contest has such an enormous advantage that a fair competition between the two countries is impossible, and any form of world championship is ruled out. In fact the leading British players at our game would by no means necessarily be the best British players at the American game. And - perhaps a more important consideration - the enjoyment of the game for an Englishman visiting America, or for an American visiting Britain, suffers.

The British version is played all over the world except on the American continent, where the United States and Canada play the American version. The object of this chapter is partly to discuss the possibility of standardising the game, and, as a more immediate aim, at least to give British players some idea of what they will be up against should they rashly contract to take on any reasonably good Americans or Canadians when on a visit to the other side of the Atlantic.

The differences can be summarised as being three minor ones: the size of the court, height of the tin, and the method of scoring, and one major one - the ball.

The American court is 18 inches narrower - 19½ feet wide as against the British 21 feet. And the tin is slightly lower. Standardisation in size must clearly be a long range project, as it would be absurd to expect either side to alter all their existing courts. To my mind the larger court is better. In the first place, the smaller the court the more chance there is of "obstruction". And secondly the main weakness of English Squash as a game - the interminability of the rallies between first class players - would be accentuated by any reduction in area. Actually, the difference is small, and one does not notice it, nor the slightly lower tin, on first going into an American court.

The American scoring is up to 15 instead of 9, and a point is scored by the winner of the rally whether he is "hand-in" or not. Thus, if one is "hand-out" and wins the rally, one scores a point and becomes "hand-in" as well. I think there is a good deal to be said for this system. Whether or not it makes the game shorter has been hotly argued, but in fact on the British system the game need never end, if each player alternately wins the rally. The adoption of the American scoring might therefore make a match between exports rather less of the test of endurance that it tends to become in England. Meanwhile,

the British visitor to America must guard against the tendency to rest when he is “hand-in”, or he will get a rude awakening. As an experiment, the American scoring was used in a number of British competitions during the 1954/55 season.

Now for the main difference - the ball. The American ball is about twice the size of the British one, and although not solid feels completely hard - thereby belying the name of “Squash”. It travels a lot faster than the English ball and puts a premium on hard hitting, as opposed to delicacy of touch. Many Americans are capable of playing delicate angle shots, but on the whole their game is dominated by the hard hitter. In my opinion the tactics and finesse which are possible in English Squash make it incomparably more interesting, and I think this opinion is shared by the majority of Englishmen who have played both games. Indeed, the only very slightly faster English ball which was given a trial a few years ago did not, I understand, prove at all popular. From our point of view then, standardisation probably means adoption of the English ball. However, as the Americans are unlikely to agree to this, it might be possible — as a first step towards standardization - to produce an “intermediate” ball for use in international matches. The only advantage I can see in the American ball is that it encourages one not to stand in front of one’s opponent when he is playing a shot. It is a very painful missile. Another of its peculiarities is that it comes off the side and back walls at quite different angles from those we are accustomed to. The result, in the Englishman’s first game in America, is apt to be a series of air shots, amusing for the spectators but humiliating for the Englishman.

Finally, there are two further slight handicaps under which the English player operates in America. The superiority of American central heating is well known, but one is apt at first to experience some discomfort in playing in a court whose temperature (before the match) is about 80°, as it sometimes is. I think this is preferable, though, to playing in an “outside” unheated court in an American or Canadian winter. At a temperature around zero the limbs are reluctant to move, and the ball still goes very fast, in this case apparently straight along the ground. And the other handicap is that the heavier ball necessitates a heavier racket, which is not so easy to wield. An English racket would not last long with an American ball.

So if you are going on a visit to the United States or Canada, and intend to play squash, get your host to lend you a racket. Or, better still, take an English ball with you

and lure him into playing you with it. He will probably miss it, but at least he shouldn't break his racket.

Addendum.

This “short guide” was written in the 1950s. I have recently (1973) re-read it, and there doesn't seem to be anything I would wish to add, except to Chapters 10 and 12.

In regard to Chapter 10 - “Obstruction” - the referee in a match can now award a penalty point against the offender. This doesn't alter anything mentioned in Chapter 10, but it of course makes it more important, in a match, to avoid obstructing one's opponent.

In Chapter 12 the difference between the American and English balls has been emphasised. I have recently seen a report that the adoption of a compromise ball is being considered — which, as mentioned in Chapter 12, would obviously be faster than the existing English one.

On this subject of the ball, there are now four standard English ones - designated blue spot, red spot, white spot and yellow spot in descending order of speed. There is not in fact a very great difference between them, but the faster balls are certainly more suitable for play in cold conditions. Most “Championships” are played with the yellow spot - the slowest. This is because they are normally played in “heated” courts, i.e. courts in heated buildings. But I saw that in last year's Army Championship, for instance, the rules said that “the white or yellow spot ball will be used at the discretion of the match secretary”.

There is no doubt that the temperature in the court should be taken into account in selecting the ball. Using the yellow spot in an unheated court at near freezing temperature is not conducive to playing good squash - it is virtually impossible to play a good length shot to the back of the court. I have not conducted any experiments with the aid of a thermometer, but at guess I should say that the best ball to use at different court temperatures might be :-

Above 60 F	- Yellow spot
50 – 60 F	- White “
40 – 50 F	- Red “
Below 40 F	- Blue “

It is possible that the dividing points might better be 45, 55 and 65 rather than 40, 50 and. 60.

Not only will playing with the correct ball according to the temperature make the game more like squash as it is intended to be played, but it will make it more enjoyable too. Trying to return a ball which is reluctant to go beyond the service line or to bounce much above ground level is frustrating and a severe strain on the seat muscles, as one is permanently bending and stretching forwards. I don't suggest that everyone should add a thermometer to his squash equipment, but one in the gallery would be a useful adjunct. Failing that, one can make a fair guess at what range of temperature one is playing in.

I may rather have laboured this point, but it does make a better game of it, and there is no point in the authorities producing four speeds of ball if no-one uses three of them.