"TACTICS AND STRATEGY IN SQUASH"

by Roger Flynn

(Grad. Dip. Elite Sports Coaching)

Head Squash Coach - Victorian Institute of Sport
Australian Junior Men's Team Coach 1998-2000

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INTRODUCTION

As a player, one of the most common questions asked of me was: *"How do you always seem to know which shot to play?"*.

The answer, unfortunately, is experience and I say "unfortunately" because, as a coach, part of my job is to teach the player how to gain this experience without also having to make all of the time-wasting mistakes that normally accompany "trial and error" and misdirected experimentation.

Part of the responsibility of the coach is to be able to provide the "short cuts" for the player so that the player can achieve higher levels of performance at an earlier stage than otherwise might be achievable. The coach's role is to accelerate the player's development.

There are a number of questions that are raised by this situation:

- *How do we, as coaches, teach the player to react instinctively with the most appropriate shot for the circumstances he finds himself in?*

- *At what stage in the player's development do we begin to teach these tactics/reactions?*

- *How can we recreate the playing environment for the better/elite players to maintain their tactical habits while continuing to develop their shot-playing capacity?*

- *How can we speed up the decision-making process to enable the player to increase the tempo of his games to a level his opponent cannot sustain, while maintaining the ability to choose from and execute a variety of options at any given moment?*

- *Can we define "pressure" and, if so, how can we teach the player to recognise it and either take advantage of it or defend himself from it?*

There are also several fairly common scenarios, the examination of which will assist us in developing our players' capacity to play a tactically sound game:

1. *When a player first plays a game of Squash, his priority tends to be survival - to get the ball back before it bounces twice and to hit the front wall. Very rapidly, this attitude changes to a more competitive, "I'm going to win this game!" wherein the player may try to hit the ball harder or to hit to his opponent's weaknesses eg. the backhand, etc.*

   This situation shows how early in the player's development that tactics become a priority. Usually, a player who is unable to beat an opponent will visit a coach to "improve". In reality they want to know how to win easier (or at all) and require some information about what is involved in winning. The astute coach will spend time on finding out about the player's opponent(s) and devising styles of play that will help the player to defeat them. Rehearsing the player in these tactics then leads to developing the skills necessary to carry out the tactics.

2. *A pupil approaches the coach with the query "I'm hitting the ball really well and I'm having good rallies, but I can't seem to win a game!".*

   Again, this is a fairly typical situation for a player who has developed a fairly fixed series of responses to the variety of situations that occur during a game. A player who plays the same shot regardless of where his opponent is or one whose game is fairly simple (ie. a "length player"), may play the best shots in the world but they are ineffective because they are played straight back to the opponent.

3. *Any competitive player at game-ball or match-ball down seems to attack harder and tends to play "safer" more restrictive shots than at any other time in the game.*

   Is there any reason why a player should not attack all of the time and or defend all the time? Or, is their a reason why a player should do both at appropriate times? If so, what are those critical times and what type of game is best suited for these situations?

4. *A player has just won a major event or achieved a personal goal, and must front up the next day to play another match in a lesser (to him or her) event that is still very important eg. a teams event after an individual championship. The player is having difficulty concentrating and is mis-hitting right through the warm-up.*

   This situation shows the power of mental skills training and expertise or the lack thereof. The solution lies firstly in the pre-match mental preparation of the player by the coach and secondly in the way the player has been trained prior to the competition.

   The training of a player to this level should incorporate the development of a variety of game plans ranging from simple to elaborate. Having rehearsed the player in these plans to the extent that the player is relatively expert in their execution, a simpler game plan incorporating a minimum of shot variations should be encouraged in this situation. This achieves 2 effects:

   1) The player will have a reduced number of options to have to choose between under pressure thus speeding up the decision-making process

   2) The level of concentration required to stay on top of a simple game plan is less because the player's base instincts will "take over".

5. *Most players have come up against the "old bloke" (or "old girl") who, despite having nowhere near the fitness, speed, athleticism, technique or shot-making capacity, makes us feel like an idiot and beats us hands down. What is the particular tactic he or she is employing and, if it is so successful for an unfit player, why don't we teach it to our younger, less experienced players as part of their repertoires?*

   This reveals a flaw in the way that many coaches traditionally develop their players. We spend most of our time teaching the player to drive the ball hard, to run fast, to get very fit, to volley and to "keep the tempo up". The player is still beaten or made to look silly by his nemesis who is simply playing a style of play that enables him to keep control of the centre court area with a minimum of movement while holding the tempo at a level that is comfortable. Surely this is something that the young player should learn first, before developing the power and strength that comes with age?

The following ideas attempt to address some of these questions and to suggest ways and means by which we can "put that older head on young shoulders".

TACTICS

"Tactics are the essence of skill development"

The terms "simple" and "complex" in regard to sport, refers to the degree of decision-making required in the sport - for example, running and swimming are "simple" sports while fast ball games such as tennis, squash and particularly team sports are classified as "complex" sports.

In complex sports, the number of decisions that must be made and the time available to make them determines the degree of complexity. Squash, quite obviously, is a one of the most complex and, being so, players rely on their "reactions" to respond to the situations that occur in the match.

Our reactions are learned responses to various stimuli. In order to "learn" a reaction, it must be trained by repetition. Unfortunately, it would appear that the bulk of the repetitive activities used by coaches are orientated towards developing skills and techniques without recognising the huge impact that this can and does have on the player's actions during a match - either positively or negatively.

How many times have you watched a match in which one of your charges is playing and, whether outwardly or inwardly, grimaced when the player has let an opportunity go that could have resulted in a winning shot or has played the worst of several possible options? The player is doing exactly what he or she has been trained to do - no more and no less!

Most commonly used routines and drills do not stimulate the tactical decision-making processes required in the game of squash. Instead they tend to reinforce irrelevant and sometimes tactically unsound habits which then manifest themselves in the game.

With a bit of thought, the coach can devise (or adapt) tactically sound drills and routines that will allow the player to rehearse the tactics that you wish them to employ in a repetitive (and competitive) manner.

Whether coaching a beginner or an advanced player, the coach should ensure that the player has a basic understanding of the purpose of a particular shot or combination. Thus, by starting with a game tactic as the basis (task focus), we can then set about developing the ability to execute the actual shots and movements required to carry out that tactic. The player's greater need and understanding produces better and faster results - not only in their technical standard but also in their playing standard.

Basic game tactics, designed to assist the player to win a game of squash and which should underpin the whole training regime, can be summarised by the following:

THE PRINCIPLE OF WINNING

"Winning is the result of carrying out two fundamental tasks - scoring and stopping our opponents from scoring; and it is how well we do each of these tasks that determines whether or not we win".

This in turn suggests two tactical "Rules" that we can incorporate into our training activities:

1) The Hand-in/Hand-out Rule:

The International Rules of Squash Racquets only allow us to score a point when we are Hand-in (serving) at which time our opponents (Hand-out) are not permitted to score.

If that is the case then, applying the "Principle of Winning", when Hand-in, our sole objective should be to attack our opponents with as much gusto as we are able and to take whatever risks are necessary in order to create the most difficult shots for our opponents to return (ie. hit the ball as far away from our opponent as possible).

When we are Hand-out however, only our opponent is permitted to score a point and, again applying the "Principle", our obligation is to stop him/her from scoring. This is best achieved by changing our attack to the back of the court so that our risk of error is minimal and we also push our opponent into the most difficult part of the court from which to play a winner.

2) Control The Front Position:

In either of the above situations the player closer to the front wall controls the rally.

The player in front is in a position to play a short shot (potentially a winner) while the player behind is less likely to be able to play short successfully and tends to be restricted to playing length shots.

IMPLICATIONS

The obvious implication of these factors is that we should teach our pupils to hit the ball short only when they are Hand-In and only when they are in front of their opponents, and to hit attacking length whenever they are Hand-Out or behind their opponents.

In their training, we should devise methods by which we can teach our pupils to recognise their relative position and to play short at every appropriate opportunity - not only because of the potential to win the rally by doing so, but also in order to develop a complete range of strokes with a minimum of risk. At some stage in the player's development, recognition of the opponent's state of recovery from the previous shot will become a factor that must be integrated into the training program.

Playing to the "Hand-in/Hand-out Rule" is a good starting point for developing a sound tactical game but, the reality is, that there are times when we should perhaps attack (or move the ball around) continually - such as when we are purposely trying to wear out our opponents with the intention of winning the "last three games". Flynn (1998) found that there are "critical stages" in the game that expert players appear to respond to instinctively.

The important thing is that the player has been trained to play an attacking game and a safe style of game and the application of these tactics can then be varied to suit the situation - whether critical or otherwise.

For example, in point-a-rally (PARS) scoring, the player simply sets up a buffer zone of points when he will play either attacking or "safe" squash - ie. the player (and coach) may decide that as long as he is 3 points in front of his opponent he will attack and otherwise play safe. This "safety zone" can be varied depending on the opponent or recognition of other crucial stages of the game.

The basic message here is that the player should know how to alter his game to nullify an attack by the opponent or to change an otherwise losing game at the moment that momentum changes - not at the end of the game.

Unless the player is trained in a variety of styles and games plans and their application at critical moments in the game, he or she is destined for mediocrity!

THE PRACTICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TACTICALLY SOUND HABITS

Wollstein (1995) and Flynn (1995) described three main decision-making situations that require training in order to develop an "expert" player:

1. **Shot selection** - which shot to play from the range available, the pace, spin, technique, etc;

2. **Anticipation** - "reading the play" so that more time is available to get to and play the next shot;

3. **Deception** - knowing just when to switch the shot.

The process of deciding which shot to play, whether or not to incorporate a deceptive movement and moving early to the shot involves complex decision-making processes that are dependant on the player's peripheral awareness (incoming information), knowledge base (experience) and strategy (game plan). The actual execution of the shot is merely the resultant "motor skill" triggered by the decisions made in the preceding moments.

In the early stages of development, the player's knowledge base is limited and sometimes flawed. Irrespective of the amount of current incoming information (which is as much as for an expert player), because there is little knowledge to refer that information to, a less than optimal decision is likely. In fact, the player's attention and resultant decision is dominated by observation of their **own position** on the court at the time - eg. if I'm in the front of the court I'll play a drop shot; I'm too close to the wall so I'll play crosscourt so that I don't get a stroke against me.

As the player progresses and gains more information from the various sources shown in Figure 2, his/her **opponent's position** relative to themselves becomes relevant to the decision. At this point, if the opponent is behind the player, the player may try to play short and vice versa.

As the player becomes even more expert, he/she becomes sensitive to the **opponent's weight transfer at impact** - a very subtle but vitally important piece of information that determines whether or not the opponent will be able to return to the "T" before the player strikes the next ball. In this situation, the opponent is open to deceptive play and/or outright winners.

So far, the decisions and processes described have been largely sub-conscious - the quality of the decision being relative to the information base (experience/knowledge) of the player, and can be classified as "reactions" that have been developed over time and by repetition - whether good or bad. There is a further capacity of the player, however, to over-ride any sub-conscious "reactions" by implementation of a game plan or strategy - a conscious decision. Conscious decisions are relatively slow and subject to the player's level of concentration, which, in turn, is grossly effected by the player's emotional state. It appears that "conscious" thought operates "serially" - ie. each thought is processed before the next is considered; whereas sub-conscious thought operates in parallel - many functions can be carried out at once. Distractions associated with the player's emotional state are manifested by gross discrepancies in application of the player's game plan.

SHOT SELECTION DECISION MAKING IN SQUASH

PERCEPTION → SHOT SELECTION → REACTION
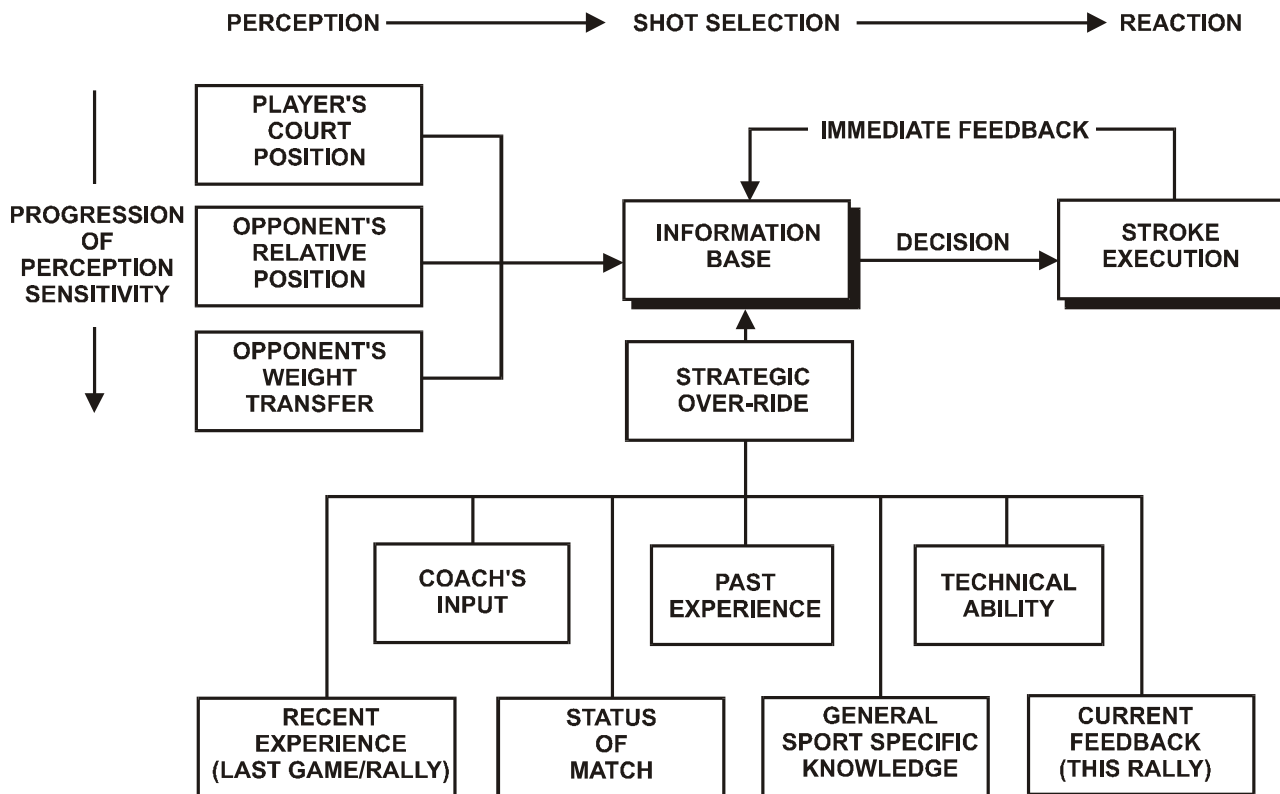
Figure 1: *Information Processing Model of Shot Selection Decision-Making in Squash*

For a player to be able to effectively carry out a game plan under the psychological and physical pressure of competition, these "conscious" strategies must be rehearsed repeatedly so that the sub-conscious "reactions" and underlying decision-making are trained to respond appropriately. The player can then be "programmed", either by the coach or self, with a "key word" corresponding to the game plan which then becomes the focus of the player's concentration - triggering the specific rehearsed reactions required.

TACTICALLY EFFECTIVE ROUTINES AND DRILLS

"Drive, Boast, Drop"

Player 1 (or Coach) plays a straight drive down one wall. Player 2 boasts (preferably while in front of player 1). Player 1 moves diagonally to retrieve the boast and plays a straight drop shot which Player 2 immediately drives straight down the wall. Volleys are usually prohibited in order to force the players to improve their recovery from the back-court/defensive boast to cover the obvious follow up drop shot.

"3-Man Volley Boast and Drive"

Player 1 (or the coach) stands at the rear of the court on one side playing straight drives at the cut-line. Player 2 stands on the "T" and attempts to volley boast. Player 3 retrieves the boast and plays a crosscourt drive which Player 2 attempts to intercept with a volley drive down the wall where Player 1 plays another straight drive. Variations include having Player 1 touch the opposite side wall and Player 3 the back wall between strokes. The boast may also be replaced by a volley drop. This exercise introduces the concept of hitting the ball away from the opponent (or away from the source of the opponent's shot).

"Return of Service Game"

Player 1 (or Coach) and Player 2 stand on opposite sides of the court. Both must remain in front of the rear of the service boxes. Each attempts to lob the ball over the other's head so that the opponent either cannot return the ball or must step behind the box to do so. Points are

scored for either discrepancy but not off an error (eg. lob out of court, etc.) or the service itself. Play a game each side. (As standard improves - no errors are allowed). A great exercise for improving control of the overhead volley - particularly on return of serve, which will place the receiver in front of the opponent immediately after the serve.

"Volley Crosscourts"

Player 1 (or the coach) stands at the rear of the court and drives straight. Player 2 remains in front of the short-line and attempts to intercept the ball with a volley crosscourt drive hit as hard as possible to get to the back wall before Player 1 can stop it. Similarly Player 1 tries to hit the wall past Player 2. Play a game scoring for each pass. Another good exercise to improve the players' ability to hit the ball past his opponent whether in front or behind.

"Quarter-Court"

This exercise provides an opportunity for the feeder to "discover" how to create the maximum difficulty for the opponent. Player 1 takes an appropriate position in either back quarter court with Player 2 on the "T". Player 1 plays shots at random around the court, while Player 2 must return every ball into the quarter court. Player 1, even as a beginner, will be observed to gradually introduce a greater variety of shots as well as some deception in order to make player 2's task harder.

"Around-The-Court"

This exercise expands on the previous exercise and provides an opportunity to develop a much greater awareness of the "value" of the complete range of the player's shots. Player 1 (or Coach) takes an appropriate position with Player 2 on the "T". Player 1 plays shots at random around the court, while nominating a shot for Player 2 to execute. Player 2 must play the shot called (no matter how difficult) with the appropriate footwork, technique and accuracy, before recovering to the "T". As with the previous exercise, the player soon discovers which combinations of shots and circumstances will create the greatest level of difficulty for the opponent. The exercise also provides an opportunity for the "feeder" to practice shots/ deception, etc.

"Around-The-Court Volleys"

As for "Quarter-Court" (above), except that the player must volley every ball with a penalty any time the ball touches the floor. The "feeder" must lift the ball up more to provide volleying opportunities but is still trying to work the player.

TACTICAL GAMES

Tactical games provide an opportunity for the players to rehearse, under contextually valid conditions, various game styles and plans. Typically, one player plays normally while the other is restricted to playing only certain shots, playing to certain parts of the court or playing certain shots from specific parts of the court. That is why these types of games are sometimes called "restricted games". Generally, these types of games tend to focus the player on his or her position on the court relative to the court rather than relative to the opponent but, nevertheless, this provides an introduction to tactical play in the format of game plans.

"Length Game"

The player is only allowed to hit the ball to the back of the court. This develops the players understanding of how to win using the safest shots - shots to the back of the court.

"Straight Game"

The player is only allowed to play straight - ie. straight drives, lobs or drops. Boasts are only permitted when forced to do so out of the back corners.

"Short Game"

The player must play short at every opportunity until the opponent gives an opportunity for a volley winner to the back. The reverse of the "normal" tactic of hitting to the back until an opportunity to play short is provided.

"Short & Long Game"

The player is only allowed to and must play short when in front of the Short line and to the back whenever behind the Short line. This exercise introduces the concept of playing short at the front of the court and long when at the back.

"English Game"

Typically played by many English players, this game requires the player to play short whenever he is in front of the Short line, play a boast whenever he is in either service box and to play a drive whenever anywhere else.

"Inner Court Game"

Using small pieces of electricians' tape, mark a rectangle on the floor of the court 1 racket length from each of the back and side walls and approximately 2 metres from the front wall. This area is known as the "Inner Court" and is the maximum area on the court that either player must "cover" in a game (Figure 1).

Have your players play a game scoring points whenever the opponent's shot bounces outside this Inner Court. Initially this is extremely difficult and is very much an eye opener - even for "good players".

Each player determines how large their opponent's "Inner Court" is and therefore the running area of the court that their opponent must cover. Thus, the players are encouraged to try to increase the running area of the court for the opponent while trying to keep their own "Inner Court" to a minimum.
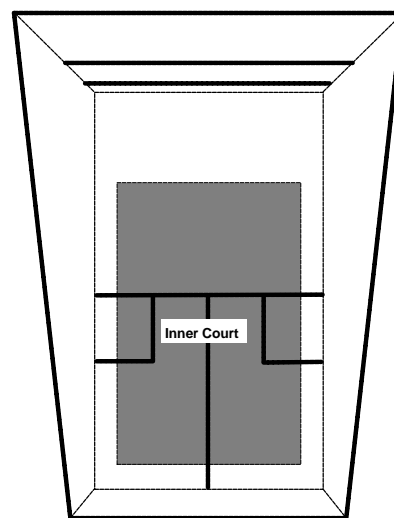
Figure 2: The Inner Court

"Bucket Game"

A bucket is placed against the tin, mid-court. Two players play an ordinary game/match with normal scoring. Whenever a player loses a point, that player stands behind the Short line and has 3 attempts at hitting the ball into the bucket. If he fails to get any of the 3 attempts into the bucket his opponent imposes a penalty (ie. jumps, push-ups etc.) which the player must immediately complete. If the player succeeds in getting a ball into the bucket there is no penalty and play simply continues. Two effects will be observed by the coach:

1. The players gradually become more and more "defensive" whenever they are not serving due to the danger of losing a point (and having to attempt the bucket and subsequent penalties). They begin to ensure that they do not give their opponents the front position (in case the opponent plays a winner) and they begin to eliminate their short shots (because of the risk of error).

2. The players also gradually relax more on service and start to play more shots in order to win a point and get their opponent to do more penalties.

The players go through a very rapid learning process and become more and more accustomed to attacking vigorously on Hand-in and defending "religiously" on Hand-out.

THE PATTERNS

The term "patterns" is used to describe drills that have an integral, tactical, decision-making, training effect as opposed to routines and drills which tend to be repetitive rehearsals of technical or skill exercises without a tactical, decision-making basis.

There are various stages incorporated into the list of patterns that are designed to provide opportunities for repeated practice of the three major decisions required to be rehearsed:

1. In the "**simple**" patterns, shot-selection for various situations is rehearsed and the actual shots practised under full match (or slightly higher) tempo. Attention is focused on the player and opponent's relative position at impact.

2. In the "**random**" patterns, anticipation and deception are introduced in a lateral sense (which side of the court is the ball going to be played to?). Attention is focused on opponent's arm and racquet immediately before and at impact.

3. When "**options**" are introduced, anticipation and deception in a longitudinal sense is introduced (is the ball going to the front or the back of the court?).

4. "**Phasing**" introduces the concept of manipulating the opponent's weight transfer by creating precedents so that the player over-anticipates or delays their recovery to the "T". Attention is forced onto the opponent's general recovery and, later (as expertise develops) on the opponent's weight transfer at impact. "Extended" and "Reverse Phasing" are further extensions to this level.

All of the patterns are designed to develop and enhance the ability to carry out the "Hand-in rule".

As a general rule, the player in front plays short and the player behind plays long. In some cases (such as in the "Drive-Boast Pattern"), the player retrieving the short shot is called on to play what, at first glance, appears to be the worst tactical shot he could play (ie. the crosscourt drive from the front of the court). The reason for this is that the crosscourt drive is one of the most common shots played from the front of the court (Haanpää, 1996). The player plays this shot so that the player controlling the "T" is given the opportunity to rehearse volleying the crosscourt and returning the ball back to the back of the court.

"SIMPLE" PATTERNS

In the initial stages, the "simple" patterns restrict play to one diagonal at a time and the shots are also developed in a logical sequence - in order of increasing difficulty. As the player(s) improve, the patterns are "randomised" by allowing all length shots to be played to either back corner. This is still classified as a "simple" level due to the fact that it is the minimum standard required to have an effect under match conditions.

The patterns themselves are basic game plans that the players should be encouraged to incorporate into their games (when they are serving!).

Note: In the "simple" patterns, if a player is forced (or volunteers) to play short from behind, his opponent must immediately play a straight drop shot.

Pattern 1 - "Drive-Boast Pattern"

The pattern starts by Player 1 driving the ball to the back of the court. Player 2, if possible, intercepts the ball while he is in front of Player 1 and, if he succeeds, immediately boasts to the front, diagonally opposite corner. If Player 2 cannot intercept the ball or, if at the moment he does so is behind Player 1, then he must play a straight drive to the back of the court to try and get front position again.

If Player 2 has successfully intercepted the ball and boasted to the front, Player 1 must now retrieve the shot and play a crosscourt drive back into the back corner. Player 2 then attempts to intercept the crosscourt and plays a straight drive to the back, hopefully before Player 1 has recovered sufficiently to enable him to retrieve it. If possible Player 1 should attempt to intercept the volley drive in front of Player 2 and play a boast to the front - reversing the situation. If not able to, Player 1 then chases the ball to the back and, because he is behind again, plays a straight drive down the wall so as to enable him to get in front of Player 2, etc.

If either player can keep control of the front position his opponent will be forced to run up and down the diagonal of the court until he either gets front position or his legs give out!

Pattern 2 - "Drive-Boast Pattern with Straight Drives"

As for Pattern 1 except that, when chasing the boast, the player straight drives down the opposite wall.

Pattern 3 - "Lob-Drop Pattern"

Player 1 lobs the ball down the wall to the back of the court. Player 2, if possible, intercepts the lob in front of Player 1 and plays a crosscourt volley drop into the diagonally opposite, front corner. If he is unable to intercept while in front of Player 1, he must then play a lob down the wall to the back.

If Player 2 successfully intercepts and drops, Player 1 then retrieves the drop with a crosscourt lob back into the back corner which Player 2 attempts to volley and lobs straight to the back corner again keeping the Player 1 running along the diagonal.

If Player 1 is able to intercept the ball while he is in front of Player 2 then he must play the drop and attempt to make Player 2 do all the work.

Pattern 4 - "Lob-Drop Pattern with Straight Lobs"

As for Pattern 3, except that the player chasing the cross-court drop must play a straight lob down the opposite wall.

Pattern 5 - "Lob-Boast Pattern"

As for Pattern 3, except that the player in front must use a boast.

Pattern 6 - "Lob-Boast Pattern with Straight Lobs"

As for Pattern 5, except that the player chasing the boast must play a straight lob.

Pattern 7 - "Drive-Boast-Drop-Lob Pattern"

This pattern combines the two previous patterns into what is essentially a very good tactical game plan and, as with all the patterns, with rehearsal becomes quite instinctive.

As with Pattern 1, Player 1 first straight drives to the back. Player 2 attempts to intercept in front with a boast. If Player 2 is unable to intercept the ball while in front he is then required to straight drive to the back and Player 1 attempts to intercept.

If Player 2 has successfully intercepted and played the required boast then Player 1 must play a straight drop into the front corner which Player 2 then retrieves with a lob crosscourt to the back corner. Player 1 attempts to volley drive the lob to the back so that Player 2 is forced to run the full length of the diagonal and Player 1 is able to maintain front position.

Pattern 8 - "Drive-Boast-Drop-Lob Pattern with Straight Lobs"

As for Pattern 5 except that the lobs must be hit straight down the wall.

Pattern 9 - "Drive-Drop Pattern"

All the previous Patterns have concentrated on hitting the ball to the diagonally opposite corners. This Pattern now develops a straight attack on the same basis of front player short, back player long.

Player 1 plays a straight drive down the wall. If Player 2 can intercept in front of Player 1 he plays a straight volley drop down the wall. Player 1 then retrieves this drop with a straight drive which Player 2 attempts to drive straight past Player 1 to the back of the court. If Player 1 can intercept this drive he then plays a drop and the situation is reversed.

As with all the patterns if the player cannot intercept or does so after moving back behind his opponent, he must now play long.

Pattern 10 - "Drive-Crosscourt Drop Pattern"

Similar to Pattern 1, this pattern replaces the boast with the drop shot towards the nick. The players may boast if the ball is too tight or if it is behind them at the point of impact. The player chasing the drop must play a cross-court drive.

"Random" Patterns

All of the above patterns are opened up slightly by allowing all length shots (drives, lobs, etc.) to be played to either side of the court. It is best to progress through at least the first six "simple" patterns before moving onto the "random" patterns. Then onto Patterns 7 onwards.

Pattern 11 - "Drive-Drop Pattern - Random"

Combine Patterns 9 & 10 so that the player in front drops to either front corner. The other player retrieves the drop and plays a drive to either back corner. The first player attempts to cut this drive off and drive to either back corner. If this succeeds in reaching the back the other player drives again to either back corner and attempts to get in front.

Pattern 12 - "10-Minute Pattern"

The player in front must play a short shot (any short shot). If behind, players must play long - straight or cross-court. If retrieving a short shot the player must play a straight or cross-court drive. Called "10-Minute Pattern" because this is the length of time it usually takes to exhaust the players!

Pattern 13 - "Anything Goes Pattern"

The player in front must play short using any short shot while the player behind must play long with any variation of drive or lob.

"COMPLEX PATTERNS" / VARIATIONS

There are a number of variations on this theme that can be incorporated into the training program at appropriate times to continue to overload the player and to continue to develop the player's "expertise".

These variations include "**randomising**" the exercise (as already discussed) whereby the length shots in the exercise are allowed to be played to either side of the court. Other variations include:

"Options"

The patterns can be altered by the addition of "options" - typically allowing the player chasing the attacking short shot to play an optional drop shot (straight or crosscourt) when normally restricted to playing a length shot. For example, during the "Drive-Boast-Drop-Lob" pattern, allowing the players to play another drop shot off the normal drop shot places greater emphasis on the quality of the first drop - if it is a good restrictive (tight, in the nick, short etc.) drop, the second player will have greater difficulty playing it and will be more predictable in his reply. If it is a poor drop, the second player will have more options - reducing the predicability and the first player's chances of taking the next shot early.

This can then be extended to allow the optional playing of short shots from behind.

"Phasing"

A further variation which is best introduced when the players are reasonably competent at the basic forms of each pattern is called "Phasing". This term refers to the situation where a player is given the option of hitting the ball back to the same corner as previously (eg. after hitting a drive to the back corner and getting in front, instead of playing short on the next shot, the player hits the ball back down the wall again to try and catch his opponent running out of the corner. Initially, phasing is limited to one shot in every 10-12

"Extended Phasing"

"Extended Phasing" allows the player to hit to the back of the court as often as necessary before playing short and vice versa. This stimulates the player's awareness of his opponent's

weight transfer and recovery while also encouraging the development of "pattern deception" - fooling the opponent's into believing that he/she knows what the player will hit next by repeating set responses a number of times. One of the questions raised in the Introduction referred to the commonly used term: "pressure". In light of the previous discussion, pressure can be defined as "forcing your opponent to play the ball when their body-weight is moving in any direction other than the optimal - ie. immediately after impact, directly towards the "T".

"Reverse Phasing"

The players can now play short from behind the opponent.

"DESIGNER GAMES", "GAME SENSE" and "ACTION METHOD"

Primarily used in the teaching of complex sports, all three terms refer to the concept of teaching people how to play rather than being concerned with the way the ball is struck.

The term *"Designer Games"* was coined by Dr. Ric Charlesworth, Head Coach of the Australian Olympic Women's Hockey Team, to describe small games designed to stimulate and teach the players how to react effectively under match conditions.

Similarly, *"Game Sense"* is a teaching method/philosophy developed by English coach educator, Dr. Rod Thorpe, and adopted enthusiastically by the Canadians who have modified and adapted the approach to come up with the *"Action Method"*. Both of these focus on teaching people how to "play" rather than the traditional "technique" oriented approach. This method promotes the use of similar activities to the "designer games" mentioned above.

As an example of such a game designed for squash, we can take any of the patterns described above and play a game in which the play is limited to, for example, the back right-hand corner and the front left-hand corner. The players are only allowed to drive or boast. Play a game to 15 points (point a rally scoring) scoring whenever the opponent fails to return the ball, uses any other shot than those allowed, or fails to keep the ball within the two quarter-courts. In instructing the players, the emphasis is placed on trying to make the ball bounce twice before the opponent can return it.

SUMMARY

It is apparent that a systematic, progressive, perceptual motor-skill development program is necessary to produce players with tactically "old heads on young shoulders". The exercises described in this article provide the basis for such a system with examples of the types of activities that can accelerate the development of a player's perceptual awareness and increase their knowledge base to assist in making more effective decisions under match conditions.

Use your imagination, think about what you want your players to be able to do under pressure and train them to do so!

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ACCOMPANYING PAPER

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