

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



**THE KILLER
INSTINCT**

When I had been playing squash for four years I entered a tournament and found myself playing one of the premier shotmakers in the game. At that time, all I could do was retrieve the ball and hit it hard down the walls and crosscourt. I did my best. But my anxiety made me overhit so that the ball came too far off the back wall. And my opponent had a phenomenally 'on' day. Whatever he hit was irretrievable. I tried to hang in until his brilliance disappeared, but it never did. He just hit one perfect shot after another. The match finally ended.

When we walked off the court he said to me, very sincerely, "Gerry, I'm really sorry. I'm almost never on like that. I feel really badly." And he genuinely meant it. He was such a gentle soul that he was truly apologetic

that he had so totally demolished me.

I remember being startled at the time by his deep-felt contrition and I felt a need to reassure him that he had done no harm, and that the gallery and I had enjoyed his brilliance. I wondered why he didn't exult in his performance and I wondered quietly to myself whether he was much too gentle a person ever to be a national champion.

Although he was more talented than his competitors, he never became a national champion. He seemed to lack the killer instinct.

In my experience, the person who exemplified the killer instinct best in squash was Sharif Khan. He intuitively sensed an opponent's vulnerability, and when he had his adversary by the throat, he could squeeze. Sharif is not innately aggressive, and yet, on the court he could make his opponent feel as though the game of squash had become a battle for life and death. A vanquished competitor told me, "I felt as though he had pinned my picture to his living room wall and thrown darts at it all week, and today he kicks hell out of me for making holes in his living room wall!"

During those fiery years Sharif motivated himself before a match by personalizing the contest. He convinced himself that his opponent was trying to take bread off his table and knock him off his throne. Having generated this private animosity, Sharif was willing to expend himself totally to battle his adversary.

He had no compunction about attacking a weakened opponent. He studied each challenger and knew the subtle indications of early physical fatigue in each one. When he saw this, he would step into the server's box and launch a bullet-like power serve directly at his opponent's body. He told me, "If I hit him, I know I'm going to win the next two points."

Is it hard to attack when your opponent is on the ropes? You bet! Most of us don't want to. We tell ourselves we shouldn't kick a man when he is down. If we get him by the throat, we don't want to squeeze. In fact, many of us don't really want to get him by the throat.

It's amazing how many rationalizations we can find to hold back. We don't want people to think we're ruthless. We don't want to humiliate our opponent. We fear reprisals.

As a psychiatrist, I believe that there are innate psychological barriers against this kind of aggression. Human beings, along with many of the higher mammals, have an inborn reflex that keeps them from attacking when an adversary seems defeated or hurt. This is a barrier that is extremely difficult to overcome.

If you are a recreational player, it doesn't matter. You play for fun, a good workout and camaraderie. You can afford to let up. If you are a tournament player, you may not want to let up when your opponent seems beaten, but you may find that you often do. You will

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need to find motivators—your own personal incentives—that you can use to keep yourself pushing when you've got your opponent on the run. And you will have to learn to recognize the excuses you use to justify holding back, and try to replace them with ideas that will keep you attacking.

One champion does it this way. "I think just like a boxer. When I've got my opponent stunned, I say to myself, the merciful thing to do is to end it as quickly as possible. And I do."