

# CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



## THE ATTACK - PART I

In my last column I wrote about avoiding the unforced error. The error-free game seems like a defensive strategy. It is really a rudimentary but brutally effective offense. Many players have built successful careers, especially in international squash, by playing this type of game and proving to their exhausted opponents that "defense can be the best offense."

However, the 70+ game favors the attacking player. We all need to learn the fundamental attacking shots and continuously hone them. And we all should carry two shots on our racquet in attacking situations, two shots that move our opponent in precisely opposite directions-like a straight drop shot and a deep crosscourt drive. Building this repertoire of offensive skills is necessary for top level competition. In the next three columns I will write about how you can plan your attack and how you should use it on the squash court. I won't try to teach you the strokes you will need, but I will suggest how you can use the weapons you do have.

How do you attack an opponent's game? Here are three ways. You can attack your opponent's weakness, you can attack his strength, or you can attack his mind. Attacking weakness is the easiest way to dominate an adversary and that's the subject of this column. It sounds simple enough, but first you have to find his weakness.

How should you scout the enemy? I start by watching him play. I divide the court into six zones, a forecourt, mid-court and back court, on each of the forehand and backhand sides. I then study what my opponent typically does in those areas, when he is attacking, when he is under pressure being attacked and when he is in a neutral situation. I look first for obvious weaknesses that I can exploit. Is he clearly weaker, more error-prone and more likely to hit loose balls on one side of the court? Does he move to the front wall slowly? Does he twist badly? Is his fitness suspect?

Here's an example. You may learn that your adversary is weak on his deep backhand. If you can beat him without attacking his weakness, that's great. But, if he is as good as you are, you can swing a match around by forcing him to play where he is weakest. You may decide to do this only at critical periods in the match. Or you may play a higher percentage of shots to his deep backhand throughout the match. If it turns out that he also has a dominating and intimidating forehand, you may decide to hit virtually every shot to his backhand. If you do this, you sacrifice the elements of surprise and variety in your game, and your opponent may adjust to your tactic. However, even such an obvious strategy can bear unexpected fruit if you pursue it relentlessly. It's okay if your opponent knows what you're doing, and even better if he frets about it. Knowing that you're exploiting his weakness will frustrate and irritate an inexperienced player. He may try to do more on his weak side than he is capable of, and the resulting errors will only compound his problems. Then, when you finally do play the ball to his strong side, he may have so much pent-up annoyance that he hits the ball recklessly, trying to erase all his

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frustrations with one stroke. In fact, he may very well smash that ball into the tin and have to endure the added mortification of seeing even his strength desert him in the face of your tenacious assault on his weakness.

Experienced players will be able to spot less obvious weaknesses. One of these is predictability under pressure. A player who may do any number of tricky things with a ball he gets to in plenty of time may be reduced to a single option when he reaches that same ball under pressure, stretched and rushed. I have a friend that I enjoy playing. When I hit a forehand boast to his backhand, if he arrives in plenty of time he can hit a variety of shots-a straight drop shot, a straight drive, a reverse and a good roll corner. I have to be in three different places on the court at the same time to cover them all. But if I hit a slightly better boast and he is stretched, I know he is going to hit a crosscourt drive. And I'm waiting to hit that ball down the wall to a perfect length before he can recover and get back to it. Yes, when players are under pressure, their options are reduced and their vulnerabilities are exposed.

A predictable attack is also a weakness. Your opponent may have a very good forehand drop shot. So good, in fact, that every time he has an opening, he will go for it, and that's the flaw! You are deep in the backhand court. You hit a shot that puts him short on the forehand, his favorite spot. You don't wait and wonder. You tear up behind him, knowing in advance what he will do, and you may just convert his "sure" winner into a legitimate let, or even a let point.

There are also "invisible weaknesses." These are apparent strengths that have an accompanying flaw. I have played

several opponents whose stroking was impeccable. They played picture-perfect squash. They set up well, got down over the ball, stroked beautifully and controlled play on the court impressively. How could this textbook execution hide a weakness? Time was the answer. Given enough time, they were picture-perfect, but *enough* was precisely what they needed.

I thought that the way to expose their hidden weakness was to rush them. Hashim Khan calls this "stealing your opponent's time." How do you do it? You try to get to every ball as early as possible. You hit the ball quickly, you hit it hard, and you volley whenever you can. The effect can be very satisfying. Given less time to execute, your opponent will carry fewer options on his racquet. He will be off balance. He will have to scramble and he will be forced to play squash in a way that is not comfortable for him. His execution will almost certainly deteriorate because he can't hit the ball where and how he likes to hit it.

You may find it hard to persist in attacking a weakness. And when your opponent is fresh he may be able to compensate for his weakness. Keep at it. Force him to keep expending the extra energy and concentration to compensate, and the results will come down the road. Some of you will feel embarrassed to blatantly exploit your opponent's weakness and, prompted by guilt, you will bring the ball back to his strength and promptly be punished for your generosity. You may tell yourself that it's bad sportsmanship to take advantage of your opponent in this way. I think not. The alternative is to play the ball to his strength, which may not be bad sportsmanship, but is certainly bad judgment.

Furthermore, your opponent is not helpless. He may very well be trying to exploit your weakness, while at the same time adjusting to your attack. If you are a better player, you will be waiting for his adjustment and ready to take advantage of it. Here is an example. You have successfully run an unfit opponent until he is on the verge of exhaustion. You know he will adjust by trying to keep rallies short, attacking your

service and going for a winner as quickly as possible. If you correctly anticipate this, you will move forward in the court so that you can cover the front wall, pounce on those balls, and reply with your own short shot, knowing your drained opponent will not be able to get to the front wall in time.

It takes planning and determination to exploit your opponent's vulnerability. If you are a novice, start by analyzing the squash matches you watch. An experienced friend will help you by confirming the weaknesses you spot, and showing you those you don't see. The opponents you play will have obvious weaknesses. Find them, play them, and enjoy yourself.

If you are an experienced player, you will also scout your opponent in the warm-up and during the match. You should watch for patterns of play that you can exploit. You will be able to pressure your opponent and force him to make predictable replies that you can attack. However, your opponent will be able to adjust, and you should be thinking about how he is likely to adjust, and how you can turn that to your advantage. Remember, it isn't always the player with the better weapons and the more complete game that wins. It is the player who can focus his strengths against the weaknesses of his opponent.