

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



THE ATTACK
-PART II

Sharif Khan, the mercurial eldest son of squash's grand master, Hashim Khan, dominated North American squash for more than a decade. I was witness to one of the most dramatic series of confrontations in his career. A young and very determined professional in Toronto was rising to challenge Sharif's domination of the game. The stories about this youngster's dedication to training were fear-inspiring. To build his stamina, he would run 10 miles to a tough squash match, play it, and run back to his home club. How would Sharif handle this challenge? What would Sharif do against an opponent whose fitness was (in my mind) unbeatable?

The answer came in three titanic confrontations. In the first tournament their initial game seemed to last for an eternity. Was his opponent prolonging the match-or was Sharif? It was apparent that in order to pressure Sharif physically, the youngster had to put on a gut-wrenching display of miraculous court coverage. After a brief pause, the struggle continued into the second game and the unbelievable

became clear-Sharif was running *his* opponent! Sharif worked him until at last his formidable reserves were depleted and finally Sharif left the court, victorious against an exhausted and dispirited rival.

The scenario was repeated on each of their next two encounters, except for one remarkable variation. I was electrified to see that not only was Sharif running his opponent to exhaustion but he was using a different pattern of play in each match to extend, exhaust and dismiss his chastised challenger. Who was the victim? A young and rapidly improving Clive Caldwell, who was later to chisel out his own remarkable reputation for success and longevity at the very pinnacle of squash.

What was the lesson? Sharif was always looking over his shoulder for potential challengers

to his crown. He was not content simply to beat them. When he confronted them, he tried to dominate and demoralize them. He knew that the surest road to doing this was to successfully attack his opponent's strength, and given the opportunity, this was what he always chose to do. He was experienced enough to know that one of the best ways to beat a runner is to run him. In this way, *you* control *him*. And you don't succumb to the temptation we all feel against a runner, to take foolish risks in order to end rallies quickly. Sharif had the tools, the discipline and the temperament to do this and to keep doing it for as long as it took.

What can you do about your opponent's strength? At first we're all the same-we just succumb-although we can *observe* what is beating us and later think about how to combat it. You will soon see that most players have a favorite spot on the court for their best weapon, and a favorite shot to hit if off.

Later, you may learn the first adjustment-avoid. Your opponent is consistently beating you with a crosscourt nick hit short off your high lob serve to his backhand. The answer? Once you're

convinced that he can do this consistently, don't let him see another high lob serve to his backhand for the entire game. Or, if he hits a great backhand drop shot from the left forecourt, never leave him there.

Later, you will learn ways to *neutralize* your opponent's attack.

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At the Saturday night dinner preceding the finals of the Canadian National Championships years ago, I was perplexed and troubled. How was I going to handle my opponent's toughest weapon, an accurate and tight reverse corner that always seemed to die in two bounces before it could hit the second side wall? A knowledgeable and helpful squash friend advised, "Gerry, that guy's got a real tough reverse. But you know, the court you're playing on has wooden walls. It's really lively. If you pound the ball in the warm-up and get it really hot, his reverse is going to come off the third wall and you'll easily get to it."

My friend was right. Neutralizing that weapon and getting to those balls made enough difference for me to win that match.

But the best way to deal with an adversary's toughest weapon is to *attack* it successfully. I was beaten in a tournament by a player who hit a quick and effective backhand reverse from midcourt. He hit it often and so well that it turned out to be the deciding factor in the match. After the match I thought about it, and I hatched a plan. I would be playing him soon in another tournament and I was determined to be ready to attack when he trotted out his weapon. I decided that the first time I hit a

ball into his target area I would be looking for the reverse and I would bust my gut getting to the ball. Then I would punish it.

Four points into our next match, the situation came up and I pounced. The next three times he hit the reverse, I delivered a different, stinging, attacking shot. After that I saw no reverses from him for the rest of the match, except for one or two which were very tentative. After-wards, he told me how it felt when I jumped on his weapon and counter-attacked it successfully. "I really didn't know what to do. You were not only getting there, but when you got to the ball, you were in your strongest position on the court. You could do more with the ball than I could handle. For the rest of the match I never felt comfortable about using my reverse, even though I didn't think I could beat you without it." He didn't.

There is only one Sharif. But you may be able to take a leaf from his book. Analyze and attack your opponent's strength. It takes planning, nerve and execution, but it is by far the most effective way to neutralize him, to shake his confidence and to dominate him. Try it.