

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



THE ATTACK
-PART III

Michael Desaulniers was a brilliant young Canadian hopeful. Victor Niederhoffer was the enigmatic and unorthodox defending champion. They confronted each other at the U.S. National Singles Championship before a packed gallery of spellbound spectators. At the beginning of the match Desaulniers held the T, volleyed brilliantly, and beat Niederhoffer to the punch, dominating him and scoring a string of scintillating points. The crowd tuned to the mounting drama.

Suddenly the match stopped. Victor wheeled to the referee, announced that he smelled cigarette smoke and insisted that someone was smoking in the gallery. The referee turned to the gallery and we turned accusingly to one another, searching for the invisible culprit. He was not found and finally the referee requested that anyone smoking

refrain from doing so, and the match resumed.

But it was a different match. Desaulniers had lost the initiative. He was edgy. He could not relocate his brilliance and Niederhoffer began to dominate and systematically dismantle the talented youngster.

After the match, I heard Victor compliment Ian Stewart, the president of the Canadian Squash Racquets Association, "Congratulations, Ian, you've got a champion there." Within a few years Michael Desaulniers had become the premier player in North America.

What do you think of Niederhoffer's ploy? It was a blatant maneuver that only a player of Victor's eccentricity and consummate skill could get away with. Victor always seemed to find new and startling ways to flaunt the unorthodoxy which concealed his shyness. Most of us would not have had the authority, the confidence, the timing, or perhaps even the wish, to carry it off, but maybe we can learn from it.

The essence of any psychological ploy is that it interrupts the opponent's concentration. Its purpose is to distract him so that he will shift his attention away from what he is doing well. It breaks his physical rhythm. It breaks his mental rhythm. But more than that. The victim knows that you are toying with his mind, and even if he determines not to be distracted, he will be angry that you think him such an easy mark. He may resolve that your antics won't get to him, but even in doing that, he is focusing on something other than his play.

Experienced players do it to inexperienced players in a variety of ways. A methodical player slows the game down, while his hyperactive opponent twitches with frustration. Finally, he floats a juicy serve. The distracted victim over-swings, smashing the ball into the tin.

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between games, on the perfection of his backhand drop shot. "Your backhand drop shot is amazing. You're so consistent. You never seem to miss. I wish you could show me how you do that." The next game begins. The opportunity appears, but now the youngster is self-conscious about his drop shot and suddenly it becomes a spastic and ineffectual parody of its former consistency. At this point, the older player steps in and executes a perfect backhand drop shot. And the youngster, knowing he's been had, self-destructs.

The devices range from subtle to brutal. They include excessive bonhomie, feigned self-criticism, good-natured humor, irrelevant banter, lavish praise or blatant physical intimidation. Stephen Potter, the author of the well known book "Gamesmanship" has devised a series of cunning and devious stratagems that delay, distract, confound and fluster his opponents. He may subtly impugn their sportsmanship by questioning a call they failed to

make. He may appear to concede the match only to attack viciously. He may offer earnest advice which is puzzling and meaningless.

Do I do this? I must confess, I am seldom capable of such innovation. Quite apart from the question of whether these maneuvers are in the spirit of the game, I avoid psychological ploys because I find them distracting. I play best when I keep my mind tightly focused on my own execution and avoid all diversions.

A successful ploy is any maneuver which distracts an opponent and focuses him on something other than the execution of his game. Victor Niederhoffer could distract his opponents in the most outlandish ways and then play a series of tough, devastating rallies. Some squash players may wish to emulate Niederhoffer. But, for most of us, I think the goal should be to be half as good as Victor; that is, forget about the psychological ploys and learn to play the tough devastating rallies.

When all is said and done, the best way to intimidate and distract your opponent is to come at him with a determined, disciplined and uncompromising attack.

With your racquet, not your mouth.