

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



YARDSTICKS

This is a good time of year for you to assess your squash game. Some of you are coming back to the game after a summer of recharging your batteries. Others will be switching back to the hardball game from softball. How can you evaluate your own game? Wouldn't it be helpful if there were a yardstick that could measure it and tell you? Well, there is. In fact, I'm going to suggest five yardsticks to you.

If you had to list the five most important qualities that make a good squash player, what would they be? Think about that before you read on, and compile your own list.

Now I'll give you my list and we can see how they compare: racquet skills, fitness, tactical ability, quickness to the ball, and mental toughness. How does that compare with your list? More importantly, how does that compare to your abilities? If you're like most players, you're probably stronger in one or two of these areas and weaker in the others.

I will discuss each of these basic elements so that you can evaluate yourself. It's worth doing. Most of us have a sense of ourselves as a good squash player, a mediocre squash player, or perhaps a weak squash player, but to improve our game, we need to know where our natural talents lie and what specific areas need strengthening.

Back to the list. First on many lists will be RACQUET SKILL.

This means an efficient swing that will deliver the ball exactly where you want it, with the spin and pace that will make that shot most effective. And, the ability to carry at least two shots on your racquet, that move your opponent in opposite directions. Racquet skills are based partly on God-given hand/eye coordination and partly on the learned mechanics of grip and swing.

Some shotmakers, like Qamar Zaman, astound us with their accuracy. They are the fortunate few who are born with almost super-human fine motor coordination and have worked to hone their swing to a razor's edge. Their racquet has eyes. They will excel in any sport that requires fine motor coordination-billiards, golf, table tennis.

However, shot makers have their own problems. They aren't willing to grind. If you are young and one of the chosen few, beware the "curse of talent." You may win early in your career because your racquet is so talented. But you may like to stand around and watch your pretty shots. When competition gets tougher, less talented grinders and retrievers will begin to beat you. Then you will get discouraged and drop by the wayside, unless you expand your game.

What about those of you not blessed with exceptional talent? Well, there are many routes to winning squash besides being an outstanding shot maker. What you do need is a reliable stroke. And the good news is that with coaching and practice, you can develop one. Since you're not a sharpshooter, you should learn to allow a greater margin of error for your shots, aiming higher above the tin. And you should develop a game that does not require accuracy that is beyond you.

FITNESS. Fitness is achieved by playing hard and by training. I will write more about that in a future article. What are the benefits of fitness? Mostly strength and endurance-the ability to play more tough rallies for a longer time, faster recovery between rallies, confidence that you can persevere even when your opponent forces you to run more than he does. The ultimate in squash fitness is being able to play

every rally hard.

How does your fitness rate? If you're not satisfied, probably the easiest approach is to simply extend your squash workout by adding eight minutes of aerobic work to the end of each match, with cycling, rowing or jogging. And you can chart your progress objectively by the drop in your resting heart rate, the decrease in your body fat, or improvement in your oxygen uptake. Anyone can get fit.

The player with TACTICAL ABILITY is like a good army general. He knows his opponent's game. He has a flexible battle plan. He analyzes play as it proceeds. He knows how to neutralize his rival's strength and how to exploit his weakness. He has "court sense"-he knows where to hit each shot to make his opponent travel the greatest distance, to twist him, or fool him.

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He uses patterns of play that keep his opponent mentally off balance so he doesn't develop a sense of rhythm, doesn't feel he can get into the match, is repeatedly surprised, or made to feel awkward. Tactical ability comes from experience and thoughtful analysis. The best guidelines I can recommend to you are found in Jack Barnaby's columns in this publication.

QUICKNESS TO THE BALL is partly physical, partly mental. Sprinters are quick because they have a fast reaction time ("quick reflexes") and a high proportion of fast twitch muscle fibers which are necessary for rapid leg movements. You can improve both of these with training.

Flexibility improves quickness. It helps you stretch and twist to get your racquet on balls that seem out of reach. Sharif Khan and Mark Talbott are quick because they're flexible. You can improve your flexibility with stretching exercises. Just remember to hold your stretches for a minimum of ten seconds.

Anticipation makes you quick to the ball. Better players seem to know where the ball is going before their opponent has struck it. How? They are reading their memory banks, predicting the probabilities as their opponent lines up his shot. But more than that, they are tuning in to fine cues, such as the position of his feet, his head, or his wrist, to know where the ball is going before it is struck.

Good position on the court makes you quick to the ball. Watch Jahangir Khan. Especially, watch what he does *after* he hits the ball. This is what impresses me most about his game. Unlike most of us who are lazy after we hit the ball, Jahangir almost catapults back to a strong position on the T. From there he can watch his opponent strike the ball, and pounce. This requires enormous discipline, but it pays wonderful rewards.

MENTAL TOUGHNESS is concentration and determination. Concentration is the ability to keep your mind firmly anchored in the present, to stay focused on the game, your plans and your own execution, and to ignore distractions.

Determination is the ability to hang tough when the going gets tough. It is what makes a baseball pitcher or a squash player hard to beat, even on those days when he doesn't have his best stuff. He uses what he has. He stays gritty. He gives nothing away. He makes his opponent work for every point. And he is not intimidated by his own fatigue or pain.

Do you need all these qualities to be a winner? No. Most winning players have two or three strong suits and are adequate in other areas. Only a very few towering players have got it all-Heather McKay, for example.

What about you? Try evaluating your game with each yardstick. All five measure qualities that you can develop and strengthen.

Oh, by the way, did I mention? These are very unusual yardsticks-they have a beginning, but they have no end. How good would you like to be?