

# CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



BAITING THE HOOK

**R**eturning from a canoeing and fishing trip a few weeks ago, I met a master fisherman with his limit of lake trout. I asked him, "Why is it that two fishermen can sit side by side in a boat with identical lines and identical bait, and yet one gets all the action?" He thought a moment and he said, "I guess it's because one of them can't see below the water. He knows what *he's* doin', but he don't know what the fish is doin'. And he sure don't know what the fish is thinkin'." I thought about his answer and realized that this old master might well have been talking about the game of squash.

After a defeat, can you answer the question, "How did your opponent beat you?" If you're a novice, probably not. You will have spent the match trying to concentrate on your own game, trying to get the racquet and the ball to be in the same place at the same time. Simply getting to the ball and hitting your shots will fill your mind and you won't have room left over to think about your opponent and what he is doing. You will answer the question by saying, "He had a better day than I did," or "He's in better shape than I am." But that doesn't explain what he did to beat you.

After a match think back on how the rallies ended. Ask yourself, "Did he beat me by hitting outright winners, or did he force me to make errors?" A picture will gradually emerge. You'll start to see what he's doing.

But don't stop there. Don't be like a friend of mine who insists after a match, "I don't know why you beat me. I was even with you until the last shot of every rally!" It's wrong to think that only the last shot counts. You'll soon see that the last shot was set up by the ones that came before. How did your opponent set up the winning shot? Did he run you until you were too tired to reach the last shot? Did he move you out of position and then beat you by hitting to the open court? Did he keep feeding your weak side? Did he pin you deep in the court and then beat you short? Did he delay his swing and fool you into going the wrong way? As time goes by you will be able to see beyond the winning shot to how it was set up. You've started to "see below the water."

Next, don't wait until the match is over to analyze. Do it after each game. Then, after each rally. Better players continuously assess what their opponent is trying to do as play goes on.

Experienced players resemble our fishing friend in another way. They know not only what their opponent is doing, they know what he is **thinking**. And they know what to do about both. Before a match, a top player considers the tactics that his opponent will use and how to counter them. "If I were him, how would I try to beat me?" He knows his adversary's game plan. During the match he continuously monitors that game plan and tries to force his adversary to abandon it.

"He's decided to come out and volley. He will try to dominate the T and keep me behind him. I will fight like the devil to take the T away from him. I will break the ball around him so that it is tough for him to volley. I'll use pace to drive him to the back. I will hit an occasional ball right at him where he can't control his return well. I'll make the first game a grueling one. It doesn't matter who wins it. If I can tire him enough in that first game, he'll

lose the quickness he needs to hold the T. Then, I will drive him off the T, and run him. He'll try to slow the game down, but I won't let him. He'll start feeling desperate, and his fatigue will create openings that I can exploit."

Some players go beyond this. They not only know what's going on inside their opponent's mind, they can control it, to set him up and then spring a trap.

"I know my opponent's game plan and I know his usual pattern of play. He's left-handed. Most left-handed players are strong on their forehand and weak on their deep backhand. He's better than that. His forehand is devastating. His backhand is solid but he uses it mainly to return the ball cross-court to his strong side. Will he play me this way? Yes, he's been successful with it against other players and he and I have never played before. So he'll come at me with his strong suit. What will I do? Will I go for broke? Attack his strength? Keep the play on the left wall and try to crack him mentally by beating his forehand with my backhand? No, the odds aren't good enough. "Will I do what most of his opponents do—stay away from his forehand, keep the ball on the right wall, use my

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backhand to hit crosscourts and attack backhand with my forehand? I'm sure that his opponents try to do that, but here he is in the finals of this tournament. He's seen that game a lot. He must handle it awfully well.

"I'm beginning to understand. He forces them to play a mirror image of his game, but he plays it much better than they do. I'll bet that's what he expects me to do. Well, that's what I'll let him

think. I'll start the match doing just what he expects—until he feels that I am going to play him just like everyone else does. But as soon as I've conditioned him, I'll have a surprise waiting for him."

I try it. The first few rallies are tough and even. Suddenly, I sense that he has shifted from the tentative play of the opening rallies to a comfortable confidence. He is familiar with this pattern of play. At that moment I pull the trigger. He's leaning right, expecting my usual backhand crosscourt reply, but I lash a hard drive down the left wall, he twists, gets his racquet on the ball, but can't return it. He thinks, "Was that just an accident or am I going to have to adjust?"

A few rallies later it happens again. This time he hits a weak return that I put away. He thinks, "That was no accident." He adjusts to the center of the court, but only when I hit my backhand. When he does this, wham, I change the pattern on the **forehand** side, hitting a screaming crosscourt drive to his left while he is leaning right, expecting the ball down the wall. It beats him cleanly. Now he doesn't know what to think. He becomes more tentative, more defensive, less quick around the court. A straight backhand drop shot exploits his indecisiveness. He can feel the game slipping away. It does.

You should try to follow our fishing friend's advice. If you are a beginner you want to become aware of what your opponent is doing, what shot ends the rally and how he sets it up. At first you will be able to do this only after the match, but you should press yourself to do it after each game and finally during play.

If you are a more experienced player you will want to "know what the fish is thinkin'." Try to anticipate his game plan and how he will respond when you break it down. And finally, learn to control his thinking, to bait the hook, and to spring the trap.

Let's go fishing!