

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



DISORDER IN THE COURT

The human mind craves order. It is unsettled by disorder. What's that got to do with squash? Well, let me ask you this. Which of your opponents is the easiest to play? Wouldn't you agree that he is the one whose game is most predictable, for example your good friend with whom you get together each week for a hit and giggle?

When a player is predictable, you know what he is going to do, sometimes even before he does. He plays to a pattern and you can anticipate almost all of his shots. How accommodating. How comforting. How unstressful for you.

But now you've probably begun to wonder, if other players games are predictable to you, how predictable is your game to them? What can you do to change your play so that your opponent is unbalanced and uncertain? Uncertainty creates tension and tension impairs performance. Here are some ways to use unpredictability to your advantage.

MOVE UP THE COURT

This is a simple thing that almost any player can do. After you serve the ball,

instead of drifting into your usual territory, thinking to yourself, "I'll wait here and see what he does," try aggressively moving a foot or two farther forward than you usually do. And return there each time you've hit the ball. Even a subtle change like this will produce an effect.

I've tried it in fun matches and discovered that the effect is immediate. My opponent feels I have suddenly taken the court away from him. I seem to be in position to get to any shot easily. I have moved onto the attack and this forces him onto the defense. His game becomes tentative. His shots deteriorate. He makes unforced errors. The interesting thing is that when I ask him after the match what happened he often doesn't know what I did to unbalance him. He only knows that he started to put more pressure on himself and then made more errors.

BRING A NEW SHOT INTO THE MATCH

When your opponent is tired and struggling with his fatigue and your attack, the introduction of a new shot can be the straw that breaks the camel's back. I have a friend who has a devastating hard serve. He has learned to save it until deep in the match when his opponent is tired, his reflexes are frayed and the tension is high. Then he launches a rocket. It breaks sharply off the side wall in towards his opponent, handcuffing him and forcing a weak reply or an error. And when his beleaguered victim begins to adjust to this weapon, he throws in a variation, a howitzer, aimed directly at his body. It may hit him, or he may duck. Or the ball may nick in the back court or rebound past him to send him chasing frantically towards the front wall. Suddenly his composure melts and his brain shuts down.

I can tell you it takes a terrible toll in a close match when the

opposition suddenly introduces a new weapon. It can turn the tide of battle just like the unexpected arrival of fresh troops did on the battlefield.

CHANGE YOUR STYLE OF PLAY

I was coaching a talented young Canadian in the Maccabiah Games in Israel. He scored easy wins in all his matches leading up to the final, accurately hitting short shots at will, and quickly disposing of his overmatched opponents. His only real challenge came in the final against the first seed, a young South African with striking talent. Before the final, I counselled him, "Jeremy, the whole South African team has scouted you. What do you suppose they told your opponent? They've told him that you have an excellent short game and that to beat you he should move up the court and take the front wall away from you. So what should you do? For the whole first game you should do nothing but hit deep. It's not what he's expecting and it will put him completely off balance. Besides, I think your deep game is good enough to beat him. And, you can always bring your short game in if he starts handling your long game."

Jeremy did this in the first game. It was almost amusing. Every time he set up to hit the ball, the South African youngster crept towards the front wall, only to be passed time and time again by a ball hit deep to a good length. Over and over again the youngster would fight his own momentum, twist to the back of the court, and dig the ball out until he was finally beaten by a shot with perfect length.

At the beginning of the second game I suggested to Jeremy that he stick to the same plan. This time his opponent hung back more and the game was much more even and physically draining. However, Jeremy hung tough to win. By the third game his opponent was tired but had caught on to the pattern of play and was feeling comfortable with it.

Jeremy and I looked at each other, "It's time to start shooting."

When Jeremy brought his short game into action, his opponent, who was already tired and was playing deep in the court, came apart at the seams. He had difficulty getting to the ball and when he did, his racquet skills deserted him. He never regained his composure and went down to a rapid and demoralizing defeat. He had expected one style, but encountered another. Almost as soon as he had adjusted to it, he was forced to face another change. The double whammy was just too much for him.

The best players are constantly aware of the patterns in their own play and their opponent's response to them. And they are preparing to spring traps as soon as the bait has been taken.

In the Xerox Classic played last month in Toronto, Mark Talbott established a pattern early in his matches. His reply to a drop shot was to re-drop the ball. But then, after the second or third re-drop, he'd delay his stroke slightly and then snap the ball past his onrushing opponent, beating him with a ball hit to perfect length.

General George A. Patton, the irascible American World War II general, summarized this philosophy in a single pithy sentence, "When you find the enemy, grab him by the nose and kick him in the ass." That is, engage him, distract him and then blindside him.

VARY YOUR PATTERN OF PLAY

The toughest opponent to play is one whose game seems to have no discernible pattern at all. This player will never seem to do the same thing twice in a row. He will continuously vary his serve, the pace on the ball, where

he takes the ball, his shot selection. and even the amount of time he takes to put the ball into play. The unfortunate wretch on the receiving end of this barrage at first struggles to make sense of it and then gradually disintegrates into a state of disorganized confusion. He may never realize why his game fell apart, but he will say, "It was just not my day. I couldn't get into a rhythm. I always seemed to be stretched and on the defensive," or "I guess I got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Now see if you can go out there and create some disorder in the court.