

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



**I'VE GOT A LEAD.
WHAT
DO I DO NOW?**

I blew it. I had him beat and I just let up." "One minute I had him where I wanted him and the next minute I was congratulating him on his win." "He looked tired. How could he come back that way?" "Once I lost my momentum, I just couldn't get it back."

Sound familiar? Well, join the crowd. It seems that the only thing harder than getting a lead, is holding it.

So here's my list of reasons for blowing leads, and some of the experts' solutions to the problem.

Too tired to keep pushing. If this really is true, it's no disgrace. But did you really hit the wall? Probably not. Marathon runners feel it at the 21-mile mark, but they've learned that their body will keep performing as long as their mind tells it to. How often have you walked off the court apparently exhausted, only to find within minutes that you felt fresher than you cared to admit to yourself?

You know he's better than you. You shouldn't be leading 2-0. This is the old "Oedipus complex," the ambivalence and fear we all have of knocking over the father figure. Champions build their retirement fund on this one. They'll just hang tough, knowing that you don't really expect to beat them, all you want is a little respect. You win two games and you've got what you want. They win the next three and they've got what they want.

He's beaten, so you let up. Your opponent seems to have given up. He's panting like an old broken down horse. He's inviting you to finish him off. He looks like he's so discouraged and feeling so sorry for himself, that you begin to feel a little sorry for him. You can't bring yourself to kick a man when he's down. When you regain consciousness...

Loss of concentration. I've seen this happen to a lot of players. They play good squash and have an edge on a tough opponent. But they seem to be looking for an excuse to get upset. They start to complain about the referee's calls, their opponent's blocking, or noise in the gallery. And you know what's going to happen. Suddenly they lose their composure. They start hitting the ball into the tin, getting more and more angry and frustrated, and blowing themselves right out of the water.

Impatience. You've got the winning formula. The spotlight of victory beckons. Only four points to go. You feel impatient. Then you change your game, try to shoot for those last few points. But all you do is make errors and open the door wide. Your opponent drives through. The

spotlight goes out.

The answers? I know only a few of them. Some are fairly obvious. Paraphrasing Bill Tilden, perhaps the best tennis player of all time, 'Never change a winning game, always change a losing game.' That's good advice. When you're ahead, stick to your game plan. Maybe your opponent can force you to change. Maybe not. Just don't do it for him. I once overheard an experienced coach speaking to a young player who was one game away from an upset. He convinced him he was ahead on merit. He owed it to himself to pile it on in the very same way in the next game. The youngster won.

Perhaps you want to let up when you're trouncing an opponent. I've been accused of unsportsmanlike excess when I played hard right to the end of a match, against an inferior opponent. The criticism hurt, but I knew that for me it was important to build momentum throughout a tournament, from the early matches on, and that a casual attitude at the beginning would hurt me later.

I once put this question to Heather McKay, who dominated squash more than any player in history, winning 17 consecutive world championships. It was just prior to Heather's first Canadian National Squash Championship. I asked her whether in tournament play she ever let up against a weaker opponent. She said with no hesitation that she felt to do so would be insulting to her opponent. "No one wants to be given points. If she gets them, she's earned them, and she can feel good about them."

Heather reached the semi-finals without giving up a single point. After losing the first game 9-0, her opponent won the serve, and in a hard and thrilling rally took the first point of the tournament from Heather. The stands, the opponent and Heather herself

all erupted simultaneously into a joyful outburst of appreciation and pleasure.

Heather had a simple formula. She played hard when she was down, she played hard when she was even, and she played hard when she was ahead.

A more difficult problem is self-sabotage. Different players do it in different ways. It may be a lapse in concentration. It may be an urge to showboat. It may be the silver-tongued devil telling you that you can take a rest, now that you've got a lead, or you can show off your new dance steps or your sense of humor, because you've got it in the bag. Players who are close to winning a big tournament are

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in danger of focusing on the event instead of the game. "Wow, I'm just six points from the State Championship!"

Whatever the case, you should learn to recognize your own danger signs.. Get to know the

saboteur inside yourself. As soon as you recognize it happening, you should have an automatic drill to deal with it. Some players put all their energy into making the next rally long, hard and error-free. Some use key motivating words before each rally, like "keep pushing" or "attack" or "drive another nail in the coffin."

A common distraction for a player who is ahead is to focus on "holding the lead." He thinks about how many points separate him and his opponent or how many points he needs to win the match. You can't "hold a lead." You either build it or lose it. Vince Lombardi, the extraordinary coach of

the Green Bay Packers, knew this. After two straight Super Bowls, he sensed that he couldn't motivate his aging team by calling on them to *defend* their title. That was too negative. He wanted them to attack, not defend. The idea that propelled them to their third straight Super Bowl was Lombardi's demand that they *fight* for the title. It's the same in squash. You should not merely *defend* your lead. You should *fight* to extend it!