

CEREBRAL SQUASH

TIME FOR A CHANGE-PART 1

How often have you seen a match turn around when one of the players introduced a new weapon or tactic at a critical point? I have seen many of these matches, coached a few and played a few. I plan to write about this in my next column.

But, I thought first I'd write about a match that was decided because of a tactic introduced by one of the competitors even *before* play had begun.

I watched the world amateur soft ball championships in 1977. The semifinal brought together a wily Pakistani veteran, winner of many titles, Muhammed Saleem, and a brilliant young Egyptian star, the heavy favorite in the match, Gamal Awad. Awad was quick, fit, a good racquet handler and had a classic and beautiful stroke.

Almost as soon as the players stepped onto the court and began to warm up, a remarkable thing happened. The referee stopped the warm-up and ordered Awad off the court. Awad was in breach of the strict dress code in international squash. He was wearing black street socks instead of the mandatory all white. This was no show of eccentric bravado. Awad was an extremely shy and quiet young man. He was the best squash player Egypt had produced in many years, but neither he nor his country was wealthy. There was no money for squash in Egypt and no sponsorship by manufacturers. The Egyptian team made do with pitifully little support. I watched the players practice with racquets whose frames had been broken and mended beyond count and stringing that was a kaleidoscope of colors from repeated repairs with whatever material was available. Awad simply did not have a fresh pair of white socks and he had to scrounge around the squash club for some.

As soon as Awad left the court, Saleem began to pound the squash ball, heating it up, making it more and more bouncy. I remember wondering why he was doing this and thinking that it was a mistake. I thought that the added bounce would favor his fitter opponent by prolonging the rallies. But Saleem had something else in mind...

In a few minutes, Awad reappeared on the

court with fresh white socks. But before he could hit the ball, the referee called "Time!". The five minute warm-up period was over and the rules dictated that play must begin.

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From the very beginning Awad was off balance. He had left the court with a cold slow ball, but now was faced with one that seemed to have twice the velocity. His surprise was obvious. Several times he mishit the ball. Once or twice he reached for the ball and hit it on the frame of his racquet. He seemed to have lost touch with his short game. He became more and more perplexed and frustrated and looked totally off balance.

His agile movements and fluid stroking became tentative and he struggled to gain his equilibrium. With his opponent off balance, Saleem seized the initiative. His game was outstanding. He had no trouble handling the ball's bouncy condition. His short shots were crisp and accurate. He used the increased velocity of the ball cleverly to neutralize Awad's quickness, drawing him forward by threatening a short shot, and hitting the ball hard and deep past him. Saleem rolled over Awad in the first two games: 9-7, 9-4.

Now Saleem could feel Awad regaining his rhythm. He could feel his own fatigue mounting. So he tanked the third game 9-1. Awad won easily, but without the hard fought competition he needed to completely regain his rhythm and sharpness. And Saleem got his rest. In the fourth game Saleem attacked again fighting like a tiger. He used every trick in the book to keep the youngster off balance, finally winning 9-7. He had



managed to seize the initiative with his pre-game ploy and to parlay this advantage into a 3-1 upset win.

You and I might not be experienced enough to have seen and exploited the opportunity Saleem did, but we can learn a lesson from it and try to apply it within our own ability. The essence of the successful change of pace is that it is unexpected and it is applied at a strategic point in a match. Next column I'll explore this further.

There is a postscript to Saleem's match with Awad. It occurred the next day in the finals of the world championships when Saleem played another young fit opponent. Maqsood Ahmed. In total contrast to his opponent of the previous day, Maqsood seemed to have an answer for everything Saleem threw at him. In tact, he seemed able to anticipate each of Saleem's maneuvers and even to exploit them. Maqsood dominated the match. He just ground the older man down, winning a convincing 9-3, 9-7, 9-4 victory to become the World Singles Champion.

Who was Maqsood and why was he able to handle Saleem's game so well? Maqsood had studied Saleem's squash since he was a youngster. No trick, maneuver, innovation or strategy would rattle him. Maqsood Ahmed was Muhammed Saleem's younger brother!