

CEREBRAL SQUASH

By Gerry Shugar



THE UNFORCED ERROR

There's the ball. Sitting up, fat, waiting for you to make that decisive shot. You step into it, swing boldly, and CRASH, you hit the ball solidly into the tin! Hashim Khan says, "A good squash player who hit tin like a carpenter who hit thumb with hammer." Yes, the unforced error is a self-inflicted injury, an unnecessarily lost point. But what else is it? It's also a rally you might *have* won. So it's really often two points lost. But it's more than that. It gives aid and comfort to the enemy. Instead of running your opponent, working him hard, keeping the fitness threat alive, making him feel just a little over-anxious to finish the rally and therefore willing to take an excessive risk, it's you that has bailed out. You are sending him a reassuring message, "Just hang tough and I'm going to hand it to you on a platter." He is encouraged to play longer,

harder rallies because you've told him that if he does, you may very well go on shooting yourself in the foot.

What about you? What does an unforced error do to you? That depends on your temperament. You may feel you have to shoot again, probably unwisely, to prove that the last mistake was just an accident, and so you begin to dig yourself a hole. Or you may feel the gnawing worm of self-doubt and desperation that robs you of your initiative and undermines your physical fluidity. And so your game becomes tentative and vulnerable.

What should you do? The good player has prepared himself in advance for anything that might happen in a crucial match. And you should be prepared for the time when your accuracy deserts you and the tin becomes a malignant magnet. As a young table tennis player, I was repeatedly taught, "No Unforced Errors." Much later, I tried to apply this to squash. Whether I was playing a friendly or a tournament, my limit was three unforced

errors a game. Once that quota was used up, I had to impose the discipline of playing risk-free squash, retrieving, hitting the ball hard, keeping the ball on the walls and trying to beat my opponent deep, rather than short, so as to avoid the tin. How can you develop your deep game? You should practice hitting the deep crosscourt into the sidewall nick. Work on the deep drive to perfect length. Try playing a whole match against a friend without ever going short. Almost no chance of an unforced error. (Notice how it puts pressure on his fitness, forcing him to shoot to get out of a rally.)

This is not the only way to play squash, but it is an approach you should have tucked away for when you need it.

Maybe you've experienced it, maybe you've imposed it on others. I've seen it over and over again. When one player refuses to make unforced errors and retrieves determinedly, his opponent begins to feel a sense of mounting desperation. He starts hitting the ball tighter and tighter,

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flirting with the tin and disaster. He senses that a rally will end only if he can hit an outright winner. And he hits the tin. You can put an opponent under enormous pressure with very unspectacular squash by taking the unforced errors out of your game (which almost magically seems to introduce them into your opponent's game).

I've heard of some coaches who make a player do ten pushups whenever he makes an unforced error. I suppose that has the desired effect, but it breaks the rhythm of play and it obviously can't be applied in

game situations. Better to impose discipline on yourself, and change your game as soon as you reach your quota. You soon will begin to feel pleased with every game and every match that you keep error free.

When I had been playing squash for about three years, I came under the tutelage of the coach at York University in Toronto, Bill Noyes. Bill taught me that there was another kind of unforced error. And anyone who wanted to be an outstanding player had to be able to recognize and eliminate it from his game. He taught me that a loose ball was an unforced error. The boast you hit too hard that comes out fat and sets your opponent up in the front of the court where he can punish you. The crosscourt drive that's overhit and comes out wide off the back wall so your opponent can back you out of position and leave you flat-footed and embarrassed as he executes his choice of any number of masterful winning shots. This kind of unforced error should make the good player wince just as much as the more obvious one that he hits into the tin. It requires a great deal of discipline and an ability to observe the match while you yourself are in the middle of the heavy going, to monitor these loose ball errors and to correct them. But the rewards are enormous. I can't begin to tell you how satisfying it is to walk off the court and have my opponent say, "Gerry, I don't know how you did it, but you didn't give me a single ball that I could hit all day long. I always felt stretched, I always felt under pressure. I just couldn't get my game going." No loose balls. Can I say

it other ways? Sure. Keep the ball on the wall. Don't overhit. Good length. The walls are your friends. A ball with lots of air around it is a gift. Get the idea?

Now it's up to you. Start next time you play. The beginner and the novice should aim at limiting his unforced errors to three per game. If this means you have to get fitter, get fitter. If it means you need more racquet control, work on it. If it means you have to alter your shot selection, do so. The better player has to learn to keep his opponent under pressure with every stroke, to monitor his execution constantly in the course of a game, and to develop a repugnance and loathing for the sloppy, loose ball.