

# The ten fundamentals of squash

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More than most games, squash demands self-discipline and the continual application of basic principles of court-craft. Do not think that you can ignore these principles because you are fit and fast and possess a good eye. No player, whether a novice or a champion, can afford to do that. If he does, he will never make much progress at the game; he will lose even against a player of less natural ability who *is* applying the basic principles of the game.

Ideally the fundamentals of squash should be so absorbed that a player employs them instinctively. But squash is a game full of strain and stress. With the best intentions in the world, it is easy to become lazy and neglectful after twenty torrid minutes on a squash court. Champions often fail to observe one or more of the fundamentals when under pressure, usually with unfortunate consequences. If the champions have lapses, it is obviously difficult for the average players to remember and apply at all times the tenets of good squash.

I assume, however, that you want to become a better-than-average player, otherwise you would not be reading this book. You can fulfil your ambition by making sure that your game is built on a proper foundation. This means not only that you equip yourself with the correct strokes but that you have a clear idea of how to use the space in a squash court scientifically.

In this chapter I am excluding any explanations of stroking technique. This certainly does not mean I am relegating the importance of sound technique. But long before a player has gained proficiency with his strokes he should be conversant with the fundamentals of court-craft, the game's eternal truths, as it were. Although some are more fundamental than others, all ten that I will enumerate are worth understanding and employing if you aspire to play squash the professional way.

## 1 Hit the ball to a good length

When I began to learn squash as a boy, my father made me hit the ball along the side walls of a squash court for the first three months before he would allow me to attempt any other sort of shot. The object was to develop good length, almost as a reflex action. I have been grateful for that grounding ever since.

What is good length? It is hitting the ball to the front wall with sufficient judgement to make it bounce at the back of the court behind the service box. The ball should never hit the back wall on the full or fail to reach the back wall. Ideally it should bounce once and then die in the back of the court. This is not always possible to achieve, if for no other reason than that one's opponent is likely to intercept the ball before it can die in the back of the court. The ball is still of good length that comes off the back wall after one bounce on the floor, as this shot takes one's opponent into the back of the court.

Good length comes with practice. It can be attained by hitting the ball either hard or softly, the determining factor being the trajectory on to the front wall. The decision whether to hit hard or not can sometimes be problematical; a very hard-hit ball may bounce too far forward off the back wall and rob a player of length, whereas the softer shot, particularly in matches against good volleyers, may be cut off in mid-court. One of the many fascinations of squash is this subtle conflict between the need for pace and the need for softness.

My own usual pattern is to hit the ball firmly to just beneath the cut line (the middle red line on the front wall) with the intention of making it bounce on the floor near the back of the service box. If I find the ball is bouncing short I aim higher on the wall.

When I practise by myself I stroke the ball down one of the side walls so that the ball hits the front wall about the cut line and bounces on the floor behind the service box. The ball then rebounds off the back wall, allowing me to repeat the stroke without moving from the one position on the court. I maintain this routine for a considerable time. The ball certainly comes off the back wall a yard or so, but this can be said to be a good length. By making the ball come off the back wall I have time to get my racket raised for the next stroke down the wall.

It is dangerous to attempt in a match to make the ball die on the second bounce at the back wall, because often the ball will land short, and is likely to be so dealt with that the player will be immediately under pressure.

My brother Bill's custom is to aim his length shots to land on the first bounce where the back wall meets the floor. Generally he is a little short of the back wall, but at least he makes sure the ball reaches the wall on the first bounce. Sometimes the ball hits the nick and rolls back into the court along the floor for a winner. When his opponent congratulates him on his luck, Bill quite casually points out that as he aims for the nick he is not really surprised to hit it every now and again!

The objective in hitting to a good length is to confine one's opponent as close to the back wall as possible. He has to be moved out of the dominating position on a squash court, the position marked by the conjunction of the red lines in the middle of the court (technically the half-court and short lines) and known simply as the T. When the ball falls short he needs only to take one step sideways from the T to reach it. He has not expended any effort, and he is set to play an attacking shot. He cannot be nearly so aggressive from the back of the court.

## **2. Aim into the back corners**

As well as being of a good length, the basic shot should propel the ball into either of the back corners. One can readily see how playing to the back corners reduces one's opponent's options, as he then has not only the back wall but also the side wall restricting his strokes. If he is pinned into a corner, thirty-two feet from the front wall, he is unlikely to attempt an attacking shot two inches above the board. This is particularly the case if the ball is dying only inches from the corner. To extricate the ball he has to restrict his swing and concentrate on a safe, defensive reply.

Similarly a player should make the ball finish in the corners at the front of the court when he is going for his short shots. In this way he keeps his opponent stretching to the farthest extremities of the court. He also makes it more difficult for his opponent to play a full stroke because of the closeness of the side wall.

Different considerations must sometimes govern the playing of cross-court shots, for, although length must not be forgotten, these shots may be intercepted consistently by a good volleyer. When this happens, the ball must be angled wider across the court out of his reach. I will explain cross-court shots more fully on pages 47—52.

## **3. Keep the ball close to the side walls**

Although this principle is closely allied to good length and directing the ball to the corners, it should be remembered distinctly in its own right. Naturally your opponent will be forced to cover more of the court if you can keep the ball clinging close to the side walls. He cannot volley the ball without taking a risk, and will almost certainly wait to play it after it has bounced at the back of the court. On the other hand a ball travelling five feet out from the wall invites a volley.

As a general rule try to keep the ball within one foot of the wall on all down-the-wall shots. Under pressure you will not always succeed in doing this, but you should have this objective in mind. Again cross-court shots need to be considered separately, but suffice it to say here that they too should not finish far from the side walls.

By adhering to these first three fundamentals you will prevent your opponent from going on to the offensive. In fact you may force him to play a weak shot into the middle or front of the court. This will enable you to hit either a winner or a forcing stroke that will lead to your winning the rally.

## **4. Recover to the centre of the court**

It is imperative after every shot to make haste for the centre of the court. From the centre T you should be able to cope with any of your opponent's shots, be they drop shots or drives to the back corners. By taking just one stride you are within distance of a ball played anywhere within a radius of eight feet.

Don't have any doubts about picking up the deeper shots. You will be moving back from the T as the ball is in motion, and returning to the T after you have played your stroke. You have more time to get to and from the T than you may initially think – provided, of course, you don't play a loose stroke.

Because of the speed of the game there will be many times when you will be a foot or more short of the T when obliged to run to the ball, but between strokes always try to make this part of the court your base. If you are several feet behind the short line (the red line running parallel to the front wall) you will find it difficult to reach shots at the front of the court. Certainly you may be in a better position to retrieve the deep shots, but you are an optimist if you think your opponent will obligingly feed these to you when he knows you are staying back. The same principle applies in recovering to the centre from the side walls.

Every player must understand from the outset that he can control the game only from the T. It follows, therefore, that he must not hit the ball down the middle of the court or he will have to vacate the I to allow his opponent to play his shot. It also means that no matter how fine a shot he has played, whether it is a drop shot or a boast, he must keep on the move – back to the T. Since both players in a match are trying to maneuver each other away from the T position, squash becomes a battle of wits, speed and stamina. The moment one player lags he is in trouble. For even if he manages to reach the next shot he may be stretching so much that his opponent is given an opening to finish the rally.

I know that when I have been beaten by a succession of winning shots at the front of the court I must try to move to the T more quickly. That is the first counter I must make in stemming the tide. Usually you are so physically extended that the additional effort is daunting. Yet if you don't make that effort, all your other efforts on the court may go for nil.

## **5• Watch the ball at all times**

Some players find it more difficult than others to watch the ball on to their own and their opponent's rackets. If this is your problem, make watching the ball at all times a deliberate practice. When striking the ball, don't lift your head too early to see the result of your stroke. Watch the ball up to impact, and you will then be more likely to hit it correctly in the middle of the racket.

It is most important that you do not take your eyes off the ball until your opponent is playing his shot. If you do, you are increasing the risk not only of being left flat-footed but of having an accident. Many people after playing their shots, tend to face the front wall while their opponents hit the ball, perhaps only half-looking to see what is happening. As a younger player I used to do this — until the day that my opponent delayed his stroke while I was looking towards the front wall. I turned abruptly as he struck the ball, and was hit between the eyes. Most eye injuries involving the ball are similarly caused when a person turns his back on the ball and then looks for it while it is in flight. Also, nothing is more certain than that a player will be frequently deceived and beaten unless he keeps his eyes perpetually on the ball.

These first five fundamentals, the most crucial of all, are incorporated into the game from the moment play begins. When you serve you should try to hit the ball to a good length so that it will finish in the opposite back corner. In flight the ball should either touch the side wall or be so close to it as to make volleying hazardous. After serving, you move to the centre of the court, simultaneously turning your head to watch the ball as your opponent plays it.

When you are receiving service, the same principles come into effect. You must return the ball to a good length, in most instances down the wall, and into the back corner. You move out of the corner to permit your opponent a free passage, and promptly make for the centre while keeping watch on the ball. Thus the game proceeds, with the players constantly switching positions.

I was fortunate to learn these five fundamentals early in my career, the first practical lesson being provided by a seasoned player named Bob Cameron, who used to play in the C-grade pennant competition in Melbourne. I was thirteen when we met in a match, and as I was pretty fit and had defeated other fit players in C-grade I was confident of winning — especially after seeing my opponent. I don't think Bob will dispute the fact that he carried a paunch and had an ancient, black-painted racket that looked as though it might disintegrate at any moment. However, he had me running all night. By applying the basic principles, keeping the ball to a good length, and moving me around the court he emerged the victor.

When I was a little older my regular games with Allan McCausland, a former Australian champion, added to my squash education. In many ways Allan's stroke equipment was not as impressive as many other players', for he was unable to hit the ball very hard, and relied upon placement. It was frustrating to play him, because he kept the ball so close to the walls and so deep that I was hardly ever able to play an attacking shot. Every week for about

two years I had it drummed into me that you must get the ball into the back of the court even if you don't hit it hard. At the same time Allan was able to make me scamper to the front of the court with perfectly controlled side-wall boast shots. He never allowed the ball to finish in the centre, but kept me running to the extremities of the court at full stretch. Which brings us to our sixth fundamental.

## **6. Make your opponent run**

This may seem self-evident. Nevertheless it has to be stressed that it is futile to hit the ball back continually to your opponent. On the contrary you must try to place the ball as far away from him as possible and make him work. If he's trying to hog the centre of the court – as he should be – he has somehow to be shifted. From the back of the court send him scurrying with side-wall boasts. From mid-court to the front of the court make him run to drop shots and more boasts.

If both players trade drives along the sidewalls, no pressure is being applied. Each, therefore, must try to maneuver the other out of position. It follows that you must always have an idea where your opponent is positioned on the court, and you will find that this can be achieved without taking your focus off the ball. If your opponent is falling back, it is time for more short shots; when he comes forward, drive him back with good length. Keep him thinking, and keep him running.

## **7. Volley the ball whenever possible**

There used to be a time when most coaches considered the ball should be allowed to bounce before being hit. Even today there's a tendency among many players, including those of international standard, to avoid volleying. Certainly the majority would not think of volleying as fundamental to good squash. However, I am positive that it is. Although I did not learn to volley until I was a mature player, I'm sure that had I learned to do so as a novice it would have been greatly to my advantage. I must say, though, that very young players often encounter some physical difficulty in volleying. Since the shot requires plenty of muscle, lightly-framed boys and girls may not be able to hit away a high volley without an exaggerated backswing that is simply too much for them. Those who have this sort of difficulty should not be discouraged, for the strength to play forceful volleys will come as they develop physically. They should start learning the technique beforehand,

By volleying the ball you place your opponent under considerable pressure. This doesn't mean you should fling yourself across the court trying to volley every ball for a winner. But if the ball can be reached by taking a stride or two,

then it ought to be volleyed – not necessarily for a winner, but deep into a back corner. You thus restrict your opponent's time to reach the middle of the court or to get set for his next shot.

Tennis players have an advantage in this department of the game, though they usually favour the short shot when they volley; this is not always the wisest shot to play, but because of their tennis background they find it hard to restrain themselves. However, tennis players who are good enough to move in and volley even the tightest of balls can be very worrying.

In my experience, playing someone who doesn't volley gives a feeling of security. You find that your shots don't have to be quite so accurate, since the reluctant volleyer is probably going to let the ball pass him anyway – you can even afford to drop the occasional service short. In other words, he repeatedly lets you 'off the hook'.

The reluctance to volley is a particular weakness among most of the British, Indian, Pakistani and Egyptian players who have been my contemporaries. It may be that as they learned squash when the spongier British ball was in vogue they could never see the value of the volley when they were younger players. The spongier ball, when volleyed, didn't come off the racket with great speed, and was therefore discouraging to players who liked to attack. In contrast the firmer Australian ball has always been more suited to volleying, and players such as Ken Hiscoe and Owen Parmenter found their aggressive volleying rewarded. Hiscoe, especially, taught me the advantages of the volley. In my earlier days he was able to peg me back and cut off my returns, dealing severely with any shoulder-high ball that was more than a couple of feet out from the wall.

Most of the leading players are now beginning to appreciate the importance of the volley. The redoubtable Jonah Barrington, though not a natural volleyer, is among those who are trying to develop this part of their games. In top competition Barrington is still disinclined to volley aggressively, but for all his achievements I think he realized he ought to volley more often. The volley is indispensable to any champion.

## **8. Know when to delay your strokes**

After stressing the value of the volley, it may seem a paradox to discuss the frequent need to delay certain strokes. There is no real ambiguity. Strokes are delayed usually at the front of the court when you are in front of your opponent. They are also delayed at the back of the court when your opponent is waiting in the middle; by holding the shot you can keep him guessing as to whether the ball will be boasted, driven down the wall or across court. It is obviously impracticable to delay volleys.

If, during a rally, you find yourself at the front of the court with time to spare, you should delay your stroke as long as possible. This has two effects. First, your opponent may have been covering the court quite well, moving about at an even pace. Suddenly he is stopped in his tracks; he has to wait till your shot is played, and then abruptly start moving again. This stopping and starting, when repeated during a game, can be very exhausting.

The second effect, which is equally important, is that by holding a shot you are able to create some uncertainty in his mind, and he is caught flatfooted as his weight falls back onto his heels. Say, for instance, he has played

a side-wall boast that has been anticipated. You are up front, racket raised ready to strike the ball, waiting as it falls. You originally intend to play a drop shot, but delay the stroke and at the last split-second convert it into a drive. This sort of ability to delay and deceive is basic to good squash.

## **9. Change the pace of the ball**

Some players slog the ball as hard as they can for the whole time they are on the court. Others continually hit the ball softly. While there are times when both the bullet-like drive and the soft shot are needed – depending on the approach of your opponent – you shouldn't try to play the whole game at one pace. By varying your pace, you make it so much more difficult for an opponent to read your game. A soft shot that follows four hard-hit shots may well unsettle him.

A good analogy here is with a distance race when the front-runner who is setting the pace slows down, and then spurts forward again. This takes a physical and psychological toll of his competitors. Similarly in squash, changing the pace of a match can bring victory. It may simply mean speeding up your drives at a strategic point in a match before reverting once more to the medium-paced drives, or mixing soft drop shots with fierce drives. Such variations tend to break up an opponent's game.

## **10. Go for the short shots**

While good length is basic to winning squash, it alone will not suffice in top company. You must make your opponent work, and you do this primarily by going for a short shot. Now, a short shot may be any of a number of things – a little, angled shot, a firmly hit boast, a soft drop shot, a hard-hit kill ... you go for the shot after your good-length drives have given you an opportunity to be aggressive. Perhaps the ball has come out into the middle of the court, and you clearly have the initiative. Then you must go for the winning shot.

Sometimes players lose confidence in their short game through hitting below the board a number of times. When this happens they should aim the shot a little higher, rather than discard their short shots completely. Even if they decide merely to keep hitting to length for a few points, they ought to return to using their short shots later. Against some players it is no use relying solely on depth, for they never make mistakes. Besides, if they suspect you are afraid to play short shots they will be able to take many more liberties.

Naturally you do not always have to go for a short shot when you have maneuvered your opponent out of position; often a hard drive down the wall or across court is as effective. But you will always be limited without short shots in your armoury.