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Know Your Training Goals

Understanding your goals; and how different activities help you achieve those will maximize your on-court training effectiveness

By Shona Kerr March 22, 2004 © 2004

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You are on court practicing a drill. WHY?
What part of your game are you improving?

When you walk on court to practice do you really know why you are performing the drills you usually put yourself through and indeed what benefit they might be to your actual performance in a match?

We are all very familiar with certain drills such as the boast-drive drill and have our favorite condition games such as a length game. But how often do we really question the hows, when's and whys of these activities in relation to our ultimate goal which is to play better squash? This article is aimed to give the novice through to the accomplished player the tools to plan out their squash season effectively with regard to on court training. Addressed here are guidelines to improving and peaking technically and tactically. Whilst acknowledging that the physical and mental components are also essential these are not going to be addressed.



Shona Kerr, Wellesley Coach

Training goals: [See Figure One](#)

Referring to [figure one](#), the first step is to set your goals. It's best to start with your ultimate goals and break these down into much smaller manageable chunks.

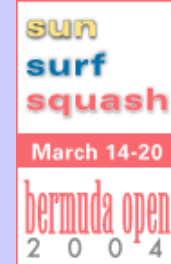
Step 1. Decide what you hope to have achieved a year from now. Goals might include winning the 3.0 skill division of the US nationals or playing at a high position on your team for example.

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Step 2. Decide on which tournaments throughout the year you wish to play to achieve this or give yourself time frames in which you are going to challenge your team-mates for a higher position on your team.

The best way to do this is to sit down with a full year calendar and slot in the important tournament dates, team matches, and/or challenge matches.

Step 3. You now have to analyze exactly what elements of your game both technically and tactically you need to improve and/or change in order for you to achieve these goals.

This can be done in a number of ways. The first and most obvious is **self-assessment**. This is great and it is indeed good to be constantly self assessing your game. It is unfortunately probably the least reliable method as we can't see ourselves play. Even better is **video analysis**. Try to video a couple of your own matches so that you can see any weaknesses for yourself. Even better again is to get **second and third opinions**. An experienced coach has seen a gamut of squash styles and will be able to give you a break down of your technique and key weak areas of your game to work on. If you are unable to get a coach to do this then try and find a friend who knows the game to be your second pair of eyes.

When looking at your game technically an easy way to be quite thorough is to draw yourself a chart with the shot that you are looking at in one column, an assessment of that shot in the next column and how you intend to improve that shot in the following column. See below for an example:

Shot	Forehand	Backhand	Key pointers
Drive	5/10 hit a set target	6/10 hit a set target	Use the front foot to go in on the forehand drive and focus on keeping racket face open on backhand drive
Drop	5/10 hit a set target	4/10 hit a set target	Need to always follow through on forehand and give a larger margin for error on the backhand
Boast	Etc...		

The analysis can be as simple or as detailed as you would like to make it. You can even start splitting up the shots into categories e.g. hard cut drop shot and soft touch drop shot depending on your standard and expectations. Movement patterns can also be split up in the same fashion and key pointers allocated to improvement.

Now you have your season planned and goals set how do you set about achieving them through your training? There should be two phases to your on court drilling, the "Training Phase" and the "Competitive Phase". The training phase refers to when you do not have an imminent competition and involves concentrated work on technique whilst the competitive phase kicks in around 4-8 weeks before competition and works on your tactical game. Looking at your yearly calendar it may be that some competitions will fall into a training phase, this is absolutely fine. You are aspiring to peak for your major goals and it is good practice to "train through" competitions, after all it is the long-term goal that you are looking at.

How do the different phases look?

Training Phase

The aim of this phase is to work on technique including the swing, movement, body positioning, shot refinement and consistency.

Drills should include:

- Solo exercises - to work on the technique and consistency of individual shots.
- Single feed drills - you and a partner feed for each other. For instance your



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partner might feed a forehand boast for you to practice your backhand crosscourt lob.

- Closed drills - this is where you and a partner or coach perform a two person drill but you know what the order of shots will be. The boast drive drill is an obvious example of this.

- Matches - when working on technique and wanting to transfer alterations to a game situation it is more advisable to play people not as good as yourself. This reduces the amount of pressure you are under and hence will give you more time to focus grooving a technical change

All of these drills build confidence in your ability to execute different shots. With the drills being narrowed and decision making not a factor, it allows you to concertedly focus on technique and movement. You should start off with the drills being physically easy in order to give yourself as much time as possible to place your feet correctly and to address any floors in your swing. This is near impossible to achieve under physical pressure. It also allows you to achieve many repetitions of a drill without becoming exhausted and hence begins to “groove” the changes you are trying to make.

Only when these alterations start to become second nature should you start making the same drill more challenging. Be disciplined and meticulous with yourself, there is no point “grooving” a wrong movement or technique that might be hard to change at a later date. In the same vain, try and get feedback from a second pair of eyes, whether that be through video tape or a coach, often we feel like we have altered something correctly but are unable to actually verify if that is true. As a final note on the training phase be sure that you check back with your goals often and that the drills you are focusing on are in line with what you planned. As you make improvements be sure to track these also.

Competitive Phase

As you move into the competitive phase the technical aspects to your game should have been thoroughly addressed as this is when you need to put yourself in pressure situations and begin working on shot choice, perception and anticipation.

Drills should include:

- Pressure drills -technical aspects worked on in the training phase are now put into pressure situations. An example would be where your partner was performing a single feed at the front for you to drive, they are now going to feed with their best drop shot, you are now running to and from the back wall to play a straight drive.

- Open drills - where shot choices and decisions need to be made. This can start off simple, for example take the boast drive / drill and now add in the option of the cross court from the front. As this phase progresses many different decisions can be allocated to a drill.

- Condition games - this is effectively making the open drills even more open and game like. For example, you can only go short if your opponent is behind you or you must play short off a boast.

- Matches - start playing opponents of a similar standard to you in order to work on strategy, perception and anticipation. You also want to start playing people of a higher standard than yourself to work on your game under pressure.

This phase is allowing you to work on anticipation and deception. When there are choices within a drill you start to see and get used to what your opponent looks like as they line up for different shots and anticipate their shot selection. You are also able to work or deception by either keeping your partner guessing for as long as possible which shot you will play or indeed trick them. It also works on playing the same shots grooved in the training phase but now under pressure.

Condition games allow you to practice particular game plans and styles of play. If

your need is to play the ball straight more often a condition for you would be to only play straight. Or if you need to work on increasing the pace of a game your condition might be that you can only hit length below the service line. The conditions set on yourself and your partner do not have to be the same, and in fact when they are different it can lead to some very interesting results. The possibilities are endless. As with the training phase make sure you check back with the tactical goals you originally set and track your progress. It's great for self-esteem when improvement is noted, reference can be made back to this as a confidence booster.

Selecting Opponents for Matches

Playing is after all what it is about so have you ever thought about which opponents you should play and when? Tournaments and league matches select opponents for us but who we play in our own time and during practice we have control over. Who you play can have different benefits to your game and where you are in your training plan can determine who you might want to call up.

This chart outlines the values commonly achieved by playing opponents of different abilities:

	Training Benefits			
Opponent ability	Technical	Tactical	Physical	Psychological
Weaker	Excellent-allows time to focus on swing/movement adjustments	Good-allows you to practice being in control and to choose your shots	Average-does not push you physically	Good-builds confidence in being in control, shot selection and technique
Same	Good-allows you to test how well and how long "good" technique will stand up to an equal player	Excellent-it is here where you will see improvements in perception, anticipation and shot selection. Also test out and practice sticking to game plans	Excellent-pushes you physically hard and tests fitness	Excellent-good practice to remain focused in the moment and staying emotionally in control
Stronger	Average-a stronger player will apply too much pressure for you to have time to consider technique	Good-can be used for defensive game practice, working on patience in rallies	Good-more pressure equals more work	Good-no pressure to win, good practice on hanging in a match and being patient

So as you can see there are different benefits to be gained from playing different opponents, all of which are valuable. The timing of each should be considered for maximum effect within your season plan.

Now you have a template with which to plan your success. There is one thing to know how to plan, another to go ahead and do it and even better is to carry out the plan. As we all know many wonderful plans have been uselessly left on shelves so get out there and use your valuable training and court time to it's maximum!!!