

## Racquet Preparation - What is it really all about?

We've all been subjected to it. The oft repeated phrase ' Racquet up!'

But what is the real purpose of preparing the racquet and when should it be done?

Let me first say that the last thing Racquet Preparation is about is hitting the ball. Actually, literally, the very last thing. So if you have habitually been telling yourself that you need to lift the racquet to hit the ball - you are really limiting yourself and are likely to be well behind the game.

As you may have read in my previous article, Squash is a time management game where players should endeavour to stay up to date with the game physically( in the present) whilst trying to get as far ahead mentally ( in the future) as is practically possible.

How do we get into that position of being mentally ahead?

That is where Racquet Preparation comes in. Racquet Preparation stimulates the mind to: think about the future; to efficiently and economically engineer your movement; to delineate your space and control of territory; to consider your options; to organize and begin your recovery in to position for the next shot and finally - when all of the other preparatory thought and movement has been done - to hit the ball.

Let me ask you to go back and re-read that last paragraph. Consider how many operations precede the words 'to hit the ball'. I have tried to place those operations in chronological order. If we accept that those are indeed the operations stimulated by Racquet Preparation then we begin to understand why excellent players 'get their racquets up' before they start their movement and while they are still a long way away from the location where the execution of the shot will actually occur.

I imagine what would happen to a player who didn't lift their racquet until they actually wanted to hit the ball. How much time would they have to conduct their attempts to ' think about the future; to efficiently and economically engineer your movement; to delineate your space and control of territory; to consider your options; to organize and begin your recovery in to position for the next shot and finally - when all of the other preparatory thought and movement has been done - to hit the ball. Phew! What pressure! No wonder people that prepare their racquets when they arrive at the shot make so many errors. And it's not just beginners either. If you watch 'You

'Tube' you will see professionals make errors from time to time for exactly this reason - especially when they are taken to the corners of the court. Any time you see a player start running without preparing the racquet, you know they are chasing (in the past) and that they are likely to make either a physical or mental error. Equally if you watch 'You Tube' and watch players like Nick Matthew or James Willstrop and see when their Racquet Preparations go up you will see that they are miles away from the ball when they prepare the racquet - clearly using Racquet Preparation as a planning and organizing tool, not simply as a device for hitting the ball. If you wish to control the game, early Racquet Prep is essential as a device for mentally gaining time.

Finally, if you wish to be a deceptive player, early Racquet Prep is mandatory. Deception in Squash, in my opinion, is all about manipulating your opponent's bio-chemistry: the adrenalin system.

The opponent uses peripheral awareness of cues from your behaviour to indicate when (not where - as is the popular misconception) you are going to hit the ball. Any little movement in your racquet head or body prior to the execution of the shot, allows adrenalin to be released in the opponent, priming them for reactive movement. If you prepare late (just prior to hitting the ball) you may as well wave a red flag or have a loudspeaker announce that you are going to momentarily hit the ball! However if your racquet is absolutely still until the moment you hit the ball, the opponent's adrenalin system is given no warning and adrenalin doesn't release until after the ball has started its journey - putting immense pressure on the opponent's physical reaction system. The variation of this method is to hold your shot so long that the opponent's adrenalin builds up to intolerable levels, releases before you actually swing and thereby leads the opponent to guess and run in the wrong direction. Either way, if you hold your racquet still before you strike, the opponent will either be late to react, or will move in the wrong direction before you have actually played.

Don't just take my word for this. Get on 'You Tube' or watch the PSA Live TV online and specifically check when Racquet Preparation occurs. Hitting the ball is a very minor part of its value.

Get your racquet up! But understand when, how, why and the value of doing it. Not just as a knee-jerk reaction to someone yelling those words at you.

**Next month: Who you should be playing if you want to grow your game**