



2 UNDERSTANDING LENGTH

The best players hit the best length. Here is how and why you can too

It seems disarmingly easy – as world no.1 Nour El Sherbini explained to us in the last issue when asked about her tactics. “They’re simple,” she said. “I concentrate on getting the ball in the back of the court”

So, even for the most brilliantly attacking player in the world, it is first things first. Put your opponent in the back corners, out of position, and then if they play short or execute a weak return, you can attack and move them over the distance. Secondly, a good length restricts options, making it hard for opponents to win points (see Issue 2). Thirdly, we use length to force weak returns. Fourthly, we use length to apply pressure and force predictable shots you can take advantage of.

A ‘full’ length will force an opponent to take the ball off the back wall. This is the shot that will give the striker the most time to take up position on the T. Where should the ball be on the sidewall? At the point a player wants to hit the ball. So, a good full length bounces somewhere behind the service box, rebounds off the back wall and hugs the sidewall.

A ‘dying-length’ drive means an opponent must hurry to return it before the ball dies in the back corner (it will not rebound back into the court). That is certainly the correct shot when an opponent is out of position

and it is sometimes the correct shot when struck from the middle of the court as well.

So, a full length puts an opponent right in the back corner and gives the striker time, while a dying length means an opponent must get the ball before it reaches the back of the court and is ideally used when an opponent is a bit out of position.

Your back-court game will then be a balance of full and dying lengths, plus hard and soft shots. A good tactical player will have a reason for each shot.

Practise a full length in solo practice, the knock-up, pairs practices, condition games and practice games. Make a clear distinction between your full and dying-length shots.

Your length shots are the basic structure of your rallies and all you need if you lose your ‘length’ (or structure) is one good length shot to reset your rally. And there is just one thing you need to do when your length fails – hit the ball higher. This is one of the unsung and unfashionable secrets of squash. It is that simple. Getting and keeping a good length is your no.1 tactic. More on this when we discuss rallying and matchplay from the ‘Top 10 Tactics’. As a preview, here is the golden rule when playing for length: if you hit one ball that is short, hit the next ball higher and then you will never lose your length.

TACTICS MASTERCLASS:

Nour El Sherbini has played a full-length shot with a difficult rebound for Nour El Tayeb down the right side. Interestingly, El Tayeb has shortened her grip to help her get under the ball, straighten it and lift it down the wall (you can see the ball in the top right of the picture). If she has it tight enough to the wall, she may get her own length shot in and win the T; if not, she has provided an opening and is in trouble. The full length has given El Sherbini time on the T and she has been able to assess her opponent’s shot and move off quickly to look for a possible volley.

TOP 10 TACTICS

1. LENGTH

Use length to put your opponent in the back corners and deprive them of attacking opportunities. Minimise mistakes. Start with defence.

2. WIDTH

Use width to get the ball past your opponent and force weak shots.

3. WIN THE T

Move to and take control of the T. Recover here quickly before your opponent hits their shot.

4. VARY THE PACE

Tactics involve a balance between hard and soft shots. Use the lob and other high shots to create time to recover the T. Vary the pace of your play to break an opponent’s rhythm.

5. APPLY PRESSURE AND VOLLEY

Apply pressure to deprive your opponent of time by taking the ball early, hitting it hard and volleying. Volley to keep control of the middle.

6. POSITIONAL PLAY

Hit the ball away from your opponent when openings occur. Make your opponent run. Play into the gaps.

7. ATTACK

Look for opportunities to attack. Attack when you have an opponent out of position and an easy ball.

8. VARIATIONS

Use surprise, disguise and deception to catch an opponent out. Set up patterns and then suddenly change them.

9. RALLY

Squash is a rallying game, so set them up and try to control them. Look for opportunities to play winners and force errors. Return to defensive play whenever you need to.

10. MATCHPLAY

Adapt your tactics to your opponent’s strengths and weaknesses.

NEXT ISSUE

- We tend to have a reasonable idea on what length is, but what is width?
- Where should we aim with our crosscourt shots?
- How do you avoid giving good volleying opportunities to an opponent when hitting across court?
- Are you playing too many crosscourt shots?