

Chapter 4 Players in a Framework

It should be obvious by now that if you want to play the game successfully you must be able to make the moves to create situations to your advantage. So, amongst other aspects, you must learn a range of strokes and become skilful in your footwork.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency these days to use the strokes as strokes only without giving much thought, if any, to their use as moves in the game. In my opinion, this state is due mainly to the development of coaching in badminton. Many young players are so overcoached on strokes in stroke practices and set routines that it gets forgotten that the point of the game is to defeat the opponent, and that the strokes are simply tools used to achieve that end. A stroke in isolation may require some very skilled movement but, unless it serves its function as a move in the game, it can be wasted. Strokes seen as moves in a game are part of a pattern of moves used to create situations in which you can make a scoring hit. Out of this context a stroke is quite meaningless. In the context of a game it becomes meaningful, for as a move it is related to the preceding move and to the next move. It should never be forgotten that when you hit the shuttle it only makes sense if you relate what you do to the effect it has on the opponent. It is not strokes you play on the court; it is the opponent. That is something you must never forget. If you have a coach who does, in his struggle for stroke perfection, remind him.

Generally speaking, players vary in their use of strokes as moves in the game. The stroke-moves a player makes or doesn't make can give us an insight into his tactical thinking or lack of it. The framework enables us to assess all players' types of game, without exception. All players must play within the framework when performing on court according to the rules of badminton. For example, if you study different players in action you will notice that some reflect much thought during the game and make a high percentage of appropriate moves, whereas others seem to reflect little thought and mix appropriate moves with a high percentage of inappropriate moves. Different players have a differently constructed framework. This is easy to 'see' if we take our framework and compare how different players work within it. You might recognise yourself as one of them. There are three basic types: those players who appear to operate in a 'complete' framework;

those who operate in an 'incomplete' framework; and those who operate in a 'badly constructed' framework.

The complete framework

In this framework all the parts are connected to form a unified whole. We know this from what a player does. And he does nearly everything right. He can make a range of stroke-moves in a situation and is able to judge and select which one is most likely to improve his chances of winning the rally. He knows his capabilities and those of his opponent in the situation he creates. In fact his framework is well designed and very clear to him. He knows what he is doing. He sees how all the moves are related according to the principle of attack and how each contributes towards making a scoring move to win the rally.

This player may be so skilful in his strokes, footwork and use of strokes as moves that he does not really consider his opponent's game. He may play the same way every time. He plays simple 'percentage' moves, knows the obvious replies and recovers to deal with them. For example, he knows that his smash gets a lift or a block return; and that his attack clear to one side gets a clear or a drop reply and to the other side gets the smash as a reply. He knows that his drop to the forecourt gets a lift or net reply in a certain situation. There is no reply he cannot manage. He never has to take chances or make random moves. So he plays his normal game consistently at speed, with control and accuracy, making few errors and recovering into position to cover any possible reply. He gives his opponent little opportunity to make a scoring hit. This player has reached the stage where he plays without conscious thought during a game, for with regular quality practice and competitive play he has developed efficient strokes and movement and the basic tactical moves which he can maintain at high speed for long periods. Nothing really troubles him. There is very little, if anything, any other player can do that he could not immediately cope with or adapt to in the course of the game. All the pressure is on the opponent. He has to struggle to cope with this confident player.

Such a player is the champion, the best player at his particular level of play. Only when he makes continual errors or loses is he forced to examine his game. Then he works on his technique, fitness, attitude or tactics. To reach such a standard much thought and learning has taken place.

In recent years a number of players have reached this standard and dominated the game for a period. Judy Hashman (nee Devlin) was the supreme player in all these respects. She has been followed by Yuki and Lena Koppen, both great tactical players with a positive attitude, who controlled opponents with the situations they created with their stroke-moves. Among the men, Erland Kops and Rudi Hartono immediately spring to mind as complete players who dominated for long periods of time

because of their all-round expertise. All these players operated in a complete framework.

The incomplete framework

In this framework not all the parts are apparent to the player. He knows that there are similar situations that occur during the game and that certain moves are possible. But he has not identified all the possible situations. There are gaps in his knowledge. He has not worked out all the possible stroke-moves nor the best way to recover after making a stroke-move. Consequently, in a contest against a superior player he finds himself in two sorts of situation.

First, there is the situation he is familiar with. This enables him to make stroke-moves which are sometimes appropriate and sometimes not appropriate. He may make an inappropriate move because he lacks sufficient skill or knowledge of his opponent and therefore cannot take this into account in his judgement of the situation. He needs more time to develop his technical skill and to learn about his opponent's possible replies in a situation.

Second, a situation he is not familiar with. This often happens against a superior opponent who creates a new situation, which he has not experienced before and so cannot identify. He becomes confused. He does not know all the possible moves nor how to perform them and so is forced to make a random move which may or may not work. If it does work then he has gained a new move appropriate to use against that opponent and, perhaps, any other opponent in the future. If it does not work he learns this quickly and can eliminate it from use should that situation occur again with that opponent.

This type of player is learning the game from first-hand experience. As he experiences a new situation he learns to identify it and can later consider the moves possible in that sort of situation. It is usually only against the superior opponent that he will find himself in situations which are new to him. Each new situation poses a problem which he has to solve by attempting to make an appropriate move. This he does by trial and error until, eventually, he learns that in a given situation certain stroke-moves work and others don't. In some games he may be successful; his random moves work and he solves the problems. But he has not yet reached the stage of the complete player who is in control of all situations and so wins consistently. Any improvement in his game can only arise from play against a superior player, for it is he who will provide him with the first-hand experience of new situations. This is one reason why he should play against many different players and many better players. Regular play in team matches, local tournaments and open tournaments is essential if you want to become a better player.

The badly constructed framework

In such a framework the player does not realise that he is in a situation because he cannot 'see' one, and does not understand that situations exist. Thus there is nothing to which he can relate; there is no guiding principle to determine whether or not certain moves are appropriate. In fact, because he cannot 'see' the situation *as* a situation he does not understand that there are moves which are appropriate in that situation, so in a sense he plays like a man who is partially blind. He sees the strokes only as strokes and not as moves in the game. Thus he is only really concerned with himself and his movements. He might possess a good range of strokes and excellent skill in travelling around the court, and he might even follow some rules in his use of strokes - but not in a way which shows he understands the reasons for the rules. For example, one international player during the build-up to the 1975 Uber Cup competition returned from the Irish Championships having lost to a player against whom we expected her to win. When I asked her about the game she told me that she had played the 'correct' game. She had hit drops and clears to the corners but it hadn't worked. This is a typical example of a player who has been taught the 'tips for singles' approach to the game. Many young players are given this sort of advice without the reasons behind the tactics. In most cases, it is doubtful whether the person giving the advice even knows the reasons when pushed to justify such advice. There is nothing wrong with hitting drops and clears to the corners if you know what sort of situation they are intended to create; when used as stroke-moves they must be hit in accordance with the principle of attack.

Another rule slavishly followed some years ago and still heard today is: 'never smash from the rear court in singles'. Such advice reflects a limited view of the use of the smash: the view that the smash should be used only to hit winners. But there is nothing special about the smash. It can be hit from anywhere as a stroke-move used to obtain a block or lift as a reply. It is very effective if used in this way as long as you can recover to get into position to meet the replies. If you cannot follow up and do something in the situation you have created, then you should not smash. But that advice would apply to any stroke-move. Generally speaking, you should not make any stroke-move if you cannot cover the replies. However, like any general rule, there may be exceptions to it in certain circumstances. One must always allow for the exception to the rule, otherwise we would never make progress in badminton or any other activity.

The players in the badly constructed type of framework do not use the strokes as moves in the game. Their strokes are more like conditioned responses to different stimuli. The only way that such a player can know whether he has played the right stroke is when he makes a winning hit. He may be extremely fit and possess a good range of stylish strokes but he does not connect one stroke as a move to the next stroke as a move. He has no

apparent sense of purpose. So when he hits the shuttle he has to wait to see what his opponent does before he can travel to perform another stroke. It is as though he is always one move behind.

When he meets an inferior player his superior strokes can help him to win easily. However, when he meets a player of equal stroke ability who uses his strokes as moves he can lose very easily or have a hard struggle. He will rarely win. This is because he leaves it to chance whether or not his strokes are appropriate in the situations. If they are, he will have a long battle with his equal opponent, for that opponent will be able to contend with most of the situations. If his strokes are not appropriate then he will lose easily. He cannot control the play, for there is no clear purpose to his play. He plays a type of game which is difficult to explain, and makes many rash shots and careless errors.

There is no doubt that such a player can suffer. Dismay, confusion, helplessness, frustration and anger are all part of his act when he does lose to anyone he considers less than his outright superior. His court behaviour shows it well. It is not unusual to see such a player swearing, racket throwing, sulking, giving up, arguing with officials, as he questions decisions and so on. Blaming everyone and everything except himself, he cannot understand how, with such technical skill, he can lose. He simply forgets that the game requires more than the ability to hit a shuttle. He has yet to learn what it actually means to play opponents and not simply play strokes. Against the superior opponent he will rarely have a good contest and certainly never win. For his development into the higher levels of play is dependent upon him seeing the strokes as moves in a situation played in accordance with the principle of attack.

The three types of player as reflected in these frameworks are not so easily identified in practice as I have described them here. They are models. However, there are many players who fit into these different frameworks at various times. I am sure that you will be able to identify yourself among them. The important lesson to learn is that more understanding of the game can be gained from looking at yourself and other players in terms of our framework. It should help you to assess your game and so identify what you should learn to improve it. It will certainly help you to assess your opponent's game and work out some moves which could contribute towards your success in competition. Don't forget that the game is a contest and the point of the game is to win. Thus, if a game is played in accordance with the principle of attack, every stroke-move must contribute to that attack. Only in this way will you play purposefully towards winning.