

Developing Your Anticipatory Skills by Mark Allen



When Julian Illingworth moves early off the T to volley straight a cross court from his opponent hit at over 150 miles per hour, he is not demonstrating sharper reactions than the normal person. It has been proven that even the most elite performers when taken out of the context of their own sport do not demonstrate greater reaction speeds than a player of average experience in an alternative sport. The best players seem to have all the time in the world, they seem to know something is going to happen in advance, and as a result the game seems to slow down for them. How can this be so?

Mark Williams, professor of motor behavior at Liverpool John Moores University is arguably the world's leading expert on perceptual exercise in sport. In an experiment containing a life size projection of a tennis player serving, he uses an eye tracking system (with the addition of feet placed on sensors) to study the observations of the serve returner. The results of this experiment show that elite players look in different places to others. "Top tennis players look at the trunk and hips of their opponents on return in order to pick up the visual clues governing where they are going to serve".

The difficulty is that it's not just a case of knowing where to look, it is also about grasping the meaning of what you are looking at, and this is something that only experience will teach us.

How do you build this skill in your squash game?

1. Don't watch the ball (well not too intensely anyway)!

How often in squash are we told to watch the ball? The reality is that watching the ball too intensely, and not learning to focus on the other clues out there, puts us at a disadvantage when trying to anticipate. In the past I realize I have often drummed the instruction "watch the ball" into my players, when what I was really trying to do was stop them staring at the front wall; these are not the same thing and I have now adjusted my instruction accordingly. Today I teach my players what to look for, beginning with the pre-impact clues that are usually there when a boast is being hit.

2. Minimize the use of set pattern practice drills

More time on court improves our anticipation skills – there is absolutely no substitute for experience. However it should be noted that the hours we spend practicing only

develop anticipation skills if the practices, drills and games always have an optional element. This is why players that are over coached and under played often struggle to read the game as well as they should. Any player that spends the majority of his on court time hitting with a coach, and with the coach spending large chunks of the lesson time doing set pattern drills, is not developing the requisite anticipation skills.

Practices that I see performed in school and squad coaching programs regularly are one's with two pairs working either side of the court, and a ball being hit by each pair. These are very poor practices because there is never a chance of the ball going cross court. I believe that even when developing technique on any shot the majority of practices should allow the coach/feeder to choose between at least two shots – that way the player's anticipation skills are being improved in conjunction with technique. This way your practice time will always be increasing your ability to read the important pre-impact clue's. So when you drill using your simple drop-drive, boast-drive, rotational rails, boast-cross-straight drills to develop technique, always add the option of your practice partner being able to hit one alternative shot at anytime.

3. Play and practice regularly with players around your own level.

Playing “up” obviously stretches you and is one of the quickest ways to raise your level of play. However if you want to win at your own level it's very important to play and practice regularly their too. The pre-impact clues given at each level of the game are different. A boast at 3.5 level is usually accompanied by a far greater shoulder turn toward the back wall than it is at 5.5 level. The drop and drive usually have very different set up positions at lower levels compared to higher levels. This is one of several reasons why I try to set up most of my coaching lessons with two players of the same standard – allowing practice to take place with someone of their own level that is demonstrating all of the appropriate pre-impact clues that need to be picked up upon. It gives me plenty of opportunities to coach the requisite skills.

Another important implication of all of this is that volleying a loosely hit (but faster ball) down the wall or cross court is far more difficult than we acknowledge for someone with only a few years playing experience. It's not so much a question of technique, it's that taking the ball on the volley in the mid court area necessitates a much earlier read by the anticipating player. Whilst I might shake my head and grumble when a randomly hit loose ball gets left to go to the back by one of my juniors, volleying a lot of these balls would require pure guesswork – something that I don't want to encourage. Now I try to limit my expectations with regards to the amount of volleys taken by a younger junior player, and increase them gradually corresponding to the level of experience. It also makes sense to not push an inexperienced player too far up in their T position just because David Palmer does it – the anticipatory skills that have been developed by David over a decade of dedicated play & practice allow him to play this high and gain the advantages from doing so. But in my experience without these skills the disadvantages of playing a high T position usually outweigh the advantages.

The thing to remember here is that the recognition of what and where to look is not an innate skill. It is something that is developed with practice. Players that read the game well have had more opportunities to develop this element of their game. If your anticipation skills are poor relative to your peers then take a look at your most used practices & drills as well as how you are being coached because chances are it is because of these things that your skills are poor.

For more on Mark Allen and his coaching, please visit <http://LobToHisBackhand.com>.