

CHAPTER X

Doubles : II. Back-and-front Formation

THE storm of argument will without doubt always rage as to whether the side-by-side or back-and-front formation is the better type for mixed doubles. There have been great pairs of both kinds. Not long ago Sir George Thomas and Miss Hogarth, a very strict back-and-front combination, were supreme ; now Mr Devlin and Miss McKane, who chiefly adopt the other method, hold their place. Yet this latter pair are perhaps not quite a case in point. Miss McKane partakes so much of the nature of a prodigy as regards hitting powers, defence, and endurance that to cite her as an example may be open to the usual criticism. So super-excellent is she that there are not many men who can claim to be superior. We must remember, too, that frequently she plays at the net while Mr Devlin looks after the back of the court. A notable example of this was in the final of the Mixed Doubles at the Royal Horticultural Hall in 1924, when, by changing suddenly from the side-by-side formation to the back-and-front, this famous pair gained a brilliant victory over Sir George Thomas and Miss Hogarth—a victory that, prior to this alteration in tactics, looked extremely doubtful, to say the least of it. In this connexion it is an interesting point to note that the only defeat which Mr Devlin and Miss McKane

BADMINTON

sustained in tournaments last season was at the hands of Mr Uber and Mrs Horsley, a fairly strict back-and-front pair. These last-mentioned players are particularly brilliant exponents of this formation.

I myself am all for the back-and-front method, even though Mrs Tragett and I won the Mixed Doubles Championship in 1923 playing side by side. However, this fine player is, in her own line, just as much of a prodigy as Miss McKane, as her shots are so numerous and so varied, and her powers of intelligent anticipation so highly developed. Yet, when it is absolutely necessary, Mrs Tragett will go to the net. The main argument in favour of this formation is that it removes the weaker player to a sphere where there is not so much scope for her to be attacked. I do not think that I am laying myself open to the charge of being called unchivalrous when I say that physically women are the weaker sex. This means that there are certain shots, chiefly the smash, the drive, and the clear from the back of the court, which they are not able to execute with the same force as men. This may not apply to such a powerful player as Miss Elton, but she is the exception. In the first two cases, the result is the loss of some openings and aces, in the third the chance of making a present of these to the opposition. When she is at the net, she can help her partner in many ways, while running little risk of losing any openings or giving them away through inability to hit hard.

To play the whole back of the court well demands a great deal of skill and energy on the part of the man.

DOUBLES—II

That its two most outstanding exponents, Sir George Thomas and Mr Devlin, should have each won the Singles Championship is a significant fact. Lesser players fail signally if they try it. Therefore, I do not advise beginners to attempt it in tournaments until they have some experience and confidence in their own abilities. In fact, it is rather an impertinence to expect a lady to play at the net when you are not capable of protecting the back, especially if she happens to be relatively of a higher standard than you are. It means that she soon loses confidence in you and the result is chaos. It is also diametrically opposed to the principle that underlies this formation—namely, the elimination of the weaker element. If you are weak yourself, you are only making yourself weaker still by attempting the impossible. You can gain knowledge and experience by adopting it first in practice matches. But you must complete a long course in training before you can hope to enjoy it in tournaments without running grave risk of letting your partner down. As soon as you have confidence in yourself, then is the time to commence in tournaments. Where possible, play as much as you can with the same partner, for good combination is a great asset, but takes time to learn. Even if it does nothing else, practice at playing all the back of the court increases your agility and versatility. You will be well rewarded by watching Sir George Thomas, Mr Devlin, or Mr Uber playing mixed. If you can understand their methods, you will have learnt much. The first-named, master of many strokes, is continually

BADMINTON

attacking with all the variety of shots at his command. Mr Devlin and Mr Uber rely mainly on forceful drives and smashes, backed up by deep lobs. Note especially how close Mr Devlin stands in to receive the serve and as a result how many aces he wins by rushing. You will be amazed at the speed of all three in covering the necessary ground, considering the rate at which the shuttle travels so frequently. As I have said, it is only the best who can succeed in playing the back, so test yourself in practice many times before you venture to adopt it in an open tournament. You must have confidence in yourself and be able to inspire confidence in your partner.

In this formation the net-player has to stand very close in. As her main stroke there is hitting the shuttle down when it is close to the tape, she must cultivate a flick-stroke in order to avoid hitting the net. Some experts at net-play favour for a grip that illustrated in Plate B, III, and this is the grip used by Miss Hogarth, perhaps the most perfect exponent of this type of play at present. You cannot follow a better example than hers. A subtle wrist is a great asset. It makes the downward flick so much easier and obviates to some extent the risk of hitting the tape. Although the general working principle is to hit the shuttle down, yet there are occasions when this should be varied. The net-player will be best able to judge these from observation of her opponent's position. For instance, when both opponents are out of position—one near the net and the other near the side-line, a low, deep drive to

DOUBLES—II

the other side-line will frequently win an ace. The correct time for using the various strokes depends on circumstances, and he is a good player who can unite the proper time with the proper stroke. Whenever you get a chance to hit down, do so. From the position in which you make your stroke you should win often. As swiftness of action is essential, you should hold your racquet in front of you always a little higher than the top of the net. In this way you are placed most conveniently to execute the flick with the minimum loss of time. You will invariably see inexperienced net-players holding their racquet too much below the top of the net and they cannot get it into position quick enough and, therefore, lose many good chances. Watch Miss Hogarth at the net. She always has her racquet well up, ready to pounce swiftly and surely.

It is generally agreed that the player standing in should take as the base of operations a position opposite to the centre of the net. Here she is best placed to guard the whole width of the court. This, of course, is not to be adhered to very rigorously. There are many occasions on which she will have to leave this central position for one nearer the side-lines. For example, when her partner is in difficulties at one side of the court she should move over a little toward the opposite side, to guard against the possibility of a half-court shot, which he would not be able to reach in time. What shots ought to be taken by her is a difficult question. Generally speaking, I think she should take any shot which she is able to hit down easily.

BADMINTON

There is extraordinary scope for anticipation in this position—in fact, you must anticipate to be a success. You should always ask yourself where the shuttle is going to cross the net, and having made up your mind as to this, be ready to take full advantage of your knowledge, if you happen to be right. Mental anticipation is enough. Make as little movement as you can. A mixed double is usually a fast game, so the time given to the net-player to determine what shot is to be hit and what is to be let pass can only be measured in fractions of a second. You must, therefore, be always ready, always on the alert, and this can best be accomplished by getting into the habit of anticipating each shot that your opponents make. If you are in any doubt whether you should take it or not, do not take it. You will probably make a bad and indecisive stroke. Yet if you start for one and can get to it, do not stop. Go for it and hit it, even if it suddenly dawns on you that your partner can deal with it better, for the chances are that he, seeing you starting for it, will not make any movement himself. Especially remember that you have to trust your partner absolutely to play the whole back of the court. Your chief advantage is that you are so close to the net and can put away any loose shots. If you lose confidence in your partner, you insensibly edge away from the net and all the potential benefits are lost. It is his business to try not to give any shots to his opponents off which they may be able to inconvenience you with their return, and you have got to keep the same object in

DOUBLES—II

view. But as you do not get so much of the play as he does, your chances of doing harm in this respect are proportionately less. His main object is to make openings for you, yours is to put the finishing touch to these and, if possible, make some for him. Unless you work for each other's mutual good, you will never make a great pair.

There is one point on which first-class players differ—whether the lady, after her partner serves, should go in at once or wait for the return and then go in. Sir George Thomas favours the latter, Mr Devlin the former. In this class of expert opinion, you should try both and adopt that which suits you better. I am in favour of the former. Elimination of the weaker element is the basic principle of the back-and-front formation and is subject to very little modification. As far as I can see, there is little or nothing to be gained by the lady standing out just for one return. There is the serious objection that you are subjecting the weaker player to attack. It may give the striker a greater variety of shots, perhaps, to choose from—he may rush a service, for instance, secure in the knowledge that if the shuttle is lobbed back over his head, his partner can get to it in time to return it. But to counteract that, if that is a great advantage, he has both to be prepared to take shots really belonging to the net-player and also to assume the back-and-front formation at once, if the reply to the service demands it. Furthermore, since she has most probably to take the first return and then go in, the spot which she has just vacated is rather

BADMINTON

vulnerable. If the man serves a lob, some affirm that two are more competent to deal with the resulting smash than one. This may be so, but the smash must be exceedingly severe and well placed. I prefer to have my partner at the net all the time, and the more she confines herself to the net, the better I like it. It will be the safest policy to try both methods in practice and then select whichever you think most suitable and keep to it.

In order to attack effectively a back-and-front pair, it is necessary to be a master of the fast attacking strokes. The smash and the drive are the two chief weapons. Do not neglect the others, of course, but I think there is more scope for the employment of these two in this type of game than in any other. They certainly are the chief strokes used by Mr Devlin and Mr Uber. A player needs to be very fit physically to protect the back of the court properly. Therefore you should try to keep him on the run as much as possible. This is where the cross-court drive proves so useful. Yet, although very telling, it must be used with discretion. If your opponent can get his racquet to the shuttle, it will be back on you almost at once and you will have great difficulty in retrieving it. Again, the net-player may anticipate it and flick it down—Mrs Horsley excels at this. Mr Uber has developed a most excellent reply to a backhand drive off a smash—a favourite stroke of Mr Devlin. He hits the shuttle round his head, midway between the usual height for a smash and a drive—that is, very little higher than his

DOUBLES—II

head. He hits hard and straight for the opposite side of the court, and makes a winner very often, if his shot goes over. Great speed of action and accuracy of timing are necessary. It will pay you to try to imitate this stroke. The smash can be used as often as you like and is mainly useful in supplying openings to the player at the net.

A stroke that is extremely effective is the half-court smash, more especially if you are able to make the shuttle fall within the side-lines. The execution must be crisp to enable the shuttle to fall fast. It cannot, of course, travel as quickly as the ordinary smash, but the action should be just the same and it forms an excellent alternative. Its great advantage lies in the fact that this is the part of the court hardest for the back-player to look after. He can as a rule get to it, but may leave himself out of position, unless he sends a high lob out far, in which case he rather surrenders the initiative to the opposition. Besides, the net-player tries to return this shot at times. If she has anticipated it, she can deal with it effectively. If she has not guessed it beforehand, she will only confuse her partner and the last state will be worse than the first. It is rather dangerous to use this stroke from right to left or from left to right. You cannot hit very hard or the shuttle will go out. This being the case, it is by no means impossible for an intelligent net-player to anticipate it and tap it down *en route*. The best time for its exploitation is when you can hit straight, or nearly straight, up the court. What is true, generally

BADMINTON

speaking, of all shots is true of this one also—do not use it too much. No stroke ought to be used to the exclusion of the rest. The more shots you employ, the more possibilities of attack your opponent has to anticipate.

Experience and the knowledge of how to gain by experience are of no avail where perfect understanding and mutual confidence do not exist between the two partners. Understanding is only brought about by close study of each other's play, and confidence grows from constant practice together. Practise often, therefore, and prune rigorously any faults in combination. Note any misunderstandings that occur and think out a scheme to prevent this recurrence in the future. You cannot play Badminton well without using your intelligence, so make all the use of it you can.

My object all through has been to write a book useful for beginners. I have, therefore, omitted some of the finer points, but these can be studied later. What every beginner should aim at is correct principles for producing strokes. These have been laid down, and since the foundations should be sound, it is your own fault as architect if the resulting edifice is not good. You cannot learn how to play any game quickly. Whatever the gods may do with an individual, they cannot make a perfect player in a moment. You will have to practise long and hard before you can become really first-class, but if you are fond of the game, this ought not to be a hardship. You will find in it both mental and physical enjoyment, for it is not a game in

DOUBLES—II

which slap-dash methods alone bring success. Hard hitting is certainly invaluable, but the brain must guide everything, and when all is said and done, strength is only half the battle. The delicate thrust of the rapier is often more effective than the thunderous blow of the bludgeon. There is a charm about the game of the elusive shuttle which is hard to define, but to me its supreme fascination is its variety. You can never know all there is to be known, and every day that passes you can, like the wise man of old, add to your store of knowledge.