

CHAPTER IV

Stroke-production

WE have it on the best authority that an edifice built on frail and insecure foundations is, by its own inherent deficiencies, destined to fall. So it is with games. To be successful, your method of play must be founded on sound and workable principles. Players must certainly differ in the execution of various strokes, but this difference is only as regards details. For example, you will see some killing the shuttle when it is in front of the right shoulder, and you will see others smashing around the head, with the shuttle above the left shoulder. It does not matter one iota which method you adopt, as long as the shuttle is hit correctly. Different methods suit different persons, but principles are changeless, and the correct execution of a stroke means the proper observance of correct principles.

The first important point to notice about the execution of a stroke is the position of the feet. It is not too much to say that if your feet are wrong your stroke will be a bad one, for it will have to be performed in an unnatural attitude. Study one of the photographs of Miss K. McKane, illustrating the smash, and the first thing that will strike you is the complete naturalness of the pose in either case. There is no strained or artificial

STROKE-PRODUCTION

effect. Everything is simple and easy. There seems to be a conscious sense on the part of the player that she is taking the stroke exactly in the manner that appears to her most simple and natural. That, of course, is the right way to feel about it. If you feel that your style is cramped in a certain shot, the chances are that there is something radically wrong with your execution. You should then experiment until you find the correct method, and once you have found it your own subconscious mind will force you to recognize the fact.

The secret of an easy and graceful action is in the position of the feet. This means that they must be placed so that you are able to execute the shot comfortably and naturally. There are two things to be remembered in this connexion—first, in making a forearm shot, the left foot must be in advance of the right ; and secondly, for a backhand, the right foot must be in front. This applies to every stroke and can never be disregarded. The only other thing that may be mentioned about position is the distance at which you should be from the shuttle at the moment of impact. On this head no hard-and-fast rule can be laid down. Most players differ to a greater or lesser degree in the matter of reach, and therefore some have of necessity to be closer to the shuttle than others. However, as a general rule, not to be applied literally in every case, the shuttle should be hit at the full stretch of the arm. This must be done always in performing a shot that involves pace. A cramped position of the arm, in addition to being very unsightly, makes it impossible

BADMINTON

to impart great pace. Practice will teach you how far you should stand away in order to gain the best results. Aim at having your feet right and the rest will be comparatively easy.

The beginning of the stroke is just as important as the actual striking, for on the preliminaries depends success or failure. Broadly speaking, for a fast shot you must have a long swing at the shuttle, unless you happen to be gifted with a wrist of inordinate strength. Even if you are thus fortunately endowed, the swing will add extra pace, which is all to the good. For a slow shot this will not be necessary, but may be used at your own discretion as a means of concealing your direction—you will find it most useful in this connexion. In the execution of various strokes the shuttle is hit at various heights, and I will mention these when the particular kind of shot is being discussed. The advantage of keeping your opponent guessing as to the proposed destination of the shuttle has already been referred to, and much can be done toward achieving this in the preliminary stage of the stroke. Now there are some shots that have practically the same initial action, such as the smash and the drop from above the head, not to mention any others. If you can accustom yourself to commence each of these in the same way, and keep the same action until the actual moment of striking, you will be bound to reap a rich harvest of aces, because your opponent cannot be sure many times whether you are going to drop or to smash. This is by no means a very difficult thing to acquire,

STROKE-PRODUCTION

and the results to be gained will well repay the time spent in practice.

You will also, as a general rule, find it useful not to have the face of the racquet turned in the direction in which you intend the shuttle to go—but only, of course, within common-sense limits. In many cases this will necessitate a swift turn of the wrist at the last moment, but it will be worth your while to train yourself to do this as if it were second nature. It means that you have to develop your wrist. You cannot start too soon to try to bring about this development, for there is hardly another game in which strength and suppleness of wrist count so much. There are numerous delicate and gentle shots that must form part of the armoury of a good player, and they cannot be executed satisfactorily unless you possess, to some degree at all events, what has been called a 'racquet-wrist.' This is where Badminton differs so much from lawn tennis, and is the reason why a good tennis player is not necessarily even a fair Badminton player, but a good exponent of Badminton is usually more than a fair tennis player. The best writers on tennis assert that the drive, forearm or backhand, should be performed with a 'stiff arm.' Apart from the absurdity of even imagining a top-spin drive with a shuttle, there is no stroke in Badminton that the use of the wrist will not improve. Players used to making their arm do nearly all the work find it extremely hard to alter their methods to suit other conditions. Hence the tennis player's failure. To do the reverse is, on the other

BADMINTON

hand, by no means so difficult, and so the Badminton player does not labour under an equal disadvantage. There is one point of interest—every good Badminton player is an excellent volleyer at tennis. However, apart from this comparison, the more wrist you are able to insinuate into your stroke, the swifter will be your execution, the crisper the shot, and the more you will puzzle your opponent.

The actual striking of the shuttle must now be considered. It is hardly necessary to say that your aim should be to strike the feathered missile with the centre of the racquet. Shots off the wood either of the head or of the handle, though very remunerative to the performer and very annoying to the recipient, are in the hands of the Goddess of Luck, to give or withhold at her pleasure, and no one can make allowances for the contrariness of a woman, particularly if she happens to be a deity. The amount of strength with which to strike depends naturally on the nature of the shot. This sense of touch, one of the most subtle and delicate senses, is not easily acquired, and to learn how to gauge accurately the amount of force required takes long practice. Once you know the correct momentum to impart, you have reached a high standard of play. In this respect again the value of the wrist comes into prominence. You can save an enormous amount of energy by making use of it when clearing or smashing! A flick of a strong wrist will carry the shuttle nearly the whole length of the court. Think of the expenditure that is necessary if you are compelled to put all the

STROKE-PRODUCTION

force of your arm and the weight of your body into the same stroke.

Finally, there is what is called the 'follow-through.' This is just as integral a part of the stroke as anything that has been mentioned. It is the natural ending, and a stroke is only half done if it is not executed. The pace of the shuttle after a smash or a drive is increased or decreased according as the player performs or neglects to perform the follow-through. Examine Plate H, the finish of the forearm drive. If you compare this with Plate G, you will notice how far the racquet has travelled around Mr Devlin from the actual position of impact. For any stroke that purposes to make the shuttle go fast, this follow-through is necessary. There are occasions when you will not be able to do it owing to circumstances. For instance, if the shuttle is close to the net and you want to smash it down, the racquet must be checked sharply after the blow, otherwise you will hit the net. Omitting this and similar cases, always follow-through.

These are the four main points about a stroke—the position of the feet and distance of the striker from the shuttle, the beginning of the stroke, the actual striking, and the follow-through with the racquet. You should practise strokes, paying due attention to each of these. In this way your production will become accurate and precise. It may seem to you impossible to attend to all these details in the heat of a fierce rally, but this is not so. If you saw a slow-motion picture of first-class players engaged in rapid exchanges, you would see that,

BADMINTON

where necessary, every stroke is founded on these principles. They are so obviously the right principles for executing strokes that once you have learned to observe them you will not be able to disregard them. They become part of the game itself, and even in the most furious rallies you will unconsciously and automatically observe them.

It will be obvious that the performance, graceful or otherwise, of all the actions that go to form a stroke constitutes style. Now style is a very elusive quality. There are some who seem to have been born to do everything connected with games in a manner pleasing to the eyes of the onlookers, and there are others who, no matter how hard they may try, find all their efforts clogged by an innate clumsiness and awkwardness of execution. The ancient Greeks made a highly important discovery in the realms of art, which they expressed by the phrase "Nothing too much." Although they have been blamed, and perhaps rightly so, for handing down to us such things as Euclid, yet not even the veriest Philistine can take exception to their achievements in architecture. Their experiments led them to find out that in art nothing should be strained or exaggerated. Everything must be harmonious and natural. This union of nature and harmony is simplicity in the best meaning of that word, and those things which we call great depend for their degree of greatness on the sublime nature of their simplicity. Style in a game is also an expression of art; and the more beautiful the style the greater the

STROKE-PRODUCTION

player, as a general rule. It is an interesting question as to how far a good style helps a player and how far a bad style, on the other hand, may prove a bar to the highest honours. Every All-England Champion that it has been my good fortune to see has been gifted with an easy style. The only point these players have in common, apart from a general high level of excellence, is this same freedom of action. A bad style by the nature of things must imply bad execution and must therefore exercise a certain amount of influence over the play. However, this effect is only noticeable when the player happens to be opposed to one whom he equals in other respects, but to whom he is inferior in this one matter of style. To have a good style does not mean that it will enable you to beat a better player, but it will usually give victory to its possessor where two are equally matched. A beautiful style can hardly be acquired—it is rather a gift of nature. Yet every one who takes the trouble to practise his strokes correctly can acquire a style free from faults of technique. It is said that the world-famous cricketer, Hobbs, practises during the winter in front of a looking-glass. By so doing, he is apparently able to see his own strokes for himself and correct any fault that he may be committing. This method, being liable to misinterpretation, probably will not meet with much favour, although it yields excellent results as far as he is concerned. Perhaps one of the best ways of improving yourself in this respect is to study the play of an acknowledged master of the game. You will know

BADMINTON

from one look that he has an easy action, and it ought not to be hard for you to find out wherein this quality lies. Study him especially where you are conscious of some deficiency in your own play and you will probably discover where you are wrong. If you decide to imitate his action in making some stroke, do not let your imitation be too slavish. No two players, no matter how alike they may seem to play, ever make their shots in exactly the same way. Copy the stroke by all means, but while copying it make it your own. Fortunately very few people harbour the idea that the poetry of motion is merely blank verse, but perhaps all in some respect or other might be improved. It is attention to small details and concentrated effort to improve that lead to the best result. Let every movement you make be directed toward the improvement of your strokes, and in such a scheme meaningless flourishes of the arms or legs or racquet will have no part. The more you play, the more you will realize that the most convenient way to execute a shot is the simplest, and that the simplest way is the best style.