

CHAPTER V

The Smash

THIS is the most powerful attacking shot in the game and is therefore of primary importance. Onlookers may consider it to be an easy shot, but it is by no means so easy as it appears—there is much more in it than meets the eye. Some players have an aptitude for this stroke as soon as they start, and it is an invaluable advantage. Beginners should accustom themselves to hitting hard whenever it is possible. I do not mean by this that they should smash from the back of the court at any and every opportunity. Far from it—indeed, I regard smashing from the back of the court, except in a double, as mere waste of energy. But it is quite a different question when the shuttle is going to fall between the net and about two-thirds of the way toward the back-line. In that case my advice is to smash every time, for not only do you stand to make a good opening for yourself, but also you have a fair chance of scoring an outright winner, if you possess in any degree a respectable smash and a sense of direction. Hit hard, when you are smashing—your very hardest. Half-measures do not pay. After the completion of the stroke, you will be somewhat off your balance and an ineffective kill will give an ideal opportunity to your opponent for a well-placed return. Thus you at once lose the initiative, if not the stroke.

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The smash is perhaps the most spectacular shot in Badminton and the possessor of a severe kill is an ideal partner in a men's double. Opinions vary as to whether the better practice is to hit the shuttle round the head over the left shoulder or to make the shot when the shuttle is in front of the right shoulder. Personally I think either method is equally good. The former way is more suitable to some, while others find the latter more convenient. It is really not so much a matter of whether the shuttle is hit in front of the right or left shoulder, but how it is hit—that is the important point. When you begin to smash, one of these ways will come naturally to you. Choose that way, and do not let any advice tempt you to essay a method that is not natural to you.

Consider for a few moments Plate C showing Miss McKane preparing to smash. You will notice that the left foot is well in advance of the right, that she is standing on her toes, and that the weight of the body is resting on the right foot. This last point is of the utmost importance, for at the time of striking the weight of the body has to be transferred from the right foot to the left. It is this transference of weight that mainly influences the momentum of the shuttle. Watch a good player preparing to smash and the truth of this will be evident. It is therefore necessary to have the left foot in front. If both feet are in line the weight is evenly distributed, and there will not be the same force or sting in the resulting smash. To have the right foot in front of the left is, of course, absurd.

PLATE C



THE SMASH
Miss K. McKane

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Some players lean very far back when preparing for this stroke, but this to a large extent is a matter of taste. Indeed, Mr G. A. Sautter used to bend so far as to give the impression that he might lose his balance altogether and topple over. Be that as it may, his smash, with the possible exception of Mr Devlin's, was the most severe that I have ever seen and undoubtedly some of its extraordinary pace was imparted by this backward bend. On the other hand, Mr Devlin's smash is just as fast and yet he does not lean back to any extraordinary extent.

The actual striking of the shuttle involves very correct timing. It is your object to make it travel to the other side of the net as quickly as possible and the nearer it goes to the net the better. This does not leave much margin for error and that is why you see so many smashes brought to an untimely end by the tape. This happens usually because the shuttle has been struck too late, or, if you like, too low. In striking, you must be able to feel that you are getting over the shuttle and hitting it down. It is here that the transference of the weight from the right foot to the left is so important, giving, as it does, so much downward pace. To strike too late is therefore a common fault, for it happens on account of this desire to get above the shuttle. At the actual moment when the racquet and shuttle meet, the wrist ought to be brought into play. You will see some smashing with no apparent effort and others battering at the shuttle as if they were trying to knock down a burglar with a cudgel. Also you will

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be surprised to remark that much more pace is obtained by the former than by the latter. The secret of this is that one has learnt to use his wrist and the other has not. It is just this bit of wrist-play, introduced at the psychological moment when the shuttle is hit, that imparts the extra snap and precision to the kill. No written instructions can be given on this point—you have to practise it for yourself until you can feel that you are getting your wrist to work in the required manner.

When the shuttle is hit the right arm must be fully extended. This is done because the higher the altitude of the racquet, the easier it is to get over the shuttle and hit downward. Tall people have therefore a big advantage. In order to reach as high a point as possible from which to smash, some players actually leap up and hit the shuttle with both feet off the ground. These are naturally those whose prowess at the game is not proportional to their inches. There are points both for and against this practice. However, I should not recommend a beginner to attempt it as a start. It is much better for him to maintain contact with the floor with both feet, at all events until after the stroke is completed. In this way he will learn the knack of shifting his weight from the right foot to the left and thus get the whole weight of the body behind the shot. If this is not done properly, the kill will be very ineffective. To start learning to smash without keeping the feet on *terra firma* is to run the risk of not making use of your weight. Once you have learnt to use it in the

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correct manner, it does not matter whether you take the shot on or off the floor. Whichever method you decide to use, you will have very distinguished company on your side. Mr B. Hamilton, one of the greatest players that have ever won an Open Championship, used invariably to leap off the ground when smashing, and his smash was, according to report, extremely formidable. On the other hand, Mr Devlin practically never does this, although, just when the shuttle is being hit, he lifts his right foot off the floor. It is also to be remembered that by jumping you leave yourself a little more open to attack than if you do not jump, in cases where you fail to score an outright winner and the shuttle is returned. When you have put your whole strength and weight behind your kill, it is very difficult at times to recover your balance soon enough to reach the return. It is naturally more difficult to do this when you have lost an additional second by being in the air. This chiefly applies to smashes from far out. However, it is not so very important, as I am not a believer in the smash from the back of the court in a single. I hold that it should only be employed when there is a clear opening or a distinct chance of making a good opening by a well-judged smash. To keep slogging away from the back will be fatal both to your own confidence and your reserves of energy. Mr Devlin used to employ his formidable smash in a single whenever he could, but found that it did not pay on account of the drain it caused on his physical strength. Latterly he has changed his tactics, reserving it for occasions

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when he is almost sure to score by it, and the result is that he is now the All-England Champion. In a double it is quite a different thing. Here you have a partner to cover up the gap, and if your smash is at all severe, the return which your opponents will make off it should not be too severe and your partner should in nine cases out of ten be able to deal with it. Let me repeat that you should learn to smash keeping both feet on the ground until the follow-through, when most will probably find it more natural to lift the right foot. Ultimately you can vary your method, if you find it to be of advantage for you to do so.

There now remains the finish of the stroke or, as it is usually called, 'the follow-through.' Look at Plate D this time and note carefully the attitude—the body bending forward, the racquet nearly touching the floor, and the whole weight of the body resting still on the right foot, which has advanced one step forward from its original position. The weight is transferred to the left at the moment of impact, and then the right foot comes forward as a natural outcome. This follow-through is the logical termination to the shot and should always be done where possible. By it you not only tend to make the flight of the shuttle more accurate but you also add to its pace. The fact that the weight has been shifted to the other foot is most important. This follows naturally upon getting your body into the stroke and needs no further comment. When you are smashing near the net, there is a certain amount of risk of striking the net. To avoid this, you

PLATE D



FINISH OF SMASH
Miss K. McKane

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stop short the follow-through. Immediately after you have hit the shuttle, you prevent the racquet from travelling any farther by a sharp jerk of the wrist. It is quite an easy thing to learn and you must accustom yourself to doing it automatically. You are bound to be presented with many 'sitters' at the net, but if you do not train yourself to check the follow-through, when necessary, you will find it as easy to hit the tape with the racquet as to put them away. It is surprising how near the shuttle may be to the net and how hard you can put it away without striking the tape.

Most players at the conclusion of their smash have their right foot off the ground, but I do not think it makes much difference whether you have or have not. In my own case both feet are usually resting on the ground after a smash, but then I find it suits me better to adopt a firmer stance than the majority of players. It is purely a question of what comes more natural to you and it does not make one jot or tittle of difference to the force of your kill whether you do the one or the other. You may notice some also taking their left foot off the ground when preparing to execute a smash. They seem to be able to get over better and get a stronger purchase on the shuttle in this way, but here again consult your own natural inclinations.

Generally speaking, without going so far as to lift their left foot up, those who smash round the head bend farther back than those who smash over their right shoulder. Mr Devlin is a notable exception to this, but it is usually the case. This type of kill is

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especially useful in returning a clear to your backhand which has not sufficient height and length to carry it to the back of the court. You can often smash this round the head and score a point at once. It is a very convenient alternative to a drop-shot or 'clear,' which otherwise the limitations of the backhand force you to adopt. However, it is in some respects a dangerous shot. It is essential to score an outright winner, for you will be considerably out of position and will be leaving three-quarters of the court open to attack. You have to hit hard; the shuttle will therefore reach your opponent quickly, and if he is able to get to it and direct it in any legal way to the other side of the court, you will not be able to reach it. Therefore be sure that you have an almost certain chance of scoring or do not smash.

Players who smash round the head have nevertheless not got the monopoly of this shot from the left side of the court. It is by no means difficult for anyone who uses the other type of kill to train himself to adopt the alternative method in similar circumstances. I have trained myself in this respect, but I do not make use of it except when fairly near the net and when there is almost certain prospect of success, on account of the above-mentioned danger of being caught by a quick return on the other side-line.

It is important to remember that each smash should have a definite object. No useful purpose is served except from your opponent's point of view, by punishing the shuttle indiscriminately all over the court.

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Some players pursue the shuttle in a sort of fine frenzy, their sole aim being apparently to hit it as hard as possible. So long as it goes over the net, seemingly it does not matter where. The shuttle comes back as a rule to a place where they cannot reach it, but instead of this teaching them the value of a little restraint, it appears merely to spur them on to greater heights of ferocity. They remember their few successes and forget their numerous failures—a very prevalent weakness in human nature. It is not a practice of first-class players, yet even they are not immune from it occasionally. Bear in mind, then, that you should have a definite object in view and go for it hard.

If you do not employ a 'round-the-head' smash in replying to certain shots to your backhand, among other shots you can use is the backhand smash. This kill, if one can use the word for such a pale and colourless imitation of the real article, is performed in the same way relatively as the similar forearm stroke, with this exception—that you have the right foot in front of the left at the commencement. However, it is not possible at all to get the same weight into it and so its pace never can be very severe. It is utterly futile in a single to think of winning an ace from far back in this way. You will only present your opponent with an opening, free, gratis, and for nothing. All the same you will find it useful to try it in practice for three reasons especially. Firstly, it will develop the wrist, making it stronger and more supple, and any accession of strength in this respect is all to the good. Secondly,

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it will enable you to perform better a backhand drop from the back of the court—a shot of the highest possible value and one, strange to say, neglected by most players. Even if they adopted it originally as one of their family of shots, the majority of them ceased at an early stage the process of development and left it in an embryonic state. The third reason depends partly on the second. You ought, by constant practice, to add to the power of your wrist, so that you may be able to put away a loose one near the net with your backhand, instead of being compelled to have recourse to the forearm smash round the head. This enables you to return the shuttle more quickly and does not leave you so much out of position. For these reasons I advise you to attempt the backhand smash in practice, not because it possesses any intrinsic merit of its own, but because you will thus improve your play in other directions. Indeed, it is one of the best methods that I know for strengthening the wrist.

Even when you are able to put away easy ones near the net hard and accurately with your backhand, you will find the smash from farther out to be a useful method of testing sometimes the condition of your wrist. If your wrist is not, as it were, up to concert pitch, the jerk entailed by having to smash from the back will give you a nasty jar for the moment. You will suffer no such discomfort if it is in good working order. It is even more important to get well over the shuttle when you are executing this shot, even when right on top of the net, than in the similar forearm

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stroke. In this case the shuttle travels appreciably slower and will in all probability, if you do not get over it, give an easy return to your opponent. But in no circumstances do I advise you to make use of it in a match except when you are right on top of the net.

In his highly instructive book on Badminton, Sir G. A. Thomas advocates taking the eye off the shuttle for a moment "in order to see exactly what your opponent is doing and the position in which he is holding his racquet," although he wrote it, as he says himself, at the risk of being branded as a heretic by many. I am entirely with him in this statement. It is certainly of great assistance to have some idea of your adversary's movements before you deliver your stroke, and if you are intending to smash off a high clear, you will have plenty of time to give a swift glance at him before doing it. I practically always do it myself, and on many occasions, noticing that the position either of my opponent or that of his racquet left an opening for me, I have taken a smash from the back of the court, a form of proceeding to which I am not partial. However, this is not a practice that I would advise beginners to indulge in at all. "Keep your eye on the ball" is ~~to~~ a well-established maxim of training to bear alteration when you are starting to learn a game. First sternly compel yourself to keep your eyes glued on the shuttle, and when that has become second nature to you, then you can think about modifying it slightly, if there is some advantage to be gained by so doing. Do not forget that it is only for the veriest fraction of a

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second that you allow your eyes to wander away from the shuttle.

For the sake of emphasis, let me impress on you once again the necessity of using your smash with judgment. Wait always until you think there is an opening before using it. At first, of course, you will often be wrong in this respect, but you will be right also at times, and these occasions will increase through experience. It is better to be right through intention, even if it occurs seldom for a time, than only to be right through the aid of good luck. In the former case there is some chance of improvement, in the latter there is none. Again, remember the waste of energy involved—more matches are lost this way than can be imagined. Reserve your strength for an opening, and then hit your hardest in the right direction.