

CHAPTER VI

Drop-shots

IT might be said with more strict truth of these than of Cleopatra that age cannot wither nor custom stale their infinite variety. Indeed, it would necessitate more toil than one of the famous Labours of Hercules to attempt to deal with them in all their manifold *stances*, as the artist might say. One can only discuss them in broad outline and select a few for more detailed treatment. Drop-shots may be used from any part of the court, and you can only learn how to execute them accurately by constant practice. Practise these shots from all angles and off any shot until you can place your return where you want it to go. This is the hardest and most delicate department of the game and one at which nearly every player remains in some respects a pupil as long as he lives. Sir George Thomas, Mr E. Hawthorn and Mrs Tragett are perhaps its most brilliant exponents, but even with all their great command over the shuttle I do not think any one of them would claim to have explored all the avenues of attack and defence that are possible. This is perhaps the most attractive part of Badminton, mainly because, like the ancient Athenians, you can always be on the look-out for some new thing to add to your store of knowledge.

The drop is an exceedingly delicate shot, but although

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it is so delicate the power behind it must be wielded with a very firm hand. To poke at the shuttle in a limp and indecisive manner is worse than useless. You will constantly have to execute these shots from all heights and angles, and your sense of touch must be very accurate and sure if you are going to impart the exact amount of strength required. Plates A and E show Sir G. A. Thomas executing two sorts of drop-shots—the first close to the net with his forearm, the second across the net from left to right with his back-hand. The points to remark in the former plate are the firm grip with which the player holds the racquet and also the level of the racquet as compared with the height of the net. One of the great secrets for learning to drop well at the net is to have your racquet as close as possible to the tape when the racquet meets the shuttle. You let the shuttle drop on to the racquet rather than strike it with the racquet—hence the necessity for the firm grip mentioned above. Nevertheless, a certain amount of energy must be given to the shuttle, and this is why the stroke is made easier if you have your racquet near the tape, for it is much easier to judge a small distance than a long one. You must remember that your opponent is on the other side of the net, ready to take advantage of any bad play on your part. A very small error in the force you give the shuttle is sufficient to ruin you—then it either will not go over at all or will go too high over it, thus giving him one of the most inviting of sitters. To enable you to regulate this force correctly, hold the racquet with a firm grip. Your aim

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must be to coax the shuttle over, as it were. Even in the gentle art of coaxing, the firmer the touch the more one is master of the situation, provided that the firmness be as light as it is decisive. You will not always be able to have your racquet as high as you would like, and in these cases a drop will be more difficult. It will be some time before you can do these shots accurately with anything like regularity, but you must remember that you are learning what is, in most respects, the most difficult part of the game.

Plate E, illustrating the drop from left to right, shows one of the most favourite shots of modern players. Equally popular also is the drop from right to left. It is somewhat easier than the one already discussed, as it is attended by less risk of punishment if it does not happen to be a particularly good specimen of its kind—a fact which may account for its popularity. The body is turned in the direction in which the shuttle is destined to go and the face of the racquet is similarly inclined. The object is to make the shuttle fall as close as possible to the net on the other side, just skimming the tape in transit. It is not necessary to have the racquet turned in the required direction, although doing this makes learning easier. Skilful use of the wrist at the last moment may deceive your opponent as to where you are aiming for, but very careful treatment is essential. It is very easy to mis-hit thus, so it is perhaps better to choose the simpler method when you are learning.

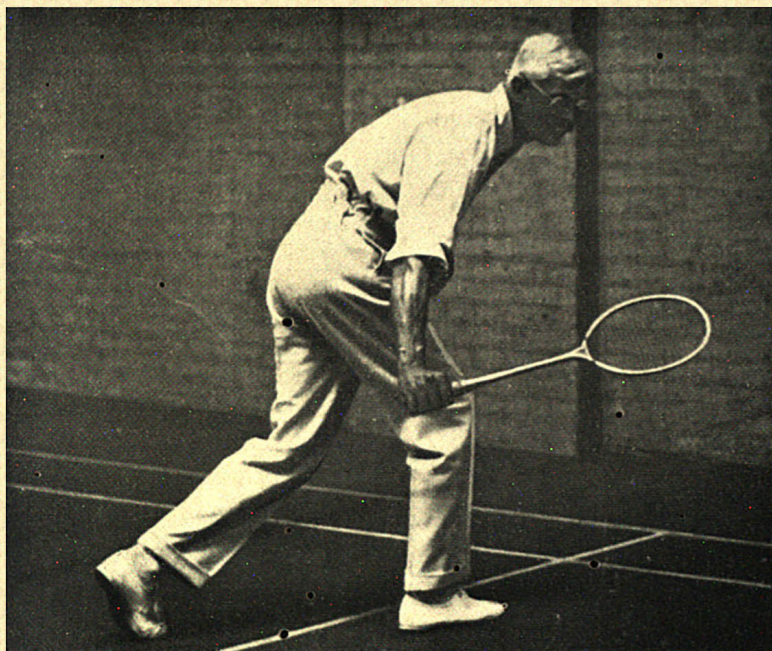
Some players, when performing drop-shots near the net, have fallen into the habit of contorting their bodies

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in order to mislead their opponents. It may mislead them once or twice, and then usually because their surprise for the time being at the strange movements distracts their attention from the game. After that, however, it will deceive no intelligent player. The simpler your method is, the better will be the result, and deception can best be practised through the medium of the wrist or movements connected with the ordinary execution of strokes. No stroke, properly played, necessitates acrobatic feats.

The drop from the back of the court, taken high up, is an important shot, and one that must be mastered. You should train yourself to do it from any position. As your object is to make the shuttle cross the net very close to the tape, it is advisable to take it as high as possible. On every occasion you should keep the body square to the net, as far as you can, and give direction by a turn of the racquet and a flick of the wrist at the last moment. Your opponent cannot then be sure which side of the court the shuttle is going to fall. Further, it is well to cultivate the habit of performing the smash and the drop with exactly the same movements until the actual moment of impact. Most players show too obviously which of the two they are going to do, but it is when you do happen to see one who uses the same action for both that you realize how paying an acquisition it may become. A cleverly disguised drop-shot will gain numerous points, particularly if it is employed in the third set of a hard single. No matter what stroke you are playing, go through

PLATE E



THE DROP-SHOT FROM LEFT TO RIGHT
Sir G. A. Thomas

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every action that may put your opponent off the scent, without falling into the error of indulging in meaningless extravagances. Nothing makes a player more ill at ease, or shakes his confidence in himself more, than inability to judge where the shuttle is coming. He begins to suspect that you have all sorts of tricks up your sleeve, and thus there is a strain on his eyes and brain which is bound to have its effect in the long run. There are at least two alternative strokes for nearly every position. Make your action for these just the same whenever possible and give the touch which determines the shot only at the last possible moment. Accustom yourself to this from the beginning, especially in the case of drops, for there is more scope for *finesse* as far as they are concerned than in any other part of Badminton.

In addition to this forearm drop, there is its supplement, the backhand drop from the back of the court. This shot is of the highest value in a single, and also to a lesser extent in a double, yet very few players use it. Indeed, among first-class players I can recall only Mrs Tragett and Miss Homan, the Irish International, who employ it with anything like frequency. Even Sir George Thomas and Mr E. Hawthorn, great masters though they are of most drop-shots, perform this one seldom. The forearm drop is a modification of the forearm smash and similarly the backhand drop is a modification, though to a lesser degree, of the backhand smash. This is due to the fact that the latter is less severe than the former. Its non-employment may

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result from the need of having a very strong wrist in order to perform it with any confidence. It is essentially a wrist-shot. Just a flick in the required direction is all that is necessary. As in the case of the forearm drop, you want to keep the same position, if you can, no matter which side of the net you intend to aim for. Also make your action for the clear approximate as closely as possible to this. Your opponent will then have very little chance of anticipating you. Of so much assistance is this shot that Mr Uber, a strenuous bombardier of the backhand corner in a single, found it paid better to direct his attacks on the right-hand corner when confronted by a player who numbered this shot amongst his armoury of weapons. Further, he gave the same advice to other players at the same tournament. It is invaluable against anyone who makes a dead set upon your backhand, hoping that it will crack under the strain. You are in a position to reserve your strength by dropping, whenever you like, and you may by this force your opponent to alter his tactics completely. This saving of energy is a point worthy of consideration when you recollect how much it takes out of you to have to clear continuously from the backhand corner and how frequently singles these days finally degenerate into a mere test of which player can last the longest. You certainly must have a strong wrist, but this is fairly easily acquired by constant employment of the wrist, especially in the case of the backhand smash in practice matches. Armed with confidence to perform this shot accurately, an attack

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on the backhand, no matter how sustained, should lose most of its terror.

The distance the shuttle should travel before reaching the ground (or your opponent's racquet) depends largely on circumstances. If he is manifestly out of position at the back of the court, your object should be to make it fall as close as possible to the net, in the hope that either he may not be able to reach it in time or, if he does, that he may be compelled to hit up a sitter. You should wait for his return quite near the net. In this way, unless he is a master of drop-shots, you almost force him to clear—the closer, then, that the shuttle is to the net when he hits, the less length will his clear have and the easier it will be for you to smash. When he is in the centre of the court, easily placed to reach any shot, then the stroke ought to be timed so that the shuttle will fall farther away. It is easiest to make a good drop when you are very near the net, and he may very well give a drop so close that you find yourself placed in grave difficulty to retrieve the situation. With the shuttle falling at a greater distance, you do not expose yourself to the same danger. Mark well the circumstances and act accordingly. Half the secret of success is to see an opening, the other half is to utilize it. Drop-shots have a particular place of their own in the scheme of attack. They go before to prepare the way for a stronger stroke—the smash. The smash involves such expenditure of energy that its correct use requires much experience. Many openings are to be gained by drops and then, but not till then, does the

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more severe weapon come into play. I have been dealing mainly with drop-shots from the back of the court, because where you execute a similar drop closer in, you can also smash. It is better for beginners, when situated thus, to smash always. Yet there are occasions on which a well-concealed and well-timed drop will score when your opponent is expecting a smash. In this case you must pretend to hit the shuttle, but in reality just pat it slightly. It is a practice that can be carried too far, and needs great vigilance in order to know the proper time and place for its use. Therefore I think that it is better for beginners to accustom themselves to smash from anywhere near the centre of the court.

There is another type of drop which is very useful to have at your disposal and which can be easily learned. This one is executed from about the same height as the top of the net or just a shade higher—also the proper altitude for a drive. However, instead of the shuttle being hit cleanly by the racquet, it is cut. It is a very deceptive shot to your opponent, because from your action he ought not to be able to distinguish whether you are going to drop or to drive. When you cut, the shuttle comes off the racquet much more slowly than when you hit with the full face. It follows then that you have to hit quite hard in order to make it go over the net at all. You have to take a long swing and put nearly as much force into your drop as into the drive. The stroke is performed so rapidly that your opponent can hardly be sure, until he sees the shuttle in flight,



BACKHAND DROP
The Author

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which one you have executed. It is a most paying shot to hold in reserve, but should not be overdone, or he will be waiting at the net for it, and that will probably mean the end of the rally and the gain of an ace to him.

One more kind that I propose to mention is in the nature of a trick shot. The shuttle is taken fairly close to the ground, your back is half turned to the net, and again you have to cut. It is most difficult at any time, but especially so on the backhand. Mr Devlin and Sir George Thomas use it sometimes with great effect. The corresponding forearm stroke is not so hard. Your opponent may have got you close to the net and then cleared swiftly out to the right corner. Provided you can get to the shuttle this stroke is possible. You must hit hard naturally, as it is a 'cut-stroke,' and the shuttle, if it goes over, will fall near your opponent's right-hand side-line close to the net. It is, of course, only to be used as a sort of last despairing effort, but the successful execution of such a shot has a great effect on your opponent's *moral*, especially if he thinks he has you cornered. Your strategy should be to try and put your opponent in an awkward position, while avoiding the same contingency yourself. If the latter takes place and your only shot is this drop, you should try to recall the stroke that reduced you to this extremity. In this way you may possibly discover a means of preventing a repetition of the same occurrence. This principle is as wide in its application as it is fruitful in results.

As I have said before, there are more varieties of the

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drop-shot than of any other stroke in the game. You should always be trying to add to the stock which you possess. Variety of shots means variety of attack, and therefore better attack, if properly employed. You can increase your list by either experimenting yourself or watching first-class players. There is nobody who has a greater number at her disposal than Mrs Tragett. Yet many of them are of a kind that I would not advise a beginner to attempt to imitate. This is not because they are bad shots, but because I do not believe that anyone else could approach them with any reasonable prospect of bringing them off. Some are indeed sheer juggling with the shuttle. On one occasion, the final of the All-England Mixed Doubles in 1923, I remember Mrs Tragett executing a drop with her back turned to the net and her face looking in the opposite direction to that in which she was playing. What is more, the shot won, Miss Hogarth being apparently too amazed to make any effort to return the shuttle. Watch Mrs Tragett's play carefully and admire it, but imitate only the more ordinary of her drops. As regards these, you cannot copy anyone better than her, either in style or elegance. You will also learn much by studying the methods of Sir George Thomas or Mr Hawthorn.

These shots give great scope to the player who is an artist at the game, and, indeed, one criterion of a good player is his ability to drop. Even though the smash may have a more theatrical effect, yet a series of drops, performed successfully close to the net, generally elicits far more applause from the spectators. Nothing is

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more fascinating to watch and nothing is more satisfying to achieve. Always bear in mind not to give away your intention to your opponent. Deceptiveness must be acquired as a kind of second nature for a Badminton court. Whenever possible, and that will be nearly always, let your wrist do the finishing touch, for by its use you have the most frequent opportunities of outwitting the enemy.