

Expert Tips on Tennis

II—HOW TO SERVE

By S. N. DOUST

"H^E who would excel as a tennis player must learn to serve."

That is the secret of tennis—the keystone of a successful player's career. Service! service! And what does service comprise? It is the transmutation into profound and well-ordered and sequential activity the thorough and concise grasp of scientific application of motion to the ball. The really successful player must possess an unerring eye for position and angle, his touch must be strong and comprehensive yet delicate withal, so that the "smashing" volley and the disconcerting "lob" are well within the category of every stroke. Indeed, a strong, fast service is absolutely essential if the player aspires to anything above the country house game, which is invariably characterized by unrelieved tameness and sameness replenished at times by a smashing service or attempt at a lob, which is more often than not successful solely on account of its audacity and innovation rather than any inherent attempt at a suitable tour de force.

All service should be heavily "cut" if it is to prove effective in breaking down an opponent's play. Indeed, it is quite as essential as a strong, fast service. Yet a strong, fast service, combined with all the tricky appurtenances of the game, the "lift" and the "top" and those sundry characteristics which spell personality and success, have been known on more than one auspicious occasion to meet with abject failure solely because the server has signally failed to measure the calibre of his opponent's play. Indeed, as far as sympathy between players (best exemplified by the brothers Renshaw), and the understanding of one's adversary are concerned, they are attributes only to be acquired on the actual court, and are far from being acquired by any amount of discussion or teaching.

PACE always tells in tennis. It is direct expression of the personality of the player—a remark best illustrated by a study of the methods of the Renshaws, who practically revolutionized the game in the years 1888-90. Pace entails the high overhand service—play common to all ranks of players nowadays. Without the high overhand service and its attendant "lob" variations, tennis degenerates to a mere game of shuttlecock. In this respect British players excel, for the American service is generally "slower," but often it becomes more deadly by reason of the formidable "cut," which causes the ball to actually "swerve" in the air and to "drag" or rebound slow from the ground. This twin effect has a distinct advantage. The play is earnestly cultivated in high quarters even by players who are opposed to the smashing volley game, since it gives the server more time in which to follow up his serve by running into a position approximately close to the net from which he can then develop the "smashing" game.

In both games (the singles and the doubles) all players aim, or should do, to get within a yard or two of the net as soon as possible. Thence develops the smashing volley so fatal yet so seldom seen at other than classical events. The player should seek to get comparatively close to the net whether serving or receiving the serve, the object, in all cases, being to volley before the gravitational pull on the ball becomes apparent. That this is the correct and only play can be adjudged from the fact that if the rest happens beyond a stroke or two, most players, even inferior ones (they are acting unconsciously) will be found to have drawn into the net. At least this is mostly so. An examination of players' positions in eight games out of ten will clearly bear out this point. It is one well worthy of study. For some, the service lines possess a fatal attraction.

Yet the volley pure and simple is but the prelude to still deadlier play.

Rapid and low volleying, clearing the net maybe by but an inch or two, can always be met by players who take the trouble to practise the art. It is when the volleying becomes varied by the attempt on the part of one player to place the ball out of reach of the other, that the science of it all becomes apparent. This "lobbing," as it is termed, calls for the greatest skill and judgment. It is the high overhand play combined with the "lift" or "top," placing the ball behind one's adversary and well at the back of the court, which is so disconcerting to follow, and has given many a pretty coup de grace to an otherwise evenly divided bout of volleying. Good "lobbing" is difficult—at least it would appear so from the attempts one often sees in the great majority of games. Unless judgment drawn to a fine art accompanies the swing of the racket, and the eye never removed from the ball even for the thousandth part of a second, the "lob" will send the ball out of court or else just drop it short enough to permit the opposing player to kill it by playing a smashing volley. It is essential that the racket does not betray the intention to play a "lob." This defeats the whole object and permits the opponent to correct his position—that is, should it prove or be thought necessary.

SO long as length is good no other defect in the service is developed, the higher the "lob" the better. In meeting a return "lob" the player should get it before the drop if possible, for if it drops before being returned, then the striker is permitted so much grace in which to gain a favourable position, determined by the characteristics of the particular game, from which he will be able to kill the return with almost a dead certainty. But the whole problem is altered if the high overhand is returned with a nice, well-calculated and equally good and high lob which will place the ball rebounding from the ground within a foot or two of the opposing base line. Yet, as evinced from the great mass of amateur play, it is not a favoured stroke. For the average player, who practises, in my opinion, too little and with even less zest, it is a stroke that is beyond the range of everyday play, requiring as it does rare skill of hand and eye, lightning calculation, and the utmost accuracy of well-played strength to accomplish with anything like safety.

In all play, the primal object should be to serve and return the serve as to permit of gaining a favourable position within a yard or so of the net and to so regulate pace as to drive one's adversary into a least favourable one—that is, away from the net toward the base line; and from that initial advantage, the successful player can, given other things equal, severely punish his opponent by suddenly reverting to the smashing volley, which so invariably wins. The smash stroke is really essential to win. The game thus resolves itself into three parts. 1. The endeavour on the part of one player to secure the more favourable position. 2. The following up with the smash volley. 3. The success of the smash stroke or a win by means of a well-directed and judiciously placed "lob."

A good player invariably takes his chances overhand. Yet few, indeed, can hope to win without resorting at times to good overhead play. The hurtling, blustering, masterful smash stroke is similarly played to the overhand, with the exception, however, that the position from which it is played has no definitely fixed distance from the net. It requires instinctive judgment and absolute mathematical precision, and its play is always in direct relation to the sidelines and less proportionately to the net. The eye must never be removed from the ball—otherwise the player loses that instantaneous perception of speed and the correlative quality of judgment so essential for a return smash at greater

pace which, with proper skill, places the ball outside the reach of his opponent's racket.

As billiard players find the "screw" of such utility, so tennis players must cultivate the "spin," which is accomplished by a slight and almost imperceptible movement of the wrist, which draws the racket at the moment of impact across the ball. Indeed, by careful and incessant practice it is possible to govern every spin of the ball, its direction and even its rotating swiftness—the ball being made by this means to break either to the right or to the left in the opposing court, or even to develop an aerial swerve which is most disconcerting to definitely adjudge and properly meet so that the return shall be as deadly as the service.

When the spin is a vertical one in the same direction as the flight, the "top" or "lift" it develops causes a quick plunge to the opposing court or an unexpected curve, according to the player's intention. It is the most dangerous when the player's opponent is nearer the service end than the net, for then the latter has a comparatively long distance to travel to effect return. Therefore, it is good play to give the ball "top," which shall send it plunging direct to the ground near the net after having driven your opponent toward the base of the court.

Another point which makes the "lift" such a favourite spin is that a ball with a well administered "top" and plenty of it can be hit harder and with impunity as far as driving it out of court is concerned. If your opponent is near the net this stroke is a useful one to win by, since it places the ball at the back of the court and, in most cases, far beyond the risk of return.

IN ordinary tennis the real smashing game combined with the high "lob" is distinctively conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, the volley has proved itself a hard task for the average player. Players of moderate capacity invariably interpret the game as taking the ball on the rebound, then confining their activity to a side-line or across-the-court return, usually at the same pace. Even though by these means the ball may be cunningly dropped beyond the reach of one's opponent, it is more by luck and chance, and bad play on the opposite side of the court than by any real appreciation of the science of the game, and an intelligent interpretation of its finer phases. It is never by these means that the Wimbledon stroke is introduced.

My concluding advice is to aim at forcing your adversary to the back of the court, which can always be done by a few judiciously played balls either near the side-line or the service line, and then to kill his return with a smashing series of volleys from a position comparatively near the net—or as near the net as prudence dictates. On the other hand, to meet and defeat a stiff bout of volleying resort to a high "lob." But unless this is skilfully and intelligently interpreted, it is usually ineffective. Neither a strong back play nor smashing tactics can, however, be employed to the exclusion of others. The ideal game is a fusion of the two.

Getting Even.—Apropos of foreign honesty, Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler tells this story:

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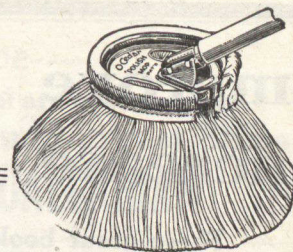
"Well, the P. D. R. will never see another cent of my money after this."

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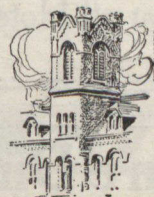
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