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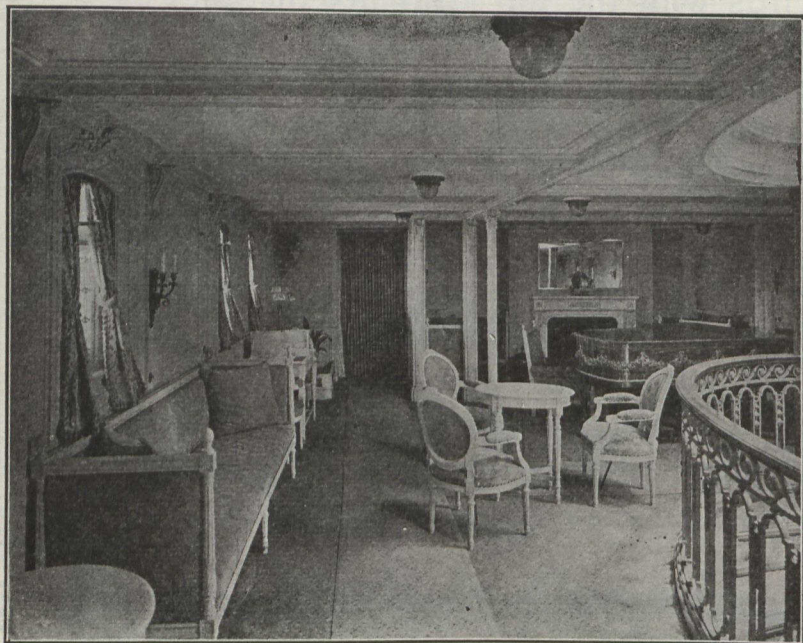
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EXPERT TIPS ON TENNIS

VIII—PLAYING IN "DOUBLES"

By C. P. DIXON

METHODS and species of skill required in the double game are so widely different to those necessary in a single that it not infrequently happens that a player proficient at the one is relatively a poor performer in the other. This fact is scarcely to be wondered at when it is remembered that in the former, four players are engaged, and the width of the court is enlarged, thus giving endless opportunities for the use of those oblique volleys, which tell so heavily in the four-handed game. Nevertheless though volleying plays such an important part in doubles, this alone will not carry a player far unless he possesses the many other qualities which go to make a first-class doubles player. Too little importance, in my opinion, has always been given to the value of ground strokes in the game. One of the first essentials of a good doubles player is a well directed and forcible return of the service; without this the finest volleying in the world will be of little avail. The return of the service constitutes the opening move of the striker out, upon the efficacy of which the whole course of many rallies is determined. When we consider the great advantage the server possesses, with his partner well up at the net, to pounce upon any tentative or weak stroke, the importance of a good return of the service cannot be overestimated. Everyone who has closely followed a doubles match will have hardly failed to notice how often the winning of an opponent's service game has resulted in the winning of the match. Players whose ground strokes are more or less stereotyped are at a great disadvantage in doubles; their strokes are easily anticipated. To vary direction, and judiciously mix up your game, so as to have your opponents always guessing is sound advice in a doubles. Strategy and generalship are even more important in a doubles than in a single. The rallies being as a rule faster and shorter, quickness of decision is indispensable.

CONSTANT practice with the same partner soon accustoms one to instinctively leave a ball to him, which you know he is in a better position to take. Rackets will clash sometimes even in the best regulated pairs, but this defect is better than allowing a ball, say, to go down the centre of the court without either of you making the least effort to go for it. A point on which many players are at variance is the position a player should take up when his partner is about to receive the service. Some advocate the parallel formation, others strongly urge that the receiver's partner should always be well up at the net. A middle course that I have often found to act very well is to be level with my partner on the first service and, if at fault, then to advance quickly to the net. This policy, of course, is founded on the assumption that a second service is generally a much weaker one than the first, and so will enable my partner to make much more of an aggressive return, thus giving me the opportunities to score off any weak replies. Players, however, in this matter should be guided by the particular circumstances. If a player's second service is a strong one, in fact almost a replica of the first, the parallel formation appears to me to be the wisest. The objection to the receiver's partner being always up at the net is that, however strong a player may be on the return of the service, he is bound, in many cases, if the service is hard and well placed, to make more or less of a defensive return, and his partner at the net, unless he is an adept at picking up smashes or low volleys at his feet, is placed at an obvious disadvantage. What may be set down as the anathemas of the double game are the short lob, the weak second service, and delay in coming up to the net after the service. All these should be studiously avoided. Apropos of

the short lob, I remember in a doubles match, my partner giving me good advice. When I was lobbing short, he shouted to me, "Lob 'em out, for goodness' sake, lob 'em out." I took his advice, and though some of my tosses fell over the base line, a fair number fell in, and my length improved. I think everyone will agree that the two Dohertys at their best were by far the best combination in doubles ever seen. There was no weakness in their play that could be discerned, and a perfect understanding seemed to exist between them. The Dohertys, of course, were well equipped at all points of the game, but quite a useful pair is often formed by one partner supplying the strength in a department where the other is weak.

It is almost superfluous to say that a good service is a most precious possession in a doubles. However, it is a mistake to attempt too much in this direction. A well placed first service of moderate pace, which enables the server to come close in to the net, is the one for most players to adopt. Other forms of service, such as the American swerve, or a hanging service of any kind, are also useful to follow in on. In doubles the watchword should always be attack, and throughout for both sides, it should be a race for the commanding position at the net. The value of a good temperament must also not be overlooked in a doubles. To be disconcerted or disheartened because your partner is badly off his game does no good and much harm. Rather in such a case does it behoove you to make extra efforts to play all the harder, until your partner gets back into his form. Deep driving, which is such an adjunct in singles, is not nearly so effective in a doubles. More useful are the short subtle shots which force your opponents to hit up, rather than down. Good combination again is naturally of paramount importance. This can only be obtained by frequent practice, and with it two players of only moderate pretensions can nearly always rely upon beating a scratch pair, though the latter may contain two players individually their superiors. From a spectacular point of view nothing at the game is comparable to a good doubles match between four first-class players, each at his best.

ONE cannot urge too strongly the advisability of a pair having some settled plan of campaign before entering upon an important match. You and your partner may have played the same pair you are about to oppose, before many times, if so, and you have been observant and wise, you will have picked up many useful wrinkles as to the best way of playing them, and a knowledge of their apparent weakness. If you have not met the pair before I admit your task and plan of action is not so easy, but it should be your aim while playing to so vary your methods that defects of your opponents may be brought to the light. One player may show a weakness overhead, another may have a distinct preference for the backhand volley or the forehand. It is a sad sight to see two players with quite a fine repertoire of strokes never ceasing throughout the match to feed their opponents' strong points, and then failing to understand how they lost. Even the finest pairs in the world have their vulnerable points. It is good policy, before playing a match to have a thorough understanding between you with respect to the smashing of lobs and the taking of balls down the centre of the court. Other things being equal, I believe in each player going back for his own lobs, that is, of course, in his own court. Some I know advocate the plan of partners changing over, but this, I think, is apt to cause a little confusion, and be more likely to lead to one or other being out of position for the next stroke. To take an instance, the service has been delivered, and the return is a lob over