

HOW DO YOU RATE?

ARE YOU DOING ENOUGH TO IMPROVE YOUR GAME? FIND OUT WITH THIS SIMPLE TEST

You can be a much better player; you don't have to only dream about it. Let's leave the excuses aside for a moment and look at the question objectively. Allowing for reasonable constraints of time, you are probably nowhere near as good a player as you could be. But don't take our word for it; see for yourself. This quick Evaluation Test will show you where you are and in what areas you can improve your performance. It will help you to answer the four questions you need to address in order to improve your game.

1. Where am I now?
2. Where do I want to go?
3. What do I need to get there?
4. How do I go into action?

We have listed ten key areas that affect your success in squash. First assess what you do now. Be honest and critical. Don't kid yourself. But don't denigrate yourself either. For example, don't say you don't practise (because you don't have time); everyone practises – in the knock-up. But if you are just having a casual hit before going into action and not using at least an eight-point practice checklist, you are wasting your time and losing a valuable opportunity to improve. When you have been through all ten areas, add up your points.

Then go through each area again and ask yourself what you could do, what would be realistic and possible. Put in your scores and total the

second column. Calculate the difference. This is your potential percentage improvement.

How you go about bridging this gap or taking advantage of this opportunity will decide how good you become as a squash player.

Column three is for you to come back to at the end of the season in order to evaluate how you actually did in relation to your potential improvement.

1. GOAL SETTING

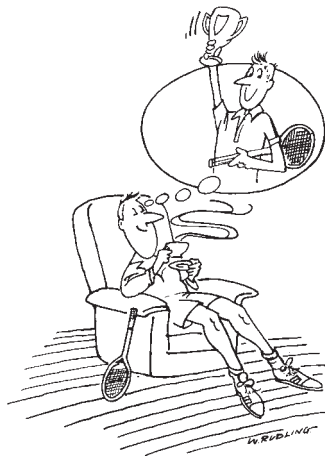
If you know where you are going, you have a chance of getting there. Goal setting involves setting long-term aims and breaking these down into short-term goals (or steps) as an incremental means of achieving these long-term aims. Goals should be specific and realistic but challenging and, where possible, quantifiable.

There are two types of goal: end product goals (outcome) and performance goals.

End product goals may be: I will get into the top ten leagues, the top league, the club second team, represent my county.

Performance goals may be: I will do 6 sets of 20 court sprints in under 60 seconds each or hit 8 out of 10 of my drives behind the service box.

Goal setting is a skill that can be developed. For now give



yourself points as follows:

I have set end product goals for the season: 1 point for each goal up to 3 points.

I have set and use performance goals: 1 point for each goal up to 3 points.

2. COACHING

Here we are considering coaching in a general sense, to include evaluation and instruction on your play, training and practice. Rate yourself as follows:

I ask or seek advice from senior players, team mates or a coach: 1 point.

I seek analysis of my game, e.g. obtain a video of my matches to see what I am really doing: 1 point.

I read books on squash or watch coaching or match videos: 1 point.

I work with a coach: 1 point.

I have a training partner or partners: 2 points.

I ask to train with or play better players: 2 points.

I have a list of areas I need to work on to improve my game: 2 points.

3. PRACTICE

A match is a hard place to develop technique, skills, shots, movement and even tactics. You need to practise in order to improve. What are you doing currently?

I book court times that allow me time for practice before or after a match: 2 points.

I practise regularly solo and with a partner: 2 points.

I practise regularly with a partner: 2 points.

I write down a practice sequence before each session: 1 point.

I practise the specific areas I need to improve in my game: 2 points.

I use condition games that address the specific aspects of my game I want to develop: 2 points.

4. GAMES & MATCHES

How do you go about organising your games and matches? One way to improve your game is to play the right type of player. For example, if you want to develop your shots, you should play mobile players who provide the opportunities for you to play shots in rallies rather than play against nick-hitters.

I arrange regular games and matches: 2 points.

I arrange them well in advance: 2 points.

I pick opponents who will provide the right challenges and opportunities: 2 points.

I use my games to practise specific aspects of my game – for example, volleying: 2 points.

I debrief after my games to learn what lessons I can and to plan for the next match or encounter: 2 points.

5. COMPETITION

A crucial part of improving your game is to get the right level of competition. This may be in your leisure centre 'ladder', in club teams or at county, national or international level.

I enter a number of competitions or tournaments each season: 1 point for each up to six points.

They are all at the right level for me (i.e. I am not always knocked out early or winning at a jog): 2 points.

I regularly research the most appropriate competitions for my level: 2 points.

6. TACTICS

We score points in squash by playing winners and forcing our opponent to make mistakes; we try to avoid losing them by minimising our mistakes and our opponent's opportunities to play winners. The top ten tactics for achieving these aims are:

1. Defence (good length and width)
2. Varying the pace
3. Applying pressure
4. Using the volley
5. Moving your opponent
6. Taking opportunities to attack
7. Dominating the T
8. Knowing when to attack and when to defend
9. Setting up rallies
10. Adapting your tactics to counter your opponent's strengths and probe his weaknesses.

Rate yourself as follows:

I use the above tactics: 0.5 point for each.

I think about the tactics I should use for a particular opponent before a match: 3 points.

From these I develop a game plan: 2 points.

7. MENTAL PREPARATION

When you walk through that squash court door, are you completely mentally and physically ready to play?

James E. Lehr, in his book *Mental Toughness Training for Sport*, defines the ideal performance state (IPS) in terms of 12 ingredients:

1. You feel relaxed and loose.
2. You are calm inside.
3. You feel no anxiety.
4. You are charged with high energy.
5. You are optimistic and positive.
6. You are mentally alert.
7. You feel mentally focused.
8. You feel highly confident.
9. You feel in control of yourself.
10. Your performance feels effortless.
11. You feel automatic and spontaneous in your play.
12. You have a sense of enjoyment.

Although you may not achieve an IPS every time you play, your mental state is not some random occurrence over which you have no control.

Give yourself 0.5 point for each of the above conditions that you regularly meet. Give yourself up to three additional points for your ability to re-focus when your concentration is disrupted, and one more if you use visualisation techniques.

8. PHYSICAL PREPARATION

Professional players schedule a warm-up and practice session (solo or pairs) before a match to get all their shots grooved in, get their bodies loose and moving well, and get used to the court and familiar with the arena. (The great importance of this familiarity and sense of support is shown by the difference in results between home and away football matches.) He will consider when to rest and eat, and will arrive well hydrated with plenty of time to change and warm up. You may not be a professional, but you can almost certainly improve your match preparation. Rate yourself.

I have developed the habit of planning my day around my matches to arrive early so I can be well prepared: up to 5 points.

I have worked out the warm-up routine that is best for me: 2 points.

My warm-up includes stretching, mobilising movements and shadow stroke play: 1 point.

After my match I cool down and stretch: 1 point.

I make other times in the week to stretch: 1 point.

9. FITNESS

You know the old axiom – get fit to play squash, don't play squash to get fit. Getting fit, or fitter, is one of the standard ways of improving your game. There are a whole range of activities and exercises you can do – to be covered in future issues. Allistair McCaw mentions some in his article on P24.

Give yourself a point for each of the following aspects of fitness that you work on: stamina, muscular endurance, core stability, strength, general conditioning.

Give yourself an extra two points if you regularly go to a gym or fitness class, do circuits, run or cycle, etc.

Up to three additional points if your warm-up or practice routine includes court sprints, ghosting and agility work.

10. ORGANISATION

Is your squash playing haphazard and ad hoc or do you have a plan: how many times per week you will practise and compete, how you will build up to major competitions and where you want to get to by the end of the season? Give yourself points for each of the following:

I plan in advance of the season: 2 points.

I use periodisation or phasing in my training: 2 points.

I have a practice and coaching timetable: 2 points.

I plan my competitions/tournaments well in advance: 2 points.

I have all the above written down: 2 points.

YOUR SCORE	ASSESSMENT Where are you now?	POTENTIAL Where do you think you could be at the end of the season?	EVALUATION Where were you actually at the end of the season?	Percentage improvement
1 GOAL SETTING
2 COACHING
3 PRACTICE
4 GAMES & MATCHES
5 COMPETITION
6 TACTICS
7 MENTAL PREPARATION
8 PHYSICAL PREPARATION
9 FITNESS
10 ORGANISATION
TOTAL