

## Perception

The ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses; "the normal limits to human perception".

I personally believe this is the most important component when playing squash and it is often neglected or simply not understood by players. Simply put, it is the cornerstone of what we do during a game of squash. To be able to hit the ball you have to know where it is and perception plays a vital role in giving you all the information you need in order to both make the initial decision to move to the ball and prepare to hit the ball accordingly. In this workshop I hope to give players an insight into how one can use perception to improve one's game and therefore exert maximum pressure on the opponent.

A common fault I often hear is to volley the ball or to take the ball early (something I have even said myself to players). This, in my opinion, is just an arbitrary response from coaches or parents trying to advise players, it has no basis and more importantly doesn't help the player to achieve anything. It is like asking a player to simply hit the nick. Hopefully this workshop will help inform players, parents and coaches.

### Considerations

- Initial shot will determine your options
- Watching the ball always is crucial to determine your response
- Position of the player and opponent will inform options
- Position of the ball will inform options

### Telltale signs

- Player watching the front wall
- Player moving too soon or too late
- Player technically hits a good ball but struggles to implement this into their game
- Player often gets sent the wrong way
- Player movement is erratic
- Player seems headless on court and is continually late in reacting.

### Positive signs

- Player moves onto the ball very efficiently
- Player reads his opponent's shots
- Player controls the T
- Player takes the ball consistently early
- Player controls his / her movement
- Player has time
- Player is relaxed but moves with purpose
- Player can see space on the court and exploit it.

## Watching the ball and your opponent



Some good examples in the photos above. See how all the players on the T are watching the ball striker and the ball. Also, how the non-striker's rackets are in a neutral position (carry wise) but are positioned to the backhand side ready to take advantage of any loose straight drive. Clearly using perception and trying to almost anticipate their opponents next shot. An increasing element in the modern game is playing at tempo and hunting the volley, perception is then key to make sure you're in positive early positions in order to achieve this.

### Example Coach Drill

The coach randomly feeds the ball to all four corners, the player must hit the ball back to the coach's box (let's say backhand deep box). This is an open routine for the player as they must cover all four boxes on court. If the player can read the coach or take the ball early this will help the player to control the tempo of the routine and show good perception and court awareness. The next progression then would be the same routine but now the player can go short with a volley. This will ensure the player is actively looking at the volley and teaches the player to soak up pressure and look to relieve the pressure and turn defence into attack by reading the play and exploiting any loose ball with a volley.

### Example Conditioned Games

Conditioned games are a great way to train and focus on the skill you are trying to improve. Basically, you are trying to isolate the skill you require in a game situation (a form of constraints training). All length game but you can take the ball short with a boast, off the boast the player must hit deep. This gives the player who boasts the opportunity to volley the return, thus working on the skills of perception and reading your opponent's deep ball, also the ability to link shots together which is a big part of the modern game. Drive boast combination is very effective as it utilises the same swing and affords the player to hit the two further points on a court. In my opinion it is the best way to take the ball short from deep and the hardest for your opponent to read as it's the same swing. Perception comes in two parts in this game A the ability to go short with the boast at the right time and B ability to read your opponent's deep response and utilise the volley.

## **Freestyle Volley Exercise During Lockdown**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3VFKNxHqNY>

This video clip gives a simple example of a ball work exercise that can be done during lockdown and teaches you to watch the ball and react accordingly. The better you get the quicker you can do it, which obviously benefits your reactions, teaches you to adapt your swing and trains you to watch the ball even with limited reaction time. It's difficult to train perception during lockdown without the ability to get on court but the big learning can come from the understanding element. I guarantee you will become a better player with a greater understanding of the role perception plays in your game.

## **Example during lockdown / Karim Abdel Gawad**

[SQUASH EDITS KARIM GAWAD 20 SHOTS OF INSANE SKILL](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdXWkwXYU_0)

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In these tough times during lockdown we need some inspiration. This highlights video is free to watch and certainly motivated myself. It also perfectly encapsulates the art of perception coupled with a complete understanding of how it links into his play. A good example for me is shot number 14, Gawad shows great perception and court awareness off the serve to punish a loose ball. This clip shows how switched on he is even when returning serve. All these winning shots show how Gawad's perception allows him to have a complete understanding of the following

- Where the ball is
- Where the opponent is
- His position on the court
- Allows extremely early racket preparation offering multiple shot options
- Affords Gawad the ability to move quickly onto the ball forcing his opponent to react / thus allowing Gawad the opportunity using all the space on the court to his advantage and forcing his opponent to guess, as they can't cover the whole court.
- Above all it's inspiring to watch a player execute shots like this while clearly in complete control through his court awareness and perception.

## **Considerations "Take the Ball Early / Volley More"**

With better understanding you might consider the following either as a player, coach or parent when you want to up the tempo in a game or the advice is to volley more.

- In order to take the ball early or volley you need to have sort of control during the game

- Establish a good length
- To gain the control required you might need to slow the game down in order to speed it up or create volley opportunities. Lifting the ball is a great way to ensure you get your opponent behind you
- Once you establish your length and have the T position then it's vital to start taking the ball early and increasing the pressure on your opponent by taking the ball early and forcing your opponent to hit up on the ball to create those opportunities you're looking for
- Ability to link your swing with those opportunities. Racket preparation needs to be adapted to utilise those opportunities
- Push up the court in line with your perception to limit your opponent's time
- Utilise the space on the court that your opportunities present
- Once you have the dominance don't let up, keep looking creating tempo to force your opponent to scramble constantly

## **Conclusion**

I believe perception/court awareness is fundamental to becoming a World Class squash player. If players can gain a better understanding and incorporate this into their game, they will become a better player. Continuous development is needed and the will to keep working and learning is key. The game is continually changing, and top players push the boundaries constantly, a player with good perception is equipped to adapt accordingly.