

Balls to the Wall: The Beauty, the Beast and The Boast

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, when racquets were wooden, and squash shoes were takkies, I was asked to have a game against a businessman who was visiting Port Elizabeth. My opponent was a 50-something veteran and I thought I was doing the old bugger a favour while I had an easy little sweat before heading off to a student power-drink. With my speed, fitness and youthfulness, I would run the “Old Man” off his feet.

I did have an easy little sweat! Less than 30 minutes later, I was sipping at some consolation beers as I wiped my mesmerised eyes from a boasted defeat where every single loose or short length was angled, either, rolling into the nick, or sucking me so out of position that recovery was forlorn. The man I had just played was Storr Hunter, a legend of South African squash. The Boast was Storr Hunter’s signature shot, which he practised and played with targeted precision. I had been taught a very important squash lesson. Never under-estimate an opponent. And over the next few beers, I sat at his knee and was taught more lessons. Lessons about the Boast, a Beauty and A Beast.

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, prisoners in the Debtors Jails in England, started hitting balls made from dog’s hair and batty-racquets, against the walls of the prison courtyard. Morphing out of the tennis, and borne out of boredom, the game gradually evolved, via racquets, fives and eventually at the school of Harrow, into squash, where a rubber ball punched with a hole to slow things down, was used.

(As the game gained popularity, interestingly, open-air “courts” were often found linked to taverns where players could quench their thirsts for both exercise and socialising ... This tradition has not changed.)

Initially, the players only hit the ball directly against the front wall but then they became boastful, and deviant, and cheeky, and started to trick their opponents by hitting the ball onto the side wall first, to change the direction of the play. And so this shot, called The Boast, came into being. The Beauty, who can give you the edge, or The Beast who will expose you, dreadfully.

It is not natural to hit the ball in one direction in order that it goes in another. Nor is it natural to hit a ball into a wall closest to you. Beginners often struggle to get used to this unique aspect of squash. But as they become attuned to the game, this shot adds a whole new dimension to their repertoire, moving the opponent away from the tee, and ideally, into the front corners. The boast is also the key, to getting yourself “out of jail” when pressurised into those pits of the horrible back corners. The Beginner’s Nightmare.

So The Boast, or Angle, adds an Attacking, and a Defensive arrow to your quiver of artillery. And for the “Beginner getting Better”, it is often the difference between victory and defeat. Sadly, the Boast soon becomes a Beast. As they progress, the success that it brings, becomes addictive, and they are seduced into playing it more and more frequently, sometimes to the point of abuse. And somewhere in this progression, the Beauty becomes the Beast. An addictive, reflex needle that does horrible damage.

Understanding the difference between Attack and Defence becomes the new key. Used defensively, and hit higher, the Beautiful Boast gets you out of trouble, and gives you time to recover to the tee. Used on attack, with varying pace, off loose drives or crosscourts, it sucks the opponent off the tee, and into distant front corners, where their options for attack are limited.

But ...if played badly, and too often, she is a Beast, merely opening up the court for your opponent, and offering numerous easy options, to punish you again, and send you scurrying off , fetching more, while the tee is dominated

So how do we develop this mathematical precision of angled boasting ?

Probably the most over-used and abused squash practice, is the Boast-and-Drive routine. Because it is an easy routine, it is one which coaches use ad infinitum, often to the players' detriment. Practised lazily, it achieves little and imprints a host of squash sins into the muscle-memory of the brain. But practised correctly, where both players simulate match conditions, move to the tee, prepare their racquets and allow themselves space, it produces magic which will add huge value to anyone's game as it practises technique, control, improved movement and fitness. And ironically, because the boast forces an increase in shoulder turn, a player's drive often improves via this routine.

Like most things of beauty, the Boast should be used selectively in order to be appreciated. And if one watches the top players, the mantra of, "When you are crying out to boast, DON'T" shouts loudly. They use her very selectively, and they appreciate and practise all of her beautiful subtleties and variations. The bulleted low 3-walled nick, the floated sucker, the tantalizing trickle boast, the lifted stay-alive time-saver, the revolting, rectangular reverse angle, the high cork-screw which pulls the opponent back into the opposite corner, the back-walled floater, and on the Doubles court, the middle-court mover which pulls both opponents out of position.

So, all ye Squash Players, go forth in triumph. Seek the Beauty in the Boast. Banish the addictive Beast into Neverland. And you will play, and win, and live, happily ever after.

The Season is well underway, with the Barton/Driscoll Doubles tournament already a thing of the past, the Summer Leagues are simmering, hot with challenges. The Westview Open which caters for the Top 16 Provincial players as well, as "the rest" via a teamed singles and doubles programme kicks off from the 4th of February. A week later, on the 12th, the Super and Goffer Leagues which involve the Top 10 players from each club, gets underway, and the 1st set of EP Schools trials will be held on Sunday 10 March.

Who said Squash is a Winter Sport ?