

THE DOHERTYS

THE SECRET OF THEIR SUCCESS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON LAWN TENNIS

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DURING the Lawn Tennis season of 1903, the Doherty Brothers of England,* won all the world's honors worth having, including the International Cup and the English and American championships in both singles and doubles. It is, therefore, of interest to inquire into the elements of skill and methods of play which contributed to their success.

It is generally believed in America that the Dohertys are superior not only to all living players, but to all the players of the past. From this it results that we shall soon have, indeed we have already, a new school of lawn tennis players, imitating the style of the Dohertys, using the Doherty racket and copying their every stroke and movement.

To begin with the racket, let us hope that no one will be so deceived as to attribute the Doherty success to the peculiarities of the racket they use. These rackets are strung so tightly as to seem like a solid board, without life or spring. This feature is intensified by several extra strings through the center of the racket. The result is, that unless one strikes the ball exactly in the middle of the racket, the stroke is a complete failure for want of driving power. Experienced men and many of the older players believe that very few experts can use these rackets successfully, and the Dohertys themselves say that they are not suited to the majority of players. In fact, Mr. H. L. Doherty told the writer that so good a player as W. Renshaw, seven times champion of England, could scarcely make an effective stroke with a racket of this pattern.

Nor will the average player profit by imitating too closely the position of the body, the method of holding the racket and making the stroke advocated by the Dohertys and other English experts. Harold S. Mahony of the English team, who, by the way, is always ready to help a beginner or a fellow player, lays great stress upon the necessity of keeping the head of the racket much higher than the wrist in volleying, and especially on low balls. Now the ordinary fault, and a very great one, is allowing the head of the racket to fall *below* the wrist,

and there is no doubt that the English theory is of assistance in correcting this defect. However, to volley with the utmost of speed, snap and accuracy, the racket should be as nearly on a line with the forearm as possible, and if the racket head is much above or below the wrist there is at once a loss of power, and a weak stroke results. To verify this, one need only compare the volleying of Eaves, Nisbet and Mahony with that of H. L. Doherty. Eaves, Nisbet and Mahony belong to the old school, and are typical of the English style. They kept the head of the racket high, making a sharp angle with the forearm, and their volleying, while sure and steady, was weak and ineffective. Doherty has profited by the American method. He raises the head of the racket, it is true, preparatory to making the stroke, when volleying at the net, but in the actual stroke itself his racket and forearm are much more nearly in a straight line, which gives his volleying a force and crispness not possessed by most of the English players.

In this connection, it may be said that the best authorities would probably discourage any very close imitation of the style and strokes of the Dohertys or those of any other players. Pettit, who held the court tennis championship of the world for many years, and who has helped many of our leading lawn tennis players to proficiency, in expressing himself on this point, said: "A player can be taught or can learn by imitation, to take the proper position in the court, to keep his balance, follow his stroke through and avoid glaring errors in style which are not in keeping with good form, but each man should make his strokes and play in the manner which comes most easily and naturally to him, and only in this way can he obtain the best results." Again, to any one who feels tempted to forsake the American style of play for the English, it may be well to point out that the style of H. L. Doherty is now more like that of the best American players than is the style of other English experts. By adding speed and crispness to many of his strokes, the little Englishman has combined the strong points of the English and American game, and has improved his game more than twenty-five per cent. during the past year.

Much has been written during the past few years about English execution of strokes and American aggressiveness, tactics and strategy. This was based largely on the play of Gore, Black and Barrett, while in this country a few years since.

* In regard to points concerning which there is general misapprehension, it may be stated on the authority of the Dohertys themselves that both the brothers were born in London, England, that they did not take up tennis because of any fear of consumption or for any similar reason, and that they do not play tennis the year round, as is often said. H. L. Doherty remarked at Newport in August that they had played more tennis this year than in any previous one.

Most of the conclusions thus arrived at must now be abandoned. W. A. Larned, and perhaps several others, can, and do, execute strokes which are finer and more brilliant than anything in the Doherty repertoire, but probably most critics will admit that there is no one in the world to-day who can display the tactics, strategy and headwork in general shown by H. L. Doherty.

The foundation of the Doherty method is not the execution of perfect strokes, but certainty of return. In this way they keep the ball going until, by clever headwork (not by a brilliant smash or reckless drive), they can win the point. Just before the match in which his brother won the American championship from W. A. Larned, R. F. Doherty made the significant remark, "When skill has reached a certain point, the man who can keep returning the ball most steadily will win."

So it turned out. It was W. A. Larned who made the brilliant returns. Larned's play had twice the speed, and when the ball got inside the lines, twice the accuracy of Doherty's, but the certainty was absent. This was especially noticeable in the third set. A close observer would have noted that Doherty's returns were almost as many feet above the net as Larned's were inches, and Doherty never sent the ball very close to the net or used much speed in his returns unless the necessity of the occasion demanded it. This was most noteworthy in the last few games of the third set, when Doherty showed his wonderful ability to adapt his game to that of his opponent. Larned, playing in desperation, was making most extraordinary returns and covering his court perfectly. Seeing that Larned was returning his best-placed shots with the greatest regularity, Doherty changed his play, and directed every return high, deep and safe down the center of the court. That this was winning policy was soon evident. Larned would return the ball several times, but eventually his drive would find the net or go behind the lines, disclosing the peculiar fact that he could more certainly return the ball when obliged to run at full speed than when it was returned to the center of the back line at his feet.

From a physical standpoint, judging his play and his strokes upon their speed and accuracy, the game of H. L. Doherty is probably inferior to that of several players, among whom may be named W. Renshaw and Dr. Pim in the past, and R. F. Doherty, M. D. Whitman and W. A. Larned of the present day. Indeed, after noticing the small and slight physique of "Little Do," one can scarcely believe him capable of performing the physical feats required, and his superiority, clear and unquestioned as it is, lies more in mental qualities and temperament than in physical skill. True, his eye is keen, and there is a fine coördination of muscles and nerves. But his thought processes are yet keener, and he is blessed with a temperament unequaled in its perfect adaptation to the needs of the game.

There is in lawn tennis a great complexity of play, and the situations and combinations are almost unlimited. In this respect it resembles the game of chess, except that in lawn tennis everything must be thought out at lightning speed and every move of one's opponent must be met instantly. In anticipating what will be the next play of his opponent, and divining the character and direction of the stroke, H. L. Doherty stands alone, for one tries in vain for the name of a player who can compare with him. So good an authority as his brother, R. F. Doherty, four years champion of England, recently said that this power of anticipating was half the battle. If one admits this, a large part of the Doherty success is explained.

But little less striking than his power of anticipating his opponent's play is H. L. Doherty's ability to make the stroke least expected by his antagonist and which is best calculated to win the point. His judgment in this respect is like that shown by R. D. Wrenn, and it would be hard to say which of the two men excels.

Even these mental qualities, however, would lose some of their value were they not aided by a splendidly balanced temperament. Always cool, determined, courageous, never hurried, nervous or anxious, he is able to play his best game at all times. In this respect also he appears to surpass all living players. This moral stamina he often shows when some close decision is given in his favor by an umpire. If he is not quite certain of its correctness, he will deliberately throw away the next point, so as to be sure that he will not be given an advantage that does not belong to him, although he knows that one point may cause the loss of the match. He did this in the final match against Clothier for the United States championship at Newport, and was cheered to the echo for his sportsmanship.

Other illustrations of his magnificent poise were given in the championship with Larned the next day. The score had been deuced in the third set and the luck of the game was running greatly in Larned's favor. Larned was playing magnificently, having one of the "Larned streaks," and it began to look as though he would pull out the set, and, on account of superior endurance, probably the match. Twice in this critical period Larned's returns, coming into Doherty's hands at the net, struck the cord, went over and fell dead, so that Doherty had no chance to return the ball. Yet Doherty showed not the slightest trace of exasperation, but went back to his position with a smile of apparently genuine amusement on his face. Perhaps he remembered how, two years ago, G. W. Hillyard, becoming the victim of a similar accident, lost his temper, and with it the English championship, after having it almost in his hands.

Brilliant headwork, well-poised temperaments and steadiness of play are the three factors which have made the Dohertys the leading tennis players of the world.