

Loveday and the Evolution and Lost Art of the Overhead Killshot!

by Bo Keeley with Marty Hogan

Almost forty years ago I found myself in double trouble in a doubles final. Our opponents were at the time the #1 player in the world, Charlie Brumfield and his legendary coach, Carl Loveday. They were two of the best strategists in the game. My partner was a green teenager I was mentoring for the summer in San Diego in his first Open or Pro level final. The youngster's name was the to-be legend Marty Hogan.

Marty thought that Loveday, with a pot belly and smelling of cigar smoke, was a bit past his prime, and he picked on the old guy. He tried to engage Carl in a *mano-a-mano* right side ceiling challenge by hitting one ceiling ball after the other to Loveday, while Brumfield and I twiddled thumbs watching with amusement on the left sideline. Carl returned some perfect forehand ceilings hugging the right side wall, and the others he flat out killed with an odd shot of the era... a perfect overhead kill in the right corner.

One after another the world badminton champ Loveday rolled out overheads.

In no time, we were down six points and griping. Marty, the kid, still couldn't believe Grandpa Loveday was taking him apart on the right side. "Timeout!" I yelled. Loveday exited for puffs on a cigar, as I explained to Marty that Carl could drop those overheads in the corner like a bird all day long. Instead, I told him, crush the ball hard and cross court so I could get into position and take control of the game, despite my perennial nemesis national champ Brumfield.

By blocking the overhead, we closed the gap and took the match in a close win. Marty won his first Open/Pro level title but not before learning the lesson of the Loveday overhead kill.

Carl later taught the same lesson to his two most famous students, Bud Muehleisen and Charlie Brumfield, and I copied from them. Both could execute the overhead kill as well as Loveday and used it to win more national titles than I can count. My personal variation was a shot only a few including one-time national champ, Davey Bledsoe, could execute offensively called a backhand reverse overhead pinch, which I could kill eight out of ten on even a slightly short ceiling ball.

The overhead kill became a staple in 1970's pro racquetball. Brumfield's overhead was the best of all the top pros. Hogan and I in singles matches against the bearded machine used to watch it like a movie, mouth agape and all the gallery had to do was throw in popcorn, as he blew open our games with an offense from a defensive position by putting away a less than perfectly hit ceiling ball with a nearly perfect overhead kill shot in *either* corner.

In the 1980's, the overhead remained a big weapon and the two best belonged to two of the best players, the now matured Marty Hogan and world champ Dave Peck. Marty would hit an overhead tomahawk chop reverse pinch with his forehand in to the left corner and after hitting the side then front wall it would roll out to the right. Dave, a student of Loveday and Muehleisen, used the overhead kill pinch to both corners and mixed in the overhead pass for deception as well as the masters did years before.

Perhaps the greatest overhead ever hit was by Muehleisen in a doubles game at the Pacific Paddleball Association where I was his left side antagonist. He wound up on a short ceiling shot like the tennis champ he had been, and smashed the ball that exploded in mid-air into two halves, and each rolled off in the respective front corners.

The 1990's saw the overhead employed by the game's very best very effectively. Cliff Swain, who'd learned the overhead from Peck, who'd learned it from Muehleisen, who'd learned it from Loveday, would kill, pinch or splat his overhead as part of an all-out attack. Mike Ray, a tall lean lefty with a build and overhead to match that of Dr. Bud, mixed in his extremely consistent overhead kills with a variety of offensive and defensive shots as part of the true all around power/control game. I played Ray once in the autumn of my career and stood shaking my head like a rake as the balls dropped like leaves in the front corners.

When I started following the top pros again nine years ago in '03, I noticed they were fast, athletic and hit virtually every shot with these big racquets. But even Sudsy Monchik and Kane Waselenchuck who were the two best offensive players in the sport didn't use the overhead in their repertoire. I deduced that the bigger racquets and balls traveling over 180 miles per hour would leave anything but an absolutely perfectly hit overhead as a set up for a Jason Mannino diving re-kill.

Like most sports, racquetball has evolved into a totally different game with new strategic shots than it was forty years ago, and I've accepted that, but I'll always miss the days of wooden and metal racquets strung less than twenty pounds, playing without gloves, 21-point games and the overhead kill!