

# PSA action on stoppages

The PSA answer Squash Player's five key questions on stoppages

**S**quash Player has long campaigned for attention to be given to the number of stoppages in the men's professional game.

It is an issue we have raised repeatedly as referees have run for cover and officials have quickly changed the subject. We have written on it, questioned the rule changes that have only encouraged more 'stroke-hunting' and asked why? We have initiated the collection of statistics on the extent of the problem and have published those.

In the March/April magazine (SP152) we posed five key questions on the issue. So where are we now?

The PSA have taken the problem on board and at the British Open we interviewed chief executive Alex Gough and chief operating officer Lee Beachill on their progress, focusing particularly on those five key questions. This article is based on their responses.

## 1. HOW MANY STOPPAGES ARE THERE?

The stats available on decisions in matches are limited, but there has been a considerable change since Bermuda (World Open 2007), where there were 30 decisions a match on average, whereas now there are 20 (World Championship 2014).

It is not quite as straightforward as that, however, because this is a deceptive average. While there are some matches with hardly any stoppages, there are still matches plagued with them. For instance,

one match may have just a couple of decisions, but there will be another with 38.

## 2. WHAT IS AN ACCEPTABLE NUMBER OF STOPPAGES?

Both Gough and Beachill were keen to point out that due to the nature of the sport there must be some stoppages. However, Beachill said: "There is an acceptance that we need to drastically reduce the number of stoppages that are unexplainable to a new viewer of squash."

Gough added: "The numbers one, two and three players in the world are asking

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for only eight decisions each a match [These were the January stats for Mohamed Elshorbagy, Greg Gaultier and Nick Matthew]. However, there are two other players whose decision averages were 30 and 24."

So what is an acceptable number of stoppages? Beachill replied: "Somewhere between 10 and 15." Gough replied: "Ten, five each way. If we aim for 10 and get 14, fantastic!"

## 3. WHY ARE PLAYERS STOPPING?

Beachill said: "There is an element of gaining advantage. We have to try and reduce this as much as possible."

The Editor (and some readers) may

have a eureka moment at this revelation. The regular spectator would be familiar with players winning replays on difficult balls, stroke-hunting, blocking an opponent in with early preparation and what Beachill calls "slowing the thing down".

Another issue (and a key one in the sport now) is blocking.

Gough said: "A player blocks the person coming in and it has been a let for 30 years, but the rules say it is a stroke. It is a particular problem area front left."

In a remarkable statement he added: "We have gone back to using the rules."

## 4. WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THIS?

"The point we are at now is that we are trying to eliminate the really bad matches," said Gough.

He emphasised that there has been a two-pronged approach. Before, the PSA had focused on improving refereeing, but now they are also addressing the issue of player behaviour.

Gough added: "We have never addressed the players before; we just always blamed the referees. Players never took any responsibility whatsoever. You have to give credit to both sides."

Beachill said: "There has been an attitude change by both players and referees for the better."

Now there is a PSA policy to reduce the number of decisions in a match, but two aspects are needed for success.

One is to get the players to make more of a commitment to play the ball – without looking for advantage from the referee. The second is for referees to make sensible decisions and not reward players for stopping.

Easily enough said, but how is this being communicated to both groups?

Beachill replied: "On a daily basis! The stats we are getting from the referees give

us concrete evidence of what is going on; bad matches are immediately addressed.

"There are certain players and certain clashes of styles that throw up way too many decisions.

"Our starting point is to say to these players: 'Here are your top three matches. Let's sit down and see what is going on.' We show them the footage. We say: 'These are the rules; you are getting it wrong.' You need to get that down from 19 to 10 [decisions].

"We have had a match this week [at the 2015 British Open] with 57 decisions and another with 51 decisions, and the same player has been in both of them."

The next day the player attended a meeting with the referee and Lee Drew [PSA rules director].

Beachill explained: "In this case there was clear communication back to the player saying: 'You are asking for too many decisions. These are the decisions you are asking for. What do you think about this?'

"To be fair to the players, whenever we have had these matches, they have turned up to a meeting the next day.

"Lee Drew is doing a brilliant job. Players are turning up because they have faith in Lee managing that process.

"In six months of really focusing on this and trying to change it we are having results already. That is why you don't have

much criticism of the refereeing. We still need to reduce the number of stoppages, but it is a huge step forward."

PSA now have the statistics and video analysis to provide some objective assessment of the problem.

"That changes the whole thing," both Gough and Beachill emphasised. They are not now on the dodgy ground of saying: "We think you are playing in a messy match." They have the video and the statistics to back it up.

Part of the game-changer is Tri-Ref, which provides easy access to the stats on the decisions in a match.

## 5. HOW DO YOU WANT THE GAME TO BE PLAYED?

Gough immediately reached for the PSA's mission statement.

It says: "It is the goal and responsibility of every player and referee to make each game we participate in, flow to the best of our ability, helping to improve the image and watchability of our uniquely exciting, dynamic and demanding sport."

There is recognition that there has been a problem. The PSA have gone about trying to solve it and not just blame referees for it, since both players and referees are involved. They now have the important tools of TV replays and statistics to help them do this.



Referee John Massarella puzzles over the Tri-Ref system

Beachill said: "We have not just used the TV; we have looked at the problem and put everything in place to try and make it better. We have spent an awful lot of time; Omar [Kandili, the Tri-Ref developer] has done an incredible job putting the tools in place so we can go through this process."

It is a work in progress. We will be watching.

## TRI-REF POWER

The new PSA Tri-Ref scoring system, which is being used at all PSA SquashTV events, cannot actually make the decisions for the referee, but it can do almost everything else.

Each of the three referees in the three-referee panel has an iPad running Tri-Ref. These connect through a local Wi-Fi access point, which also has internet access to allow for live scores and the prompt emailing of results to the tournament promoter immediately after a match.

The system was developed by PSA software consultant Omar Kandili and is licensed to the association. He has developed the majority of PSA's software, including tournament/player management, world rankings calculations, random draws, players/promoters' secure website, SquashTV Shop and more.

The Tri-Ref system acts as a scoresheet, allowing points to be added – and removed if a mistake is made. It shows clearly who is

serving, the side, the score and so on, but its beauty is in its handling of decisions.

The system guides a single referee - or the three referees on a panel - through the decision-making procedure (good, bad, unsure or let, no let, stroke). The majority decision is automatically calculated, based on the individual decisions of all three referees, and shows up on the central referee's iPad. It is then announced.

The pressure is taken off the referees, a structure is provided and they like it. It guides them through all eventualities – scoring, decision-making, video reviews, retirements, injuries and conduct strokes. Kandili has worked through a development list, testing it at every stage, and almost all eventualities have been anticipated.

Kandili says: "Tri-Ref was launched at the Tournament of Champions this year and we've covered seven major tournaments, with over 200 matches and 37 referees using the system. So

far there have been no software issues, which is unprecedented for squash scoring systems, and the feedback has been very positive."

As well as providing a digitally-recorded scoresheet, a communications device for the three-referee panel system and a match management system, Tri-Ref allows for the compiling of decisions and match statistics. For example in the TOC, with 45 matches recorded, Tri-Ref was able to give the total number of decisions, the average per match, the number of strokes, lets, no lets, video referee appeals and to show that there were 29% over-rules.

Analysis can be made over a season, tournament or round, or by player or referee. The ability to tie the number of stoppages a player is involved in to their stoppage record gives the PSA an important tool in their endeavour to manage this number.