

NUMBERS GAME

Squash Player analyses this year's British Open finals using data provided by Crosscourt Analytics

Ali Farag seemed to have the ball on a string for much of the time in the British Open final. He was up the court reading his opponent, waiting to pounce on the ball and moving it all over the court. Diego Elias set up a strong striking position, imposed himself and struck cleanly. This is a match worth re-watching on SquashTV.

Our sport has shots to different places, of differing angles, speeds, short and long, soft and hard, dying and rebounding, loose and tight, perhaps clinging or nicking, all in kaleidoscope rallies.

It is not always easy to see the recurring patterns or the key events like winners and errors and where they occur, where an opponent hits shots from and to, and which part of the court an opponent has strengths and weaknesses.

Analytics – counting up the events; the data, the facts – are indispensable to understanding what goes on and in developing a player's profile that allows for improvement in a focused way. It can also help in preparing game plans to counter an opponent's

strengths and exploit their weaknesses.

One impression from the British Open final is of Farag's mid-court jinking around and volleying. Let's look at the data. Farag volleyed 27% of his shots. This is remarkable. When you know this, you can look out for it. If you are an opponent, it can help you develop a game plan.

Crosscourt Analytics produce a very full data report on matches on the PSA World Tour. How to select from this is the key but not necessarily easy. We have selected from the data (see below), but many other selections are possible. Additionally, we provide a second selection in the men's appendix which has wider implications and may be of interest to the reader and coach.

THE MATCH

BRITISH OPEN 2023 MEN'S FINAL:

Ali Farag beat Diego Elias
13-11, 5-11, 11-8, 11-9

THE POINTS

All games were very close in this match except the second, where Elias stepped up the court (a move reflected in the heat maps) and Farag over-reached with his volleying and boasting. Overall, Farag won 40 points and Elias 39.

Points are marked on a player's winners, an opponent's errors (both forced and unforced) and those awarded by the referee.

WINNERS AND ERRORS

	Outright winners	Forced errors	Total (OW & FE)	Unforced errors
Farag	17	6	(24)	10
Elias	20	7	(26)	11

SHOT SELECTION

Remarkably, over a quarter of Farag's shots were volleys (27%) whereas Elias's percentage was 16%.

In the rallies he won, Farag dominated on the volley (31% of shots were volleys) and 50% of his shots were hit from the mid-court, demonstrating that he dominated the T and on the volley.

In the rallies Elias won, he forced Farag to play from deeper in the court (47% of his opponent's shots were from the back in these rallies, as opposed to just 40% in the rallies Farag won). Elias also managed to reduce Farag's volleying dominance down to 23% (from 31%), so here Elias managed to get the ball past his opponent.

Winners were played by both players largely from the mid-court. For Farag there was a similar number left side (33%) and right (29%), but he also hit winners from back left (21%). Elias's winners, however, were largely from the right mid-court (38%).

Crosscourts (hit hard and lifted) were the predominant shot from the front corners. However, at the front left corner Farag countered short with 27% of his returns compared to Elias's 18%.

From the back both players predominantly hit straight (two thirds of the time) to the back corners and mid-court.

For all his dominance on the volley and ability to move and pressurise his opponent, Farag played fewer winners.

SIDE TO SIDE

Interestingly, in the winners and forced errors category, similar points were won on each side (L: 25 points; R: 25 points). Farag scored better on his backhand (15 to his opponent's 10), the straight volley drop and crosscourt length being the top scoring shots. Elias, by contrast, scored on the right (16 winners to nine for his opponent) with his straight forehand drop and straight volley drop accounting for seven of his 16 winners. Throughout, while Farag played more volleys, Elias played more lifted shots.

LIFTED

In the second game, Elias played 20% of his shots as lifted shots, while Farag was at 4.5% – a striking difference. Farag hit twice as many boasts in the second game as in the others, letting his opponent into the front. The Peruvian responded with an increase in lifted shots and straight drop winners.

In a close match with Farag amazingly dominant on the volley and Elias cleverly varying the pace and straighter on the forehand, errors were an important factor in the outcome. Elias's four forced errors in the third and five unforced in the fourth were crucial – as was his handling of difficult refereeing decisions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Farag and Elias had very similar winning shot totals: Farag 17; Elias 20
- There were 1,318 shots in the match
- Farag volleyed 27% of his shots
- In the rallies he won, Elias forced Farag deeper and allowed him to volley less
- Winners were mainly hit from the mid-court
- Farag's winners were to the front left, Elias's to the front right
- Crosscourts were the main shot from the front
- From the back, the players hit straight two-thirds of the time
- Farag countered short front left, Elias front right
- The average rally length was 16 shots
- Elias lobbed or lifted the ball 12% of the time
- The time between shots was 1.4 seconds.

MEN'S FINAL: APPENDIX

1. TOTAL SHOTS: 1,318

Backhand Shots: 726 (55%)
(Farang: 349, Elias 377)

Forehand Shots: 592 (45%)
(Farang: 308, Elias 284)

Note: most of the game is played on the backhand

Shots hit to:

	Farang	Elias
Front court:	81 (12%)	85 (13%)
Mid court:	288 (44%)	245 (37%)
Back court:	288 (44%)	331 (50%)

Note: the shot classification in this analysis is defined by the impact point, not the landing point

2. SHOT BREAKDOWN

Volleys hit

Match:	Farang 179 (27% of shots)	Elias 108 (16% of shots)
Game 1:	Farang 70 (26% of shots)	Elias 25 (9% of shots)
Game 2:	Farang 27 (32% of shots)	Elias 21 (24% of shots)

Note: Elias moved up the court and looked to be more positive in the second game

Volleys straight and crosscourt

	Farang	Elias
Straight volleys:	86	65
Crosscourt volleys:	87	41
Volley boasts:	6	3

Lifted Shots

These are the percentages for lifted shots (including lobs) for the match of which Farang hit 5% and Diego 12%

Note: most lobs (and lifted drives) were played from deep regions

Shots Straight, Crosscourt & Boasts

Total straight shots compared to crosscourt (and boasts) per player

Farang:	Straight:	338
	Crosscourt:	264
	Boasts	55
Elias:	Straight:	370
	Crosscourt:	254
	Boasts	38

3. WINNERS & ERRORS

See above

Note: Here we look at A's Winners, and the shots played by Player A which forced Player B into error (forced errors). In this match, Farang hit 17 winners and Elias made seven forced errors (24 in total); Elias hit 20 winners and Farang made six forced errors (26). There was also a remarkable symmetry side to side.

Winners (and forced errors) per side

Left:	Farang 15	Elias 10	Total 25
Right:	Farang 9	Elias 16	Total 25
Total:	Farang 24	Elias 26	

4. RALLY LENGTH

Average rally length: 16 shots

Game one: 20 shots

Game two: 10 shots

Game three: 16 shots

Game four: 13 shots

The average rally length in the match was 16 shots (24 seconds), but with huge fluctuations by game (20 shots was the average length in game one, but only 10 shots in game two). A cooling, less bouncy ball would be a factor here - as was Farang's frequent ventures short.

5. TIME BETWEEN SHOTS

The average time between shots was 1.4 seconds with a very marginal quickening (i.e. less time between shots) in game two.

6. DISTANCE COVERED

Over the course of the match, Farang covered approx. 2.6km and Elias covered approx. 2.7km.

THE MATCH

BRITISH OPEN 2023 WOMEN'S FINAL:

Nour El Sherbini beat Nouran Gohar 11-9, 11-7, 11-1

THE POINTS

El Sherbini won 33 points to Gohar's 17

WINNERS & ERRORS (in play)

	Winners	Errors
El Sherbini	22	6
Gohar	9	10

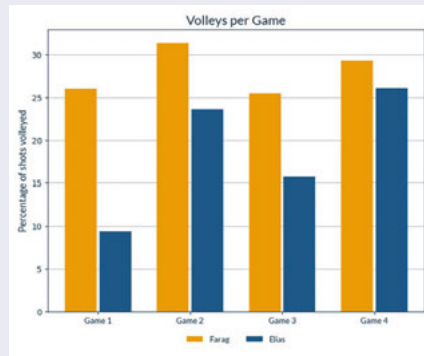
Often matches are a delicate balance of winners and errors. The analytics of the woman's final gives one over-riding statistic: El Sherbini dominated with winners and Gohar collapsed in the third game.

Gohar's winners were hit from middle left (54.5%) while Sherbini's were hit from all over the court (Front: left 18%, right 14%; Mid: left 25%, right 7%; Back: left 25%, right 11%). Most were to the front court, with 29% to the left and 29% on the right. Gohar volleyed 21% of her shots and El Sherbini 14%.

CHARTS

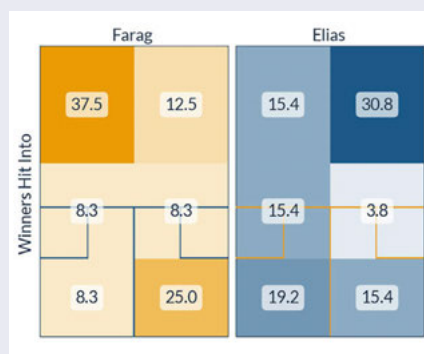
1. MEN'S VOLLEY percentages per game

Demonstrates Farang's dominance on the volley and how Elias improved his volleying percentage in the important second game



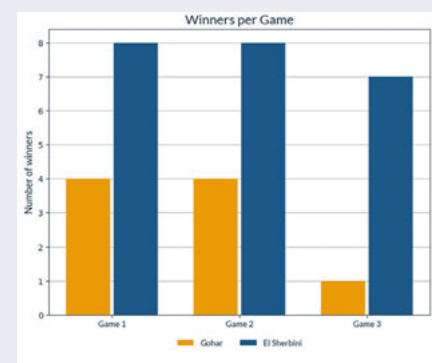
2. MEN'S WINNERS: winners were hit to these areas

This shows the stark difference in where Farang and Elias scored winners



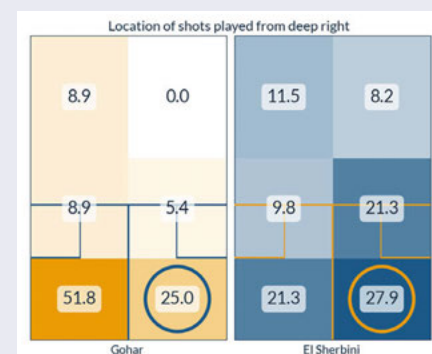
3. WOMEN'S WINNERS per game

The chart demonstrates El Sherbini's dominance with winning shots



4. WOMEN'S SHOTS from deep right corner

Gohar predominantly hit crosscourt to Sherbini's backhand, while Sherbini kept it straighter



Special thanks to Cross Court Analytics for sharing this data and co-ordinating on the analysis. The match reports can be found on page 10. Cross Court Analytics bring a statistical rigour and objective assessment to elite squash. Their service - for players, coaches and federations - brings informed and specific feedback according to players' needs.

CROSS COURT ANALYTICS

For further information visit crosscourtanalytics.com

MATCH DATA REPORTS The match reports that have provided the data for this article are available to readers. Go to: squashplayer.co.uk > Workshop > Cross Court Analytics