

Stats on Stoppages

Ian McKenzie comments on the new statistics available on player stoppages

Squash may well have been included in the Olympics by now if the best players in the world could play the game without running into each other all the time.

You may think that comment a bit strong, but that was certainly the feedback from the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester. After all, what other sports have so many replays?

Let's have a look at the Olympic sports. They are: athletics, aquatics, gymnastics, cycling, basketball, football, tennis, volleyball, archery, badminton, boxing, judo, rowing, shooting, table tennis, weightlifting, canoe/kayaking, equestrian, fencing, handball, field hockey, sailing, taekwondo, triathlon, wrestling, modern pentathlon, golf and rugby.

Pick one out. There is not too much chance of prolific replays in any of them, is there? Squash then has a bit of a problem. How serious is it, though? In considering our reply, there are five key questions to ask:

1. How many stoppages are there?
2. What is an acceptable number of stoppages?
3. Why are players stopping?
4. What can be done about this?
5. How do we want the game to be played?

1. HOW MANY STOPPAGES ARE THERE?

This question has been tackled by Roy Gingell, head of the WSF Referees' Committee (with a little encouragement from Squash Player). At last year's PSA World Championship he briefed the referees, collected the data and we present the results here:

REFEREEING DECISIONS

Tournament: 2014 PSA Qatar World Championship

Matches: 79 (including qualifying)

Total points: 4,983

Total minutes: 3,729

Lets: 920 (62%)

No-lets: 267 (18%)

Strokes: 305 (20%)

Total decisions: 1,492

Average points per decision: 3.34

- The full statistics can be downloaded from squashplayer.co.uk/rules

2. WHAT IS AN ACCEPTABLE NUMBER OF STOPPAGES?

We asked this question of some key officials and there was an embarrassed silence. Really, no one knows. From these

stats, though, there is at least a starting point. Players stop every three points or so on average, but there are wide variations - as you can see from the stats.

3. WHY ARE PLAYERS STOPPING?

Again no one really knows. To answer this question we need to do some analysis. Are players stopping for safety reasons, because they genuinely can't play the ball or because they are seeking an advantage - i.e. to get lets in difficult situations or to try and win points from the referee?

For years there was a so-called 'tough' refereeing policy. Sounds good, doesn't it? It was about as good as giving a footballer a penalty every time they dived in the penalty area. In squash this 'stroke hunting' under the 'easy stroke'



policy is still manifest in several areas:

- For 'front wall interference', especially down the forehand side
- Whenever a player can catch an opponent in their swing
- On loose mid-court balls, where players take up excessive room and make very early preparations for their shot
- Where players block an opponent's exit from a shot.

4. WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THIS?

The analysis should really come first, but already policies have been implemented to reduce stoppages. There has been a new emphasis on refusing lets for minimal interference.

However, a tougher 'minimal interference' policy is not a panacea, as it is not without its problems - e.g. no policy warnings, unfair 'no-lets', and increased subtle blocking of players' lines of the ball.

It is useful here to compare the

statistics from the 2007 Bermuda World Open with those from the 2014 Qatar World Championship (note: Bermuda was a 32 draw, while Qatar was a 64 draw. The stats here for Qatar are from round 2).

DECISIONS COMPARISON

	2007	2014
Matches	31	31
Games	116	115
Points	1917	2068
Decisions	959	643
Points per decision	2	3.2

So there is a significant decrease in total decisions, but it is still a significant problem.

It is also possible to break the overall stats down to stats per player. Anyone who looked at the stats for the

controversial match between Borja Golan and Fares Dessouki at the China Open would not have been surprised by the outcome of their rematch at the World Championship, with a stoppage every 1.68 points!

It would be interesting to compare the stats per player over time, wouldn't it? Then you would start to see where the real problems lie.

Whether the PSA can bring their players to the party is the all-important question. It is all rather easy to dump the issues at the referees' door, but in the end it really comes down to what the

player community finds acceptable (and how much they want to get into the Olympics).

5. HOW DO WE WANT THE GAME TO BE PLAYED?

Refereeing policy can affect the players' motivation to play the ball by adopting a 'no easy lets' and 'no easy strokes' system and by making points won from the referee a little bit harder to come by than points won in play.

However, in the end we need a consensus on how we want the game to be played. A fair result for each rally, players accepting minimal interference and playing the ball, minimal referee involvement and players winning points in play, rather than having them awarded by the referee, would be a start.

Refereeing policy needs to reinforce a culture of playing the ball. Then we will really see how many stoppages are needed! That is up to the players as much as the referees, though.