

Who Rules Squash?

In October, at the AGM of the World Squash Federation, the issue of a change in the scoring system will be decided. Could a change bring benefits or will it undermine the very nature of the sport?

The Squash Player Editor Ian McKenzie reviews the arguments and urges caution.

A stream of arguments come out in support of a change in the scoring system: it is necessary for the Olympics, it is better for spectators, TV stations like it, it is more exciting, newcomers do not understand traditional scoring, we need a unified scoring system ... How do these arguments stand up to scrutiny?

WHAT CHANGES HAVE BEEN MADE?

The scoring system used by most of the sport (except the professionals), 'standard scoring' (sometimes called 'traditional scoring'), has been in place for 82 years. The first Amateur Championship (the pre-eminent competition for many years), in 1922, used hand-in, hand-out scoring to 15, best of three, and T. O. Jameson beat J. K. Tomkinson 17-15, 12-15, 15-0. Four years later the scoring system was changed to hand-in, hand-out to 9, best of five, and Tomkinson came into his own, winning his first title by beating the defending champion Cazlet 9-5, 9-7, 7-9, 9-6 in the final.

This remained the game's scoring system, outside the USA, until 1989, when the men's International Squash Professionals' Association moved to point-a-rally (PAR) to 15 (sometimes called American scoring) for its top events.

In 1993 ISPA merged with the US men's hardball World Professional Squash Association which had used PAR to 15. The new body became the PSA.

In 2004 the PSA started the move to PAR to 11. Men's matches have since been significantly shorter, moving from about an hour on average to around 45 minutes.

This year the European Squash Federation has moved to PAR to 11 scoring for events under its jurisdiction for a one-year trial period; the Women's International Squash Players' Association has moved to PAR to 11 scoring for its events; and England Squash has moved to PAR to 11 for junior events to co-ordinate playing conditions for juniors following the European initiative.

WHAT EFFECT HAVE THEY HAD?

The advantage of the move to PAR to 15 was that the score moved along regularly, the disadvantage that play could become tedious when one player fell behind and there was little likelihood of a comeback.

With PAR to 11 the men's game has become more intense, with more short shots played as the ability of players to retrieve when out of position is made easier by the shorter match times. It is

new and superficially more appealing, but it is less tactical, players 'throw' games regularly and frequently give up before the end – and so do spectators.

In England two major events have not been scheduled since the changes and the British Open was half full, and the US Open is not scheduled yet this year.

Moreover, issues such as the men's professional game's dependence on the Middle East and the lack of significant activity in major squash playing countries such as Germany and Australia remain unresolved. Changing the scoring system, it seems, is no panacea for the professional game, let alone for the rest of the sport.

The change has been a difficult decision for WISPA. Women's matches will be considerably shorter. The decision to change was explained to The Squash Player as an 'on balance' decision and not one meant to set a precedent for the rest of the sport. WISPA has called the scoring method 'pro scoring', which seems sensible.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN INFLUENCES BEHIND THE CHANGES?

Two main influences can be seen to be behind the proposed changes: the 'Squash in the Olympics' campaign and the desire for 'unification' following the PSA decision to move to PAR to 11 scoring.

The Olympic Argument

Squash misses out on many things by not being in the Olympics: publicity and promotion, funding, and the state support it would receive in many countries. Will changing the sport's standard scoring system to PAR help?

There is no evidence that it will. There is no direct link. Squash authorities have had discussions and meetings with IOC officials and the anomaly of different scoring systems has been brought up and discussed. WISPA's move to PAR removes any anomaly between the men's and women's games at the top (i.e. Olympic) level, so any potential problem there has now been solved.

The key points are that it is not a condition of squash joining the Olympic Games that the same scoring system be used throughout the sport, and that at no time has there been opposition from the IOC to the 'complexity' of traditional scoring.

Those uneasy with this last fact need only to consider the position of tennis – the highest profile of the racket sports. Except for the adoption of the tie-breaker in the 1970s, the game's scoring system has

remained largely unchanged since the 1890s. If you win the first rally of a game, you are awarded 15 points, the next earns you another 15 but a third point only ten; if both players have 40 points, there is a call of 'deuce', which means 'two', and the next point winner is said to have the 'advantage'. There may be any number of 'advantages' before a game is won. There are tie-breaks to seven (except that one player must be two points ahead) in all sets except the last, where at Wimbledon there is no tie-break. Women play the best of three sets, whereas the men play best of five ... Does the public not understand all this? Is there a clamour for uniformity? Does the scoring system cause a problem at the Olympics? No, on all counts.

The Unification Argument

The call for a unified scoring system is superficially appealing but it presumes that the 'needs' of players and spectators are the same at all levels – from Olympics to club ladder. Where is the evidence to show that this is the case and that it would be to the benefit of the rest of the sport to move to PAR to 11?

WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN OTHER SPORTS?

Volleyball and badminton have been cited as examples of sports that have moved from hand-in, hand-out scoring to PAR – in 1989 and 2005 respectively. What has been their experience?

It may be instructive to quote one of the top coaches on the US collegiate volleyball scene: "I am and will be forever disappointed in the change to rally scoring [PAR] for the two basic reasons that comebacks are statistically eliminated and every mistake is penalized. I accept the change in men's volleyball because of the overt physicality of the game (match time and player health). I do not support the change for women's volleyball – it has made no discernible positive impact upon the sport, but rather made us look like a profession willing to desperately grab for any shiny new hope." (www.collegevolleyballcoach.com)

In relation to the recent Olympic Games in Beijing, it should be noted that, 'exciting' as volleyball's scoring system may have been, the organisers had to bus in spectators to fill the stadia for the cameras.

Badminton moved from hand-in, hand-out to 15 to PAR to 21. The 2004 Olympic men's champion Taufik Hidayat predicted that the changes would make the sport, "monotonous", and much criticism has since been levelled at the change, especially the poor chance of staging a comeback when falling behind. The problem for badminton is that the authorities have not left themselves an option to change the system again.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SHOW?

The WSF has conducted an opinion poll on the subject of a change of scoring system and some analysis of the new scoring system.

The results of the poll showed no consensus and raised the issue of wording

bias. If participants are asked if they think something 'will help grow our sport,' as they were in connection with the introduction of a uniform scoring system, they might be expected to respond in the affirmative. If they had been asked: 'Do you think the rest of the sport should be compelled to change to the scoring system the professionals use?' they may well have said No. Perhaps we should therefore not read too much into these results.

The WSF's (limited) analysis showed that matches were 30% shorter and, predictably, that players were less tired as a result. What did this reveal about the effects of the scoring change on tactics or on spectator satisfaction? Nothing. It did not even answer the important question: 'Are there more injuries in this more intensive form of squash?' The planned measurements of stress levels, exertion levels and related recovery times was postponed – because the players selected to take part were injured!

WILL THERE BE MORE DISPUTES?

With shorter, more intense matches, harder hitting and more balls through the middle, there can be expected to be more stoppages. Every point being more crucial in PAR to 11 and the implications of falling behind being so much more severe, there can be expected to be many more contentious and disputed decisions. Research by The Squash Player has shown that at Men's World Open level there is now a stoppage every two points.

An abiding impression of squash left with IOC officials following their visit to the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester was the inappropriately contentious nature of the sport, the number of disputes and the disrespect shown by players towards officials.

Do we want contentiousness to become an intrinsic part of our game, at every level?

WHAT IS THE OFFICIALS' VIEW?

We have asked many officials their views. There seems to be a general advocacy of the changes, although hardly any make reference to the players. A number of the arguments we have mentioned are put forward – Olympics (though there is confusion over the IOC's requirements), TV, 'excitement', spectator comprehension – but when pressed on any of these points, officials tend to move on to another point or another sport, badminton or volleyball ... And then there is a sort of confession: "We agree with your points but it is going through anyway."

WHAT IS THE PLAYERS' VIEW?

One player has written to us to state: "If I fall way behind I want the chance to use all my competitive instincts, my sporting intelligence and my fitness to turn that situation around. My fear is that the custodians of our sport will change the



Michelle Martin (left) watches as Sarah Fitz-Gerald retrieves and stages the greatest comeback in World Open history at the 1998 Women's World Open in Stuttgart.

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'The world title was always going to come down to this final and what a final it was – the classic drama in women's squash history.' And perhaps the greatest comeback in that history – a comeback unimaginable under PAR! Sarah Fitz-Gerald, the world champion, had been beaten by the world no.1 Michelle Martin in nine of their ten previous encounters. In the final the battle went to five games. Martin surged ahead in the fifth to lead 8-2 and was on the verge of her fourth world title.

'At 8-2 down I remember thinking, "I'm not going to let her get it that easily,"' said Fitz-Gerald ... six match balls were saved. Slowly Fitz-Gerald inched to safety ... a moment's respite at 8 all. Then Martin struck a crosscourt nick and a drive that hugged the wall and died on the side.

"When she got 9-8 I thought, 'Gosh I've come all this way back and I could still lose it.' ... Finally the opening came and Fitz-Gerald smashed in a backhand drive that Martin failed to anticipate to secure a remarkable victory and retain her world title.'

rules to take that opportunity away from me. It will diminish the sport for me and for those that think this ingredient is a fundamental part of our great competitive game."

Not only will the changes bring greater contentiousness to squash, but they will introduce a new aspect to the game: the 'point of no return', where players will decide not how they will go about making a comeback but when they will give up. Will this give squash added value?

WHAT IS THE BEST SCORING SYSTEM FOR SQUASH?

The key question to be asked on scoring really should be: what is the best system for players – not for the few hundred professional players but for the rest of the game's 15 million participants?

If we go back to first principles we have in our game of squash a rebound ball sport which requires skill, agility and tactical acumen – and in which players with different styles, abilities and fitness levels can compete successfully and enjoyably. It is a sport in which one of the basic tenets is that 'play must be continuous' because it is a fitness (or endurance) sport. Players compete not

only to outwit and outpace their opponents, but also wear them down physically and mentally and take advantage of their weaknesses. It is a physical and mental battle in which the character of the performer is exposed: it requires great concentration, confidence and the ability to overcome a range of negative mental factors such as anxiety, frustration and the urge to give up. It is a game in which you are rewarded for fighting right to the end, in which a comeback is always on the cards and it is not over until the opponent has won that final point.

A change in the scoring system risks undermining the game's fundamental, long-standing and well balanced principles and a decision to implement such a change should not be made lightly or on account of half-baked arguments that could well turn out to be illusory.

What may be appropriate at a professional level (where very high levels of fitness, hard hitting and a very hot ball that keeps rebounding sometimes produced excessively long matches with standard scoring) may not necessarily be assumed to be advantageous or even applicable to the rest of the sport.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Rightly or wrongly, the professional associations have moved to a scoring system they believe is in their interest. Whether the arguments on TV, spectators and excitement are convincing is largely irrelevant. The deed is done. The professional level of the game is unified. The WSF should now confirm standard scoring as the accepted norm and allow PAR to 11 as a variation. (At the moment only PAR to 15 and to 9 are officially sanctioned and, it should be noted, with 'setting' not 'win by two'.) Let players, associations and groups then decide from their experience what scoring system is best for them and what they want to use. If PAR to 11 is imposed as standard scoring, there is no way back, and the experience of it at all competitive levels is meagre.

The European Squash Federation has (in contravention of the sport's established procedures) moved to PAR, claiming it is a 12-month experiment but in the process starting a chain reaction. It must be required to report detailed results in 12 months' time.

There is no consensus for a change in the sport's scoring system and no general call for the WSF to impose a change on all players. The arguments for change are confused and unconvincing. The arguments for a unified scoring system are unsound. What those officials pushing for change do not realise is that they will not just be changing a scoring system; they will be changing the way the sport is played, changing its very nature.

Perhaps in future a consensus will develop. It does not exist now.

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