

## ANALYSIS

# 2014 NATIONAL FINAL

*Ian McKenzie found the 2014 men's National Championships final a fascinating spectacle but says a little simple analysis shows what really lay behind it.*

**T**he 2014 National Championships men's final between title holder Nick Matthew and James Willstrop was an exquisite match for both quality and excitement. Matthew was dominant in the head-to-head, with the perceived wisdom being that his speed, endurance and pressure would tire his opponent in the end. Willstrop had brilliant hands and fine winners, but he would need to seal the match before he tired. What happened?

## GAME ONE

Willstrop won the first game 11-5. He played slow and straight clinging lines. He only volleyed occasionally, but he varied the pace brilliantly playing high slow shots. He paced himself and controlled the pace of the game. Willstrop's job then was to get the ball past Matthew's volley. This he did with high balls, clinging balls and occasional low balls. The clinging balls forced opportunities and Willstrop put these away, hitting eight

winners. Check the rally length and his winner/error ratio. Controlling the pace of the rallies would allow him to survive. Could he keep it up?

### STATS

**Score:** Willstrop 11-5  
**Total rallies:** 16  
**Total shots:** 451  
**Longest rally:** 70  
**Average rally length:** 28  
**Time:** 18 minutes

### Winners and errors

	Winners	Errors
Matthew	3	3
Willstrop	8	2

## GAME TWO

Matthew needed to change his tactics and he did. He tried to impose his volleying on the game, took risks to do so and started to move Willstrop around with his boast. Matthew's game is based around his backhand volley. He does not recover to the T against a right-handed player but hangs in a metre to the left of it, looking for and setting up intercept opportunities. He does this more than any other player. If you watch SquashTV, this is one thing

you can look out for.

Willstrop responded by getting dragged into driving lower, lost his length and let Matthew in to score winners on the drop. At 4-6, in a 25-shot rally, Matthew worked his opponent for the first time. Willstrop won the point, but this type of play would take its toll. The match turned at 10-10, Matthew winning the point with a brilliant lob off an excellent drop. Two strokes cost Willstrop in this game and a third, when he was blocked in, proved crucial. There is always the luck factor as well. Matthew's shot hit the backwall nick at 11-10 and so he won the game.

### STATS

**Score:** Matthew 12-10  
**Total rallies:** 22  
**Total shots:** 383  
**Longest rally:** 46  
**Average rally length:** 17  
**Time:** 24 minutes

### Winners and Errors

	Winners	Errors
Matthew	9	6
Willstrop	4	3

## GAME THREE

It was going to be hard for Willstrop mentally and physically after the disappointment of losing the second game. Now it was 1/1 and he desperately needed points, but that meant he had to take risks. The stats – especially the error count and average rally length (17 shots) – tell the story and Matthew was now moving his opponent around. There were no easy points to be had here.

### STATS

**Score:** Matthew 11-4  
**Total rallies:** 15  
**Total shots:** 234  
**Longest rally:** 39  
**Average rally length:** 17  
**Time:** 12 minutes

### Winners and Errors

	Winners	Errors
Matthew	3	1
Willstrop	3	8

## GAME FOUR

The start of the fourth game was important. In reaching 3-3 Willstrop accidentally hit Matthew, going to the front.

“Stroke to Willstrop,” announced the referee. Was this a factor? Willstrop then made six errors in one hand, the guilt disrupting his game while Matthew refocused. He raced into a 9-3 lead and the final looked over. Willstrop hung on, though, lobbing to get back in it and now it was Matthew making the mistakes. However, he had enough of an advantage to win the game 11-8 and the match. Look at the statistics here, though. Remarkably, Matthew won the game without hitting one winner!

### STATS

**Score:** Matthew 11-8  
**Total rallies:** 19  
**Total shots:** 290  
**Longest rally:** 37  
**Average rally length:** 15  
**Time:** 18 minutes

### Winners and Errors

	Winners	Errors
Matthew	-	6
Willstrop	2	11

## THE MATCH

This was a masterclass of quality squash and lots of ‘what ifs’: what if Willstrop had continued the way he began the match; what if Matthew had been denied a third stroke in the second game; what if he hadn't got the lucky backwall nick; what if Willstrop had been able to overcome the disappointment of losing the second game; what if Willstrop had played to minimise his errors by using a more judicious margin for error?

Behind the play there were tactical decisions, a mental game, luck and the inspiration of sport. The stats didn't lie, though. Roll on 2015.

### TOTAL STATS

**Score:** Matthew bt Willstrop 5-11, 12-10, 11-4, 11-8  
**Total rallies:** 72  
**Total shots:** 1,358  
**Longest rally:** 70  
**Average rally length:** 18  
**Playing time:** 72  
**Match length:** 78

### Winners and Errors

	Winners	Errors
Matthew	17	16
Willstrop	15	25



Nick Matthew attempts to stay in front of James Willstrop and dominate on the volley