Should the men's match format, in tennis, be shorter than five sets?

Introduction

- **"I think the men and the women should play best-of-three sets all year long."** (King, 2018). This quote from tennis legend, Billie Jean King, identifies how the issue has been talked about in the tennis world, but no research has been conducted on the topic.
- Gomes *et al.* (2011) found that that an **increased level of fatigue corresponds to an increased length of match**, thereby decreasing the level of tennis, meaning players could not sustain their optimum level over an increasing match length.
- Harris' (2016) and O'Donoghue and Simmonds' (2019) studies confirm that **shorter match formats increase competitiveness and unpredictability**, leading to more entertaining matches and higher viewing figures as a result.

Method

- **Quantitative** research methods were used with a **correlational** research design.
- A **questionnaire** created on Google Forms was used to gather participants' responses.
- Data was collected from **tennis fans and industry experts** with age being the inclusion criteria, as a statistical correlation between participants' age and their preferred length of format was conducted.
- The analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using a laptop with IBM SPSS installed as well as charts already provided by Google Forms.

Discussion

- **The quality of tennis was more important than the length of the match for the respondents** – people have shorter attention spans and the shorter the event, the more powerful and explosive the play is and an increase in unpredictability in the outcome (Brown & Soulier, 2013).
- **Shorter match formats should mean that players have increased energy levels and recovery time**, hence a reduced chance of injury and a longer career for players (Reid & Duffield, 2014).
- **Grand Slams should remain five sets as it's the pinnacle of the game**, however, a ten-point final set match tiebreak would increase unpredictability, but also see the physical and mental excursion on a player after a five-set match (O'Donoghue & Simmonds, 2019; Gescheit *et al.*, 2017); future research could be explored with this format.

Aims

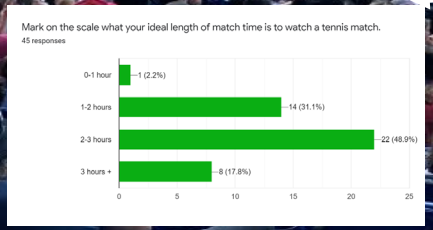
- To answer whether the men's match format should be shortened at Grand Slam level.
- The primary hypothesis is that participants think that the match format should be shortened at Grand Slams.
- The secondary hypothesis is that younger participants would prefer a shorter format whereas older participants may prefer the more traditional and current format.

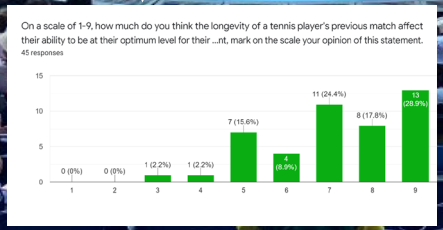
Results

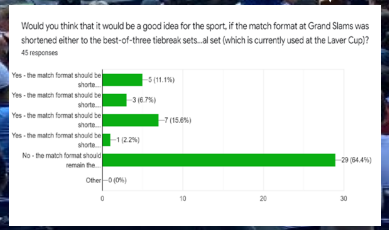
- **46%** of participants thought that **two to three hours** was the optimum length of match time, **34%** at **one to two hours**.
- **26%** of participants **strongly agreed** that player performance is severely affected by a long match format; **86% agreed** with this statement.
- **68%** of tennis fans and industry experts thought that the match format should **remain the best-of-five sets**, **32%** thought that it should be **shortened**, with **14%** saying that the **ten-point match tiebreak to replace the fifth set** was the best alternative.
- The secondary hypothesis was assessed through a correlational test and found no significance between the match format chosen and the age of the participants – (**0.092** positive correlation, p-value of **0.525**).

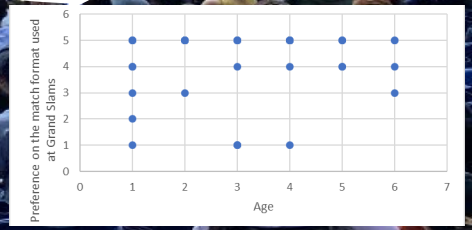
Conclusion

- **Over two-thirds of participants (68%) thought that the match format should remain the best-of-five sets.**
- However, **32% thought that the format should be shortened, 14% to a final set ten-point match tiebreak** – suggesting that there are viable options to shorten the match format.
- Trialling this format at one of the Grand Slams and comparing it to the current format would produce interesting results with the views of fans and industry experts.









Key References

● Brown, I.M., & Soulier, C.M. (2013) *Tennis: Steps to Success*. 4th edn. Human Kinetics. ● Gescheit, D.T. *et al.* (2017) 'Effects of consecutive days of match play on technical performance in tennis', *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 35(20), pp. 1988-1994. doi:10.1080/02640414.2016.1224352. ● Gomes, R.V. *et al.* (2011) 'Physiological demands of match-play in elite tennis: A case study', *European Journal of Sport Science*, 11(2), pp. 105-109. doi:10.1080/17461391.2010.487118. ● Harris, S. (2016) 'The effects of different scoring systems on upset percentage and match length in tennis: a simulation study', *Journal of Sports Research*, 3(3), pp. 81-94. ● King, B. J. (2018) 'Wimbledon: Men and women should both play best of three sets', *The Times*, 16 July. Available at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wimbledon-men-and-women-should-both-play-best-of-three-sets-2zzrvk2z4 (Accessed: 20 November 2019). ● O'Donoghue, P. & Simmonds, E. (2019) 'Probability of winning and match length in Tiebreak Ten tennis', *International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport*, 19(3), pp. 402-416. doi:10.1080/24748668.2019.1615296.