

## Yes it was an Epic Tennis Match, but is There a Winner?

June 23, 2010 a day that seemed like any other, except in the world of sports. It would be the day that US soccer team scored a goal in the 91st minute of their match against Nigeria to advance to the second round of the world cup and it would be the day that longest match in Wimbledon history would be played but not finished. The match would be suspended due to darkness at 59-59 in the fifth set, a set that had lasted 7 hours and 6 minutes. This set alone broke the record for the longest match, which stood at 6 hours and 33 minutes. The total time of the match was already at ten hours. The players, American John Isner and Frenchman Nicolas Mahut, exited court 18 exhausted. The crowd looked exhausted to not sure to make of what they had witnessed. As I sat at home and watched and wondered the same thing. Yes I had seen a match that had lasted ten hours and still had no winner, and although Mahut or Isner would eventually win the match I wondered in a match this long was there really a winner?

The match began late Tuesday afternoon and was suspended at two sets all due to darkness. Wednesday the match resumed a little after two o'clock and with no tie breaks in the fifth set at Wimbledon this promised to be a long set. When I say long I thought that possibly the match could end with a score of 22-20, after all the previous record at Wimbledon was a match that ended at 20-18 in the fifth. Long fifth sets are common when you have two big servers and both Isner and Mahut have monster serves. By the time the players walked off the court Wednesday night Isner had 98 aces and Mahut had 95. In addition there have been 881 points, 612 in the fifth set. Isner has compiled 218 winners, Mahut 217. Isner has only 44 unforced errors, Mahut 37. How much more incredible would these numbers become on Thursday before the match was over?

On Thursday either Mahut or Isner would win the match, but would the winner be a real winner? The idea is not to win the match but win the tournament and how could either player do this after three days of intense tennis? I had to believe that whoever won the match would go out in the next round. In addition matches like this tend to leave players drained for sometime after. If you need proof of this just look at the epic match between Djokovic and Nadal in Madrid in 2009. That match was only three sets and lasted for a little over four hours. However neither player seemed to be the same for months afterward. Nadal lost early in the fourth round at the French and missed Wimbledon altogether and never really seemed to regain his confidence the rest of the season. Djokovic, the loser of the match lost early at both the French and Wimbledon and has never been the same since. So while either Isner or Mahut would eventually win the battle both had little chance of winning the war.

Then they are the spectators, did we really win anything? While we got to witness history this is not the most interesting match. In all 118 games in the fifth set Mahut had only two break points, and Isner had only four match points. There were very few deuces and the longest rally was 17 shots long. For the most part during the epic fifth set the server held easily and watching a serving contest for over seven hours is not terribly interesting. The match lacked the drama of either the 2008 final between Nadal and Federer or last years epic clash between

Federer and Roddick. Besides which there is too much of a good thing and a match that last for over ten hours is overkill, especially when there are other matches going on. The spectators would be able to say they had witnessed the longest match in history but would they be able to say anything beyond that? Not really because you can't talk about drama that isn't there.

Besides it is frustrating to watch a match that never ends. As I watched I wondered what it would take for one of them to win, at about 2pm I listened to the commentators joke that the match would have to be called in a couple hours due to darkness, they never believed that was a real possibility, certainly after seven hours there would have to be a winner. When there wasn't and the match was called for darkness I became as frustrated as the players. We would have to wait another day before there was a winner, this was no longer fun to watch it was just endless! It becomes too similar to watching the slides of someone's vacation, you sit there nodding your head trying to maintain interest but in truth your mind is thinking about twenty other things. Imagine what you would feel like if you were told you had to come back the next day to watch more slides, well that is how I felt when the match was called for darkness. With the lack of drama in this one I wasn't so I was not looking forward to the resumption of the match.

Did the tournament win anything? Once again the answer is not really. When the draw came out one of the most interesting match ups was a possible fourth round clash between Isner and Nadal. The two had met twice in 2010, once on hard courts and once on clay, Nadal won both. Despite the wins it seemed that Isner was getting closer to beating Nadal and on grass with his big serve it seemed like Isner had a real chance to beat him. However that matchup was not likely to happen since Isner was not likely to make it past the second round. The tournament was going to lose a very exciting dark horse in Isner because he took part in this historic match.

So with no real winners in this situation what is the answer? Should we implement tie breaks in the fifth set of all majors? The question we must ask ourselves when evaluating this is, if the match had not been so long would people still be talking about it in ten years? Probably not because without the length of the match this match would have been just another first round encounter between two big servers. So let's put this match in the record books, be happy it's there, and prevent it from happening again.