

Marathon Matches in Tennis, are they Worth it?

For years the only tennis major to go tie breaks in final set of men's matches is the U.S. Open, the three other majors all require a player to win the last set by two games. For years this was fine, at most the last set may run 20 games, a normal set is at most 12 games plus a tie break, but all that changed in 2010. At Wimbledon in 2010 John Isner and Nicolas Mahut engaged in a three day first round match that ended with a score 70-68 in the final set. Since then marathon matches have continued to occur with increasing frequency, the Olympics contained two, and given the toll these matches take on the players it is time to reexamine whether or not tennis should institute a tie break in the fifth set.

The explanation I have been given as to why there is no tie break in the final set is since the players have been evenly matched up to the final set, each player has won an equal number of sets, the winner should have to show something special to win the match. This worked fine in the serve and volley era when the game lacked today's power and was played with wooden racquets resulting in more service breaks. Today the technology has evolved to allow more of a power game with big servers focusing on their serve and less on their return game resulting in fewer service breaks. Big servers frequently have to win sets in tie breaks so if you have a match between two big servers and do not have a tie break in the last set you have the stage set for a marathon match. If you need verification of that look at the Isner/Mahut marathon, where over a total of 183 games Isner had a total of 14 break points and Mahut had three, with two sets won in tie breaks. With both players having big serves and strong ground strokes neither player found it easy to manufacture or convert break points, Isner converted only two of his, one of those a match point at 69-68, and Mahut converted only one of his.

The problem with these matches is not only the length of the match but the toll the match takes on the players. The idea of a tournament is to win the war not just the battle. When a player wins a marathon match they win the battle, but have very little energy or focus left to win the war the tournament. Sometimes these affects last not only for the tournament in which the player won the marathon match but for months after. Coming into the matchup with Mahut, Isner had been playing well, he was a fixture in the top 20, and fans were expecting him to do well. However after his historic match Isner was so drained instead of improving his ranking he dropped out of the top 20 at the years end. It took him until the second half of 2011 to recover his previous form. The reason for this is not only the physical toll the match took on Isner but the psychological effects of a marathon match as well. Matches are emotionally draining enough but when a player is playing a final set where there is no tie break each point takes on a new significance. In this type of set the player is concerned on each point with either making effective return to help generate a break point, or protecting their own serve, Isner and Mahut had to endure this kind of intensity throughout their 8 and 11 minute final set. It is true players think about these things in other sets but when they know there is a tie break at the end of the set it is a little less intense. With the type of emotional pressure and physical toll a marathon match takes is it any wonder that Isner found it hard to recover for many months afterward.

Since the Isner/Mahut epic there have been several other epic matches none as long as the Wimbledon epic but all of them going over twenty games in the final set. Two of these matches

occurred at the recent 2012 Olympic Games. The first was a second round encounter between Jo Wilfred Tsonga and Milos Raonic. This featured a three hour final set with Tsonga winning by a score of 25-23. Tsonga was drained by this victory and although he would win his next match against Spaniard Feliciano Lopez, he played with little energy and required a tie break to win the first set. In the quarterfinals Tsonga would not be so lucky losing to Djokovic in straight sets, losing the first set by a score of 1-6. Djokovic is a player that Tsonga usually plays well against and until the Olympics there record against one another was tied with six wins apiece. However by the time Tsonga arrived at the match he was drained and tired and could not put up much of a fight, thus he lost to Djokovic who was not playing terrifically at the Olympics. How the long match will affect Raonic is unknown; we will have to wait until the upcoming American hard-court season to answer that question.

The second marathon match of the games was the semifinal between Roger Federer and Juan Martin Del Potro. Federer would win the final 2 hour 43 minute set by a score of 19-17. Although he won the chance to play for the gold medal against Andy Murray he did not have the legs to make it much of a match thanks to his semi-final. Federer would lose the match by a score of 2-6, 1-6, 4-6 the most lopsided loss Federer has ever had on one of his favorite courts, center court Wimbledon. Murray would probably have won the match without Federer having played his long semi-final against but it certainly would have been a more competitive affair, with Federer able to take advantage of the opportunities given him including converting any of the nine break points he generated. During the bronze medal match Del Potro would fare better than Federer, beating Djokovic but only because he found the ability to win the big points and Djokovic did not. On paper Djokovic won match hitting more aces and winners against a tired Del Potro but this would not win him the match. What the long term effects of the Federer/Del Potro epic are remain to be seen but if either player is negatively affected than fans have lost their chance to enjoy watching two great hard court players compete to their fullest abilities during the U.S. hard court season.

It is clear that players who take part in marathon matches have the potential to negatively affected for up to months afterward. Given this reality is it worth it to allow these matches to continue? With the tennis calendar already jam packed is it fair to the players to endure these marathons in majors, have little chance to win the major and play in subsequent tournaments in the weeks following the major? Since the technology and the game have evolved to allow these marathons isn't it time to let the rules of the majors evolve to allow tie breaks in the final set? In the end both the players and the fans would benefit. The players would not be negatively affected physically or mentally and the fans would be able to see their favorite players competing in top form.