

The great experi

Richard Eaton investigates squash's latest attempt to improve its image and make it more watchable

The biggest experiment ever made with how professional squash is played took place at the 2014 British Open.

It was triggered by radical new ideas about how lets should be awarded. This may not sound like a big change, but it influences many things – such as how players respond to an opponent's shot, how they move, how they think and even perhaps their tactical emphasis.

It is sufficiently momentous to have brought a mission statement from Lee Drew, the sport's first director of refereeing, who was appointed by a Professional Squash Association (PSA) seeking nothing less than a transformation of the image of squash.

"It is the goal and responsibility of every player and referee to make each game we participate in flow to the best of our ability, helping to improve the image and watchability of our uniquely exciting, dynamic and demanding sport," the statement read.

Television executives believe there are too many interruptions for squash to make good broadcasting. Simon Green, the head of BT Sport, described the quantity of lets as "disruptive" and believes they appear random to viewers because the reasons for them are unclear.

"We feel similarly really," said the PSA's chief executive, Alex Gough. "We have to get rid of soft lets and also create a new way of looking at decisions."

Of course other innovations in modern squash have been important too. The introduction of three referees and of the video-review system has been conspicuous and reasonably successful, but probably nothing has affected how players approach the game as much as what is being attempted now.

Not only do players seek fewer lets, but referees enforce a greater requirement to play the ball, even where there is some interference. This means more decisions are likely to go the way of the striker of the ball, and the responsibility of the non-striker to get it has increased. The prospect of continuous rallies is greater, but so is the scope for misunderstanding.

As everyone tries to cope with the transition, there is increased risk of friction between players and referees. That means Drew must have started his job well, because a majority of both have so far expressed their approval.

Nick Matthew feels the experiment

"has made a statement" and that "it bodes well", fellow world champion Laura Massaro described the refereeing at the British Open as "quite fair and consistent" and four-time world champion Amr Shabana says he "likes what Lee Drew is doing – he is along the right lines".

Even though such a big change in interpreting rules is hard for referees, who have to think differently and maintain this new mindset for several hours through all the usual stresses and strains, they too sounded positive.

"Everyone is making more effort to play the ball," one referee commented.

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"I'm assuming this is through referees enforcing that [new interpretation]. It can only help the game."

Another said: "It's quick thinking and communication where we are tested, but Lee Drew will be on the ground floor watching and helping, which we've never really had before."

Drew's own assessment was optimistic, though he admitted it was only a start. Asked whether this British Open had created a better spectacle, he said: "I thought it was flowing. I thought

matches were entertaining. It was flowing squash in general.

"There are always sticking points or contentious decisions. You are never going to get away from that. Even Mosaad v Willstrop went well. It was not even contentious when it might have been."

Most players were willing to make adjustments to aid continuity in the rallies and there was goodwill in seeking what seemed to be accepted as a common aim. Inevitably, though, there were some blips.

Shabana became irritated by one referee's requests and responded by going through the back of his opponent, knocking him over. That got him a conduct stroke.

"The referee kept telling me to go through to the ball, so I just tried to do that," Shabana said. "He [the opponent] was in front of me and I just did what I was told – go through him to get the ball."

Later Shabana reckoned most players were co-operative because it was early days. The real test of the new interpretation would come, he thought, when both players were being "spikey".

There were brief moments when serious incidents seemed possible, but each time it was avoided. Dipika Pallikal accused a referee of being "very biased" during a surprise first-round defeat to Tesni Evans and Nour El Sherbini can rarely have argued as much as she did during her first-round loss to Emma Beddoes, the biggest upset of the tournament.

Neither was penalised. Perhaps referees decided that in the unique

What the players say

NICK MATTHEW: The changes are an improvement all round. They make a statement either to the striker or the player making way – that the shot is too good or you've got to go and get the ball. There are a lot of 50-50s which are going to the striker – a no-let rather than a let. This is making a statement early in the game. It bodes well.

MOHAMED ELSHORBAGY: Referees have been making players go for shots more. This is a big change. All players need to follow it. There has been so much improvement. There are no cheap lets. It is making squash better and with more encouragement, I am really hoping something different will come from this.

AMR SHABANA: I think they are going to struggle if players become spikey with

each other. In the off season they need a course from Lee Drew. This is the process by which they are going to learn. This [experiment] may be difficult for referees, some of whom have been doing it the same way for as long as 20 years. Suddenly they have to change. It takes time.

GREGORY GAULTIER: I think it's been okay. I prefer the one-referee system: one referee and one video referee. At least one will be consistent. Three referees are not like that.

LAURA MASSARO: I like the fact that players are trying to go for the ball. I think the no-lets are a way of making players play the ball – as long as it's consistent. But it will take players a lot of time to adapt.

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circumstances, it was better not to apply discipline too strictly. Even Beddoes empathized with her opponent's inability to comprehend what was

happening.

The Egyptian appeared not to know about the changes of interpretation, which caused confusion and anger. She was not alone. Remarkably Massaro, world and British Open champion no less, had not known about them either.

"What is a little disappointing

is that no-one told me what was happening," Massaro said. "The only place I heard about it was through Squash TV. I would at least have liked to have had an e-mail from the referees or from someone else dealing with it.

"I went through a few points without realising there had been a change. It's a bit frustrating."

This was the great experiment's biggest shortcoming. Drew, who is employed by the PSA, did not feel responsible for matters affecting the Women's Squash Association (WSA) and Tommy Berden, the WSA's new interim chief executive, had only just taken on his new role and had not been directly involved in any of the changes.

Lack of communication is an issue which goes beyond refereeing and beyond what is best for the British Open. It extends into relationships between the different bodies which run the sport and therefore into unity of governance, an Olympic issue. There may be a case for the World Squash Federation's referees committee or rules commission to take a greater role in communicating these changes.

Drew is a refreshing character because he admits mistakes whilst generating improvement. His motive, he says, is achieving whatever takes the sport forward, whether this is best for him and for keeping

Fares Dessouki leaps over fellow Egyptian Karim Abdel Gawad at the British Open

his job, or not.

That purity of motive may be one of the qualities which has enabled him to bring different parties together to deal with very difficult and potentially inflammatory issues.

By the end of the British Open, Drew had created nearly 40 video examples of refereeing situations, to which he was able to add notes even whilst busy with television commentary. There will be many more examples in due course.

“We can all sit in a room and watch them,” Drew said. “It will create debate and we can discuss how we see it. It’s easier [this way] with referees and players to bring the rules to life.

“We will quickly have a good data base. At the moment it’s private. It’s in the development stage. It will grow and we will allow people to help. Soon we might make it available to as many people as possible.”

This collection may be vital to the success of this ambitious venture. So too may collecting statistical information.

The changes during this British Open appeared to have reduced the number of lets, but we don’t know for sure. We need more stats which offer important detail about the progress of the great experiment.

Precisely how many lets were there? Was this fewer than usual? How many lets are acceptable in the new climate? Five per game? Fewer? These are a few of the questions which need answering, though we will have to wait for that.

It will happen, though. When it does, it should provide crucial evidence for persuading TV companies of the game’s enhanced beauty and excitement.



Switzerland’s Nicolas Mueller (left) takes evasive action to avoid being hit by Columbia’s Miguel Angel Rodriguez at the British Open