

Vive la Différence!

Looking to widen tennis' appeal? Just don't take away the very things that give the sport its identity.

BY CHRIS NICHOLSON

Let's eliminate ad scoring from tennis. And while we're rewriting the rulebook, let's rid the game of that 15-30-40 nonsense and count like normal people. And we should change the ranking system. Then let's raise the net, eliminate the let, stop at three sets and paint the lines blue.

Why? Because the American public simply cannot understand tennis.

That's the underlying contention of many well-meaning advocates for change in this game. Almost every time voices in tennis are given a chance to spout opinions on the state of the sport (such as I'm doing now), we find ourselves awash in ideas about how change will generate more interest from the common folk.

After almost a decade in tennis publishing, I've become weary of hearing the myriad suggestions on how rule modifications would transform the public's desire to watch our game. Yes, tennis would benefit from building a stronger fan base. But I've begun to wonder why the first solutions that so many tennis insiders reach for involve rule changes. The reason has become clear: Tennis has an identity crisis.

We see that tennis is not as popular as baseball, hockey, football, etc. And some of us think that the way to amend that is to make tennis more like those sports. We claim that tennis' scoring method is too hard to follow; the length of matches is too unpredictable; the lack of teams is an obstacle to marketing.

But these are the things that help give tennis its identity.

Anyone who even idly observes American marketing knows that much of it involves capitalizing on trends, on imitating other entities that are already popular. Such strategy can often return

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some modest gains. But it does so at the expense of diluting the distinctiveness of the product.

We must stop believing that the grass is greener on the other courts. Are we so unoriginal that we can't find a way to make tennis more appealing without stripping it of its character? Especially when we do so only because we think the common fan can't understand it? Let's give American sports fans at least some credit for their intelligence.

Tennis has a confusing scoring system? So does football. Six points for this, three for that, two for yet something else. And while the clock's not even running, teams get to score another point—or two points, depending on how they go about it.

Tennis has an incomprehensible ranking system? Who wants to explain the rationale of college football rankings to me?

Every sport has its oddities. In baseball, games can last two hours or five, and star pitchers play only once every

five days. In basketball, teams are allowed to make the final two minutes of a game last 15 by deliberately slapping each other. In hockey, aside from the goalie, each player is on the ice for barely a third of the contest. A golfer may move a twig on the green, but not on the fairway.

These idiosyncrasies do not detract from their sports; they're the aspects that help define the games. Tennis has these defining traits too, and we should celebrate them as the things that make our sport unique.

Embrace ad scoring; winning by two means you have to be decisively better. Embrace variable game-lengths; you never know when you might be in store for a classic, epic battle. Embrace the puzzling scoring system as the intriguing, historic mystery that it is.

Embrace tennis' identity.

You want to turn more people into tennis fans? Bravo. Kudos. Good for you. But don't do it by *changing* tennis. Do it by selling the uniqueness of the game. People are smart; when they're interested, they will learn.

Not all change is bad. Pressurized balls, the women's tour and the Open Era attest to that. Evolution is natural and necessary, and it can revitalize a sport. But be wary with change. Misplaced, it may dilute tennis into a game that everyone understands, but that no one loves. ▀



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