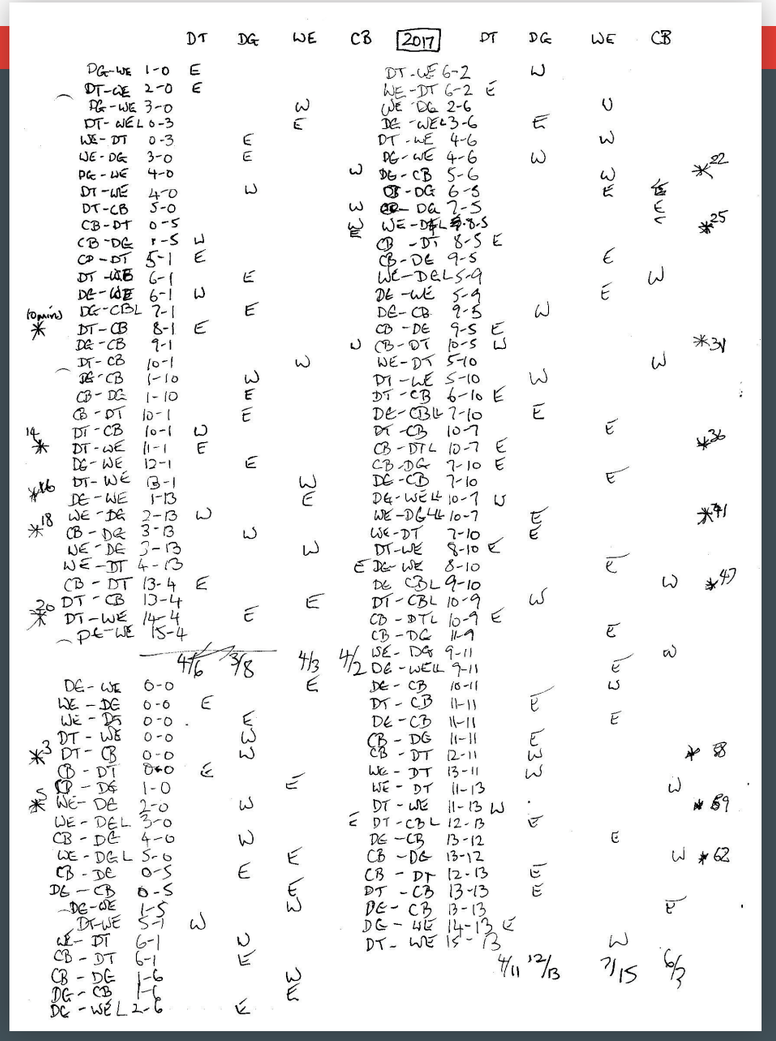
Scoring with stats

Hamish Buchanan reveals the secrets behind his stats-based scoring system



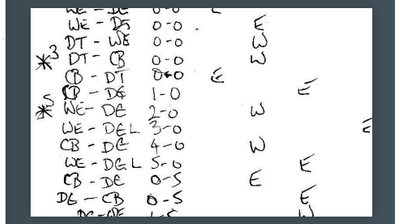
READING THE RESULTS

LEFT: Scoresheet from the 2017 National Doubles Final – Dan Tristao (DT) and Dan Grant (DG) versus Will Ellison (WE) and Charlie Brooks (CB) won by the latter 15-4, 15-13.

Reading each line from left to right:

- Who is serving to whom
- The rally ends and note the score followed by an 'E' (error) or 'W' (winner) in the column of whichever player makes a mistake or hits a winner
- Lets are annotated with an L after the serving initials

In the future I may note aces as different from winners to see whose serve is the most effective.



ABOVE, (inset): Dan Grant (DG) has a purple patch of four winners as he and Dan Tristao build a 5-0 lead at the beginning of the second game.

In the course of this match there were 22 lets [L], eight occurring at the crucial 10-7 point in the second game. In the course of the match Tristao scored eight winners and made 17 errors; Grant 15 winners and 21 errors; Ellison 11 winners and 18 errors and Brooks 10 winners and five errors.

After many years of watching incredible, almost endless National Doubles finals contested in mutual respect by Wayne Enstone and Neil Roberts against Dave Hebden and Ian Fuller, it became apparent that you don't win many games of doubles when making more mistakes than your opponents.

In the next few years playing with my partner Robin Perry, I saw my role as the steady, controlling half of the pair, trying to orchestrate opportunities for my big-hitting partner to finish the rally and, crucially, to avoid making any mistakes. We lost our first three doubles finals, but with a little fortune managed to win the next eight, probably reaching our peak in our fourth final, which was our second against John Minta and Phil Bishop. John and Phil were both big hitters, and along with Robin it surely resulted in one of the hardest-hitting finals of all time. I tried to join in with smacking the ball into the back nick when possible, but essentially my part was to retrieve and frustrate the opposition. We won that final in two games and, when presenting the trophy, the then President, John East, generously picked out my performance as the game-changing one, stating that he felt that I only made one mistake. I clearly remembered making two horrible ones and no doubt there were a few more unremembered errors, but it was probably my best game of doubles and this observation stuck with me.

> 'EVEN THE BEST STRUGGLE TO RECORD MORE WINNERS THAN ERRORS'

Several years after Robin and I had lost our crown I began wondering how the ratio of winners to errors factored in a game of doubles. As Nationals organiser I had the opportunity to score the final every year and thought the players would enjoy some stats to mull over afterwards.

RECORDING SYSTEM

So, what stats to record and how to evaluate them?

The players are not wearing GPS trackers to record distances run or heart monitors showing the stress-induced peak when serving at game ball down, so how about the classic winners versus errors? Tennis has a forced and unforced errors count, but that would be too difficult to evaluate in the flow of a game of Fives. I had to decide whether the point ended with a winner from player A or a mistake from D, record the score, note who was serving to whom and whether it was first or second hand.

I decided to stick to the simple 'winner or error' choice, with every point ending in either one or the other. The question then arose of how to evaluate an error? I thought back to when I was winning trophies and the disappointment and anger I felt when, after getting my hand to the ball, I failed to complete the shot. It's harsh, but I believe that that is the honest feeling of the top players and winners of any generation. When given the smallest chance they will expect to get the ball back in play. So while winners are clear – there is no touch before the ball bounces twice – errors are deemed as such even if at point blank range or fielding the hardest of corner nicks at extreme pace. As long as one gets a hand to the ball it should be possible to get it back in play.

MIXTURE OF STYLES

Viewers of this year's final could attest to the gut-wrenching disappointment shown by Ed Kay or Will Ellison after missing a retrieval that would be inconceivable to the average player or the brief but incandescent rage from Dan Tristao or Charlie Brooks when hitting the ball down in trying for the outright winner. Small margins are what make champions.

Stats from the last five or six years' finals show that even the best players struggle to record more winners than errors under these circumstances. Dan Tristao and Will Ellison hover around the 50/50 winners-to-errors ratio and when one or the other is in the positive that usually results in a win for them. Charlie Brooks is rather akin to my probable performance of few errors and few winners, whereas Dan Grant would appear to like the game to revolve around his performance, with a large number of winners and an equally large amount of errors.

One could try to take this analysis further with an errors-and-forced-errors count, or an ace-serve percentage, but that probably requires a playback analysis or more observers.

Try watching a game of doubles at your local club and counting the winners and errors. I expect the latter count to exceed the former. Quite rightly we all love hitting those unplayable nicks or the perfect length shot into the corner, but I believe it's the over exuberant cracks into the bar and desperate misses from the back corners that dictate the outcome of most games.