

CHANGES

Like everything over time, the sport that we all love has changed over the past 15 years in various ways. The greatest change has been the scoring system which has changed the game in many ways, certainly making it a different spectacle to what it once was. Below I will look at different aspects of the sport and how they may have changed over the past decade or so.

Technology

Despite what you may first think, technological advances in equipment has not really changed much over the past 15 years. Rackets are using slightly better quality graphite. Their construction is marginally better. Frame cross sections and weight distribution remains only slightly better. The biggest change in rackets has probably been the introduction of isometric or square shaped heads. This gives rackets a slightly larger surface area to hit the shuttle with, producing a larger sweet spot. However the number of main and cross strings used pretty much remains the same meaning that rackets need to be strung tighter than years ago due to the fact that will string up a bit looser than smaller head rackets. String also has not changed that much if at all since the early nineties. The biggest revolution here occurred in the mid eighties when companies started making multifilament string which is very high tech, providing greater power and durability than previous styles of string like mono filament synthetic and natural gut. As rackets became lighter and more powerful due to the switch to graphite materials, string suitably followed enabling us to hit the shuttle with much greater force. However the increasing demands over the past 10 years for much higher string tensions has probably produced much bigger development in stringing machines which can cater for the demands of high tension stringing. In the nineties top players would have their rackets strung between 18-25 pounds. Today's professionals demand tensions of 26-32lbs!

Shuttles have not changed much either, if anything the quality has dropped a little and the price has continued to rise. Bouts of bird flu through Asia at times has decimated many of the feather producing areas making the supply of quality feathers limited at times. Increased freight and production costs due to the rise in petrol prices has also added to the increase of prices. In fact the lack of available quality goose feathers has seen many manufacturers using inferior duck feathers instead. In reality most of the shuttles you probably use are actually duck feather now (despite what it says on the tube!). I can guarantee you that you won't find real goose feather shuttles that retail for less than \$25 now.

Rally Point Scoring

The biggest change to the game has been the shift to the Rally Point scoring system. After trial periods of different formats including best of 5 to 7 points which was used for the 2002 Thomas and Uber Cup, the World Badminton Federation decided to go with the current Rally Point system. This has definitely changed the game in many ways.

From a viewing perspective, there are far more 'vital' points creating more exciting viewing. The game does not remain stuck on the same score for long periods of time. There are now more definite finishing times for matches. At international level there were women's doubles matches going for 2 hours which caused problems for telecasting and for the recovery of athletes to perform the next day. Players of all disciplines needed to have an incredibly large aerobic base to last the time it almost takes to run a marathon! Can you imagine running, lunging and jumping for two hours?

Coaches are now allowed to coach from behind the court and are allowed to come onto the court at regular intervals giving a whole new tactical approach to matches. This was brought in partly due to the fact that many of the Asian countries were coaching in different languages from the side of the

court and it was becoming impossible to police by the referees. Consequently it has changed the game especially at junior level. Coaches can now help junior players understand better what they are doing wrong or right during a match instead of just trying to communicate with them about a rally that happened 30 minutes before hand.

The speed of the game has gone to a whole new level. With players knowing that they will not have to play for much longer than one hour at the absolute maximum they do not require the same endurance as before. In fact with most singles matches not lasting more than 30 mins, singles players are now trying to play far more aggressively, hitting the shuttle much harder, moving as quickly as possible and attacking their opponent's body far more often. They have moved their base position further forward in court looking for the opportunity to attack the net as soon as they can. Women's singles is going the same way as men's singles. It is becoming far more aggressive and speed orientated. We are now seeing female players who have jump smashes and incredible speed and agility around the court, enabling them to play attacking short serves regularly.

Men's doubles has seen a great emphasis on the quality of the first 4 shots played in a rally. This is one of the biggest differences between the very best players and the rest – they serve, return and play the third shot extremely well creating the attack. Gone are the days when we see really defensive pairs in doubles as attackers do not need the stamina required from players years ago. The quality of the mid court game is also vitally important to try and maintain or get the attack.

Women's doubles too has become far more attacking than before with players at times virtually playing half court singles, with each girl covering her own front and back court. Players need to be able to rotate continuously and it is not unusual to see good pairs attacking to the point where both girls end up in the front court side by side finishing off a rally.

Mixed doubles has seen the role of the man change probably more than the lady. At the highest level the woman has always been able to control the back court and rotate forward when required but today's man needs to have the agility of a singles player constantly pushing forward and controlling part of the net as well as most of the back court.

You know the game has really changed when we are now seeing players from India who are very attacking and having their rackets strung at 30lbs! Traditionally India produced player after player who were 'retrievers' or 'runners'. They would wear down their opponents through their solid defence and superior fitness, slowly wearing them down after a long drawn out match with their loosely strung rackets. However in today's style of game even the Indians have completely changed their ways realising that their game style was not going to be successful with the changes that have happened in our game.

Some may argue that the style, control and deception has left the game for a much more aggressive approach but there is no denying that the speed of the game is at all time exciting level.

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