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# EQUALITY AND TENNIS

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*Men, it is sometimes alleged, deserve more prize money than women for winning tennis Grand Slams such as Wimbledon because they are required to play more tennis than women. Such an argument has two flaws. First, it is empirically unsound: the nature of tennis means women can and often do play more tennis than men; and second, the argument rests on a category mistake by confusing prize money with financial remuneration. Moreover, the focus on prize money neglects more fundamental issues of sexual inequality, in particular, why women do not face the same challenges as men at the Grand Slams.*



With the onset of summer comes the out-door tennis season, but along with it arises a fundamental ethical and political debate about sexual equality. Should men and women receive equal prize money when they win the same tennis competitions? The Wimbledon Championships, for example, have only awarded equal prize money to the winners of the men's and women's singles titles for the past eight years. All four of the so-called 'Grand Slam' competitions held in Sydney, Paris, London and New York now offer equal prize money, but other competitions, such as the Rome Masters, do not.[1]

While the awarding of unequal prize money for most tennis competitions is difficult to defend against the charge of sexism, the Grand Slam competitions are thought by some to be different. In the case of the Grand Slams, a common argument against awarding equal prize money does not obviously derive from a fundamental objection to

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sexual equality, understood as a normative claim about how we should treat the sexes. Rather, the argument maintains that a proper application of the principle of equality requires that men receive more prize money than women. Sexual equality does not entail that men and women should be treated the same in all and every situation; circumstances will arise where it is appropriate to treat men and women differently. All the principle of equality demands is that in like circumstances, men and woman should be treated the same.

The Grand Slam championships, however, do not involve the same playing conditions for men and women. Most tennis competitions require that men and women play the best-of-three sets matches, but for the Grand Slams, men are required to play the best-of-five sets matches while women continue to play the best-of-three sets matches. As such, the argument for unequal prize money maintains that because men play more tennis than women, they deserve a greater financial prize. The argument, however, suffers from two difficulties. First, it is empirically flawed; and second, and more importantly, it makes a category mistake by viewing prize money as synonymous with remuneration.

The different number of sets that men and women must win in order to win their matches might obviously appear to indicate that men play more tennis than woman. The nature of the game of tennis, however, means the number of sets that must be won is not always a good indicator of how much tennis is actually played in any given match. A number of features of the sport influence how much tennis is played. A match is won when a player wins the required number of sets, with a set being won by the first player to win six games and have a two game advantage over their opponent. If the players are tied at five games all, the set is won by the player who wins the subsequent two games. If the set is drawn at six games each a tie-break is played. The tie-break is won by the first player to score seven points with a two point advantage. If both players have six points, they continue playing until one player has a two

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point advantage over their opponent. A game is won by the first player to win four points (called 15, 30, 40 and game, respectively) with a two point advantage over their opponent. If the players are tied at three points (otherwise known as 'deuce'), they play an extra point ('advantage'), and the player who wins the next two points at 'deuce' wins the game. If both players are tied at 'advantage', the scoring is re-set to 'deuce', and they continue as before, with the player who gains a two point lead over their opponent winning the game. As a consequence, there is no limit to the number of points that must be played in order to win a game. Along with the number of points that are played, another variable is the number of shots it takes to win a point. A point may be won quickly, with only one player striking the ball, such as with an 'ace' where a player serves and their opponent is unable to hit the ball. Should the opponent be able to return the ball, the players may proceed to trade any number of shots until the point is won.

As this brief elucidation of the basics of tennis illustrates, the number of sets that it takes to win a match does not accurately indicate how much actual tennis is played. A set may involve as little as six games, or it may involve 12 games and a tie-break, where the tie-break can involve an unlimited number of points. A game will involve a minimum of four points but with no limit thereafter, and more importantly, a single point can involve as little as one shot or many shots. It is possible, therefore, for a men's match to require that all five sets be played, but for it to involve less tennis than a women's match where only two sets are played. For example, the men's singles final of the Australian Open in 2012 lasted five hours and 53 minutes, and was won by Novak Djokovic in five sets.[2] In 1984, in a tournament held in Virginia, Vicki Nelson beat Jean Hepner in two sets in a match that lasted six hours and 31 minutes, and which included a 29 minute rally consisting of 643 shots.[3] What is more, the winner of a Grand Slam tournament must win seven consecutive matches, adding a



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further variable to the amount of tennis that is played. Over the course of a tournament, a player could win matches relatively easily, with only the bare minimum of points and shots played, or they could play more difficult matches involving long rallies and many deuce points, or they could experience a combination these two possibilities. As a result of these features of tennis and Grand Slam competitions, the number of sets that a player must win in order to win a match provides little indication of how much actual tennis, that is how many shots, points, games and sets, they will have played on their way to winning a Grand Slam event.

It should be emphasised that I assume that losing points, games and sets count towards the amount of tennis that is played. With its emphasis on the number of sets that a player must win, it is not obvious that the argument in favour of unequal prize money does include them. Even excluding lost points, games and sets, the number of sets a player wins will not reflect the number of points a player wins or how many shots they make, and therefore, the amount of tennis that is played. Nevertheless, it would seem disingenuous to claim that when a player loses a game, for instance, they have not played any tennis; and if they have played tennis, it is unclear why lost points, games and sets should not count towards the total amount of tennis that they played.

Once it is recognised that the number of sets that must be won does not indicate how much tennis is played, the argument in favour of unequal prize money becomes difficult to sustain. The argument posits a relationship between the amount of tennis that is played and the prize money winners receive. But it cannot propose a direct relationship and maintain the view that men should be awarded more prize money than women. A direct relationship would entail that the prize money varies, not between men and women, but between individual players irrespective of their sex. For instance, if a man were to win a Grand Slam without losing a single point (unlikely, but possible), he should receive

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less prize money than a man who wins the same tournament but loses two sets in every round of the competition, because he has played less tennis. Moreover, if a woman wins a Grand Slam playing more tennis than a man who wins the same competition, she should receive more prize money. The argument for unequal prize money cannot rest on a direct relationship between the amount of tennis that is played and the financial reward for winning a Grand Slam event and maintain that men should receive more prize money than women.

What is more, the argument cannot point to an average amount of tennis that men and women play in order to justify the disparity in prize money. For instance, it might be argued that because men play the best-of-five sets, they are more likely to play more tennis than women when winning a tournament. As a consequence, men will on average play more tennis than women, and it is on this basis that they are awarded more prize money than women. While it may be the case that men do, on average, play more tennis than women, this would not justify awarding men greater prize money, at least according to the principle of equality. Although on average, men may play more tennis than women, an individual woman could play as much or more tennis than the men's average in a given competition. She would nonetheless, not be entitled to the same prize money as men because she belongs to a different group, one that plays, on average, less tennis than men do.

An initial objection to basing the argument for unequal prize money on averages is the unfairness that a person's reward for their endeavours should depend upon the achievements of others. This implies that a fair solution involves either a direct relationship between the amount of tennis played and the financial reward, or that players receive equal prize money irrespective of how much tennis they have played. A more fundamental objection concerns what determines membership of the groups upon which the averages are based. The nature of tennis means, as the



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assessment of a direct relationship emphasises, the amount of tennis that a player plays in order to win a competition will vary between individual players, irrespective of their sex. There must be some criterion or set of criteria for separating players into two groups based on the amount of tennis they play. The argument in favour of unequal prize money uses the fact that some players must win more sets to win a match than others to provide such a criterion. But what determines how many sets a player must win is their sex. A woman, therefore, who plays as much or more tennis as the men's average, cannot gain membership to the group that receives more prize money because she is not a man. The argument in favour of unequal prize money, when based on the average amounts of tennis that men and women play, rests on an inherent sexual bias of Grand Slams, namely, the anomaly that men must win more sets than women.

An allegedly non-sexist argument against equal prize money identifies the financial reward for winning a Grand Slam as relating in some way to the amount of tennis that is played. In so doing, it fails to recognise that women can play as much, and even more, tennis than men when winning a tournament. More fundamentally, however, the argument makes a category mistake: the financial reward is a prize and not a form of payment. While it is typical of financial remuneration that it relates in some way to the amount of work that is done, no such relationship exists for a prize. A prize can provide an incentive for participating in a competition, but it is also a reflection of the value that is placed on participating in and succeeding at some endeavour. It is a reward for the effort, skill, talent and success that competitors demonstrate in winning a competition. By giving less prize money to women, competition organisers and the sport's authorities imply that women's tennis is a less valuable sporting endeavour than men's tennis.

One reason for viewing women's tennis as less valuable than men's tennis, albeit only in the case of Grand Slams, is that women must win fewer sets than men. As a result,

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women's tennis is, in some substantive way, different to men's tennis. Although they play the same sport as men, women play according to different rules, which a justification of unequal prize money might propose, devalues their endeavours in comparison to men. The greater number of sets men must win, it might be argued, poses different challenges to those needed to win a best-of-three sets match, such as the need to be physically fitter, and to win more sets requires a different approach and different tactics to those adopted for a best-of three sets match. Yet, if it involves as much tennis, which the nature of tennis makes possible, a best-of-three sets match will be no less physically demanding than a best-of-five sets match. In addition, while a best-of-five sets match may require a different approach and different tactics to those needed for a best-of-three sets match, it does not follow that because they are different, they are more valuable.

Another, and related reason why women's tennis might be less valuable than men's tennis is the view, expressed by the French tennis player Gilles Simon at the 2012 Wimbledon Championships, that women's tennis is less exciting than men's tennis.[4] If the excitement of a sport reflects those features that contribute to its value, then the claim that women's tennis is less exciting than men's tennis implies that it is also less valuable. What might contribute to making men's tennis more exciting, at least for Grand Slam competitions, is the different challenge that playing a greater number of sets poses. A match will need to meet certain objective criteria in order to be deemed exciting, for instance, that it must involve players of similar skill levels and who are both making an effort to win. But how those skills are used, what effort is made, the talent that is on display, the tactics players use, and the psychological strengths of the players will all influence how exciting individual spectators find any given match. Thus, whether or not a tennis match is exciting will depend greatly on subjective preferences, and what one spectator finds exiting, another may not. This will also be the case whether a



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match is the best-of-five sets or the best-of-three sets. It does not follow that because a player must win more sets the match will be more exciting; the fact that a player can afford to lose only one set might, for some spectators, make a best-of-three sets match more thrilling than a best-of-five sets match. Some matches will be considered by most spectators to be more exciting than others, but there is no reason to believe that this will depend upon the sex of the players. Rather, what makes a match or a tournament exciting and valuable, will depend on the quality of the tennis on display and the competitive spirit of the players, whatever their sex and however many sets they must win.

The argument in favour of unequal prize money at tennis Grand Slams is often portrayed as one concerning the proper application of the principle of equality. Men, it is claimed, deserve a greater financial prize because they must play more tennis than women in order to win their matches, and ultimately, tournaments. The nature of tennis means that while this might, for the most part, be the case, it remains possible that women can play as much, if not more, tennis than men. The argument is therefore empirically flawed. Perhaps more importantly, however, the argument against equal prize money, by insisting upon a relationship between the financial reward for winning a Grand Slam and the amount of tennis played, makes a conceptual error. Prize money is not remuneration for the work done in winning a tournament but a reward for the sporting endeavours of the winners that reflects the value placed on the achievements of sportsmen and sportswomen.

As important as equal prize money is, focusing on it risks obscuring other, more fundamental issues of sexism in the sport. Although the argument in favour of unequal prize money claims to promote the proper application of the principle of equality, the argument in fact rests on fundamental issue of inequality between men and women in tennis. Men, the argument maintains, deserve more prize

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money than women because they play more tennis than women, but this raises the question of why it is that men are required to win more sets than women. What distinguishes Grand Slam competitions from other tennis tournaments for men is the fact that they must play the best-of-five sets. No such distinguishing feature exists for women and no reasons are provided to explain why this should be so. There are no physical reasons, for instance, why women cannot play the best-of-five sets, as the evidence, if it were needed, from tennis and other sports demonstrates.

The requirement that men must win more sets than women also both promotes and reinforces the view that men's tennis is more valuable than women's tennis. For instance, the final of the men's singles competition always concludes Grand Slam singles championships. In so doing, it provides the denouement for the tournaments, the end to which the championships progress. While one of either the men's or women's finals must conclude the singles competitions (unless they are to be played simultaneously), it does not follow that it must always be the men's final. Were men and women's tennis to be of equal standing, event organisers could alternate which of the men's and women's finals closed the tournaments. What might justify the prominence of the men's game is the different challenge that they face in Grand Slam tournaments, but it is a challenge that is denied to women.

Rather than being contrary to the proper application of the principle of equality, awarding the same prize money to men and women at Grand Slam championships is an important step towards sexual equality in tennis. Nonetheless, fundamental issues of sexual inequality remain, and to some extent, the focus on prize money is a mistake. If sexual equality is to be achieved at the Grand Slam competitions, women must face the same sporting challenges as men by having to win the same number of sets as them. Yet, even such an achievement might not be enough to establish more widespread sexual equality in



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tennis, with other tennis competitions demonstrating a prejudice in favour of men and without the putative justification of the Grand Slams. More fundamentally, men's sport in general receives greater prominence and accolades than women's, and until attitudes in society change, sexual inequality in sport will continue.

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## Notes

[1] http://www.internazionalibnlditalia.com/About/Fact-Sheet-and-Prizes.aspx [accessed 20 May 2013].

[2] Kevin Mitchell 'Novack Djockovic beats Rafael Nadal to win men's title', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2012.

[3] David Seminara 'The day they belabored the point', *New York Times*, 23 September 2009.

[4] Jamie Jackson 'Sam Stosur hits back in pay row with Gilles Simon', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2012.

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