

Great moments in governance: Australian Open tennis meltdown 2019

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- An event at the 2019 Australia Open tennis provides a vivid metaphor for the complexities of decision making.
 - Despite overt transparency and clear rules supported by sophisticated technological measurement, there can still be disagreement about what decision should be made.
 - The event also highlighted the need for organisations to rethink risk appetite in regard to governing in an era of social media.
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Governance is all about decision-making and there may be no better metaphor for operational governance in action than a tennis umpire.

Umpires and line judges make decisions in real time about the rules of tennis, and actively work to mitigate the risk of these decisions impacting on play. Umpires also provide assurance to players, spectators, sponsors, and the public that the game will be played within the rules.

Anyone watching the 2019 Australian Open tennis would have noticed some great split second decision making by umpires and line judges in high pressure situations involving balls travelling at hundreds of kilometres per hour.

We know that many of these decisions were correct because we can now see immediate video replays using 'electronic line calling technology'. In fact this technology is considered to be so good by some, that an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in March 2018 suggested that 'tennis tantrums could soon go by the wayside' if line calling technology was adopted by tennis for all professional games.

Like any professional sport there is a lot riding on the quality of the umpiring, so there is little wonder that the governing bodies of tennis would want to consider using technology to improve the performance of umpires and line judges to benefit game as a whole.

However, any person who has sat on a board, led a program, or led the development and implementation of a project knows that there will be numerous short, medium and long-term risks that also need to be considered before making a decision.

While technology can be very sophisticated is it reliable enough to replace human beings?

What if the technology breaks down? Is it feasible to roll out the technology to all professional tournaments and to all courts? Without line judges, how will umpires start their careers and develop their skills, and how will this impact on the quality of umpiring in the future?

In the same *Sydney Morning Herald* article, former tennis great John McEnroe is quoted as saying 'if the technology is there, all you really need is an umpire to call the score', however a fourth round match at the 2019 Australian Open Tennis dramatically showed that his comment could be somewhat naive.

Spanish player Pablo Carreno Busta had a notable meltdown at the end of his match against Kei Nishikori from Japan. In the fifth set tiebreaker, after five hours of play and needing only two more points to win the match, a ball hit by the Spaniard was called out. The Spaniard believed his shot was in, and appealed the line judge's decision. The umpire called for a video replay.

This is where things got 'murky'.

This slow motion replay gradually (and dramatically) zoomed in to show that the Spaniard's ball was actually in. In line with the rules of tennis, the Spaniard believed the point was going to be replayed, however the umpire controversially awarded the point to his Japanese opponent. The umpire believed that the Japanese opponent hit a winning shot off the ball at the same time it was called out, and that the Spaniard was not in a position to retrieve the winning shot.

The Spaniard did not agree with the umpire's decision and had a complete meltdown. After battling for five hours in the heat, he was not able to pull himself together and he lost the match. He also lost at least \$200,000 (the difference between a fourth round and quarter final loss) along with a number of valuable tour points that are used to determine a player's ranking.



The umpire and the Spaniard may both have been right.

Television commentators immediately had differing views about the action that should be taken by the umpire. Commentators and ex-players continued to disagree for many days after the incident.

The level of public commentary and analysis following this event, fuelled by the dramatic footage of the player's meltdown, continued for many days despite clear rules being in place around the use of video replays, along with clear rules about action umpires should take to correct line calls.

Oddly however, it appears as though the umpire and the Spaniard may both have been right.



The 2019 ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) Rulebook clearly states that (in regard to video replays) a player is able to challenge a line call if they have sufficient challenges remaining and if they do this immediately, which the Spaniard did.

The rulebook also clearly states that whenever there is a corrected call the chair umpire 'in his sole judgment' must determine if either player was hindered, and if the player was hindered the point must be replayed. The drama occurred because the ATP rules required the umpire to allow the Spaniard to challenge the call, even though the umpire had already formed the view that the Spaniard was not hindered, that is the umpire believed that the Spaniard was not able to return the winning shot hit by his opponent, regardless of whether his shot was in or out.

The challenge was effectively futile, and this inconsistency added to the tension that sparked one of the tournaments most memorable meltdowns.

While the Spaniard was considered to be a villain by the spectators at the match, his distress could also be justified. He argued that he should not have been allowed to challenge the call because he was not able to win the point if he did. While the drama created 'good theatre', the Association of Tennis Professionals will undoubtedly review the rules relating to the use of video replays to determine if a rule change could stop this type of incident from happening again.

From a governance perspective the incident is also particularly interesting as it illustrates the significant complexity involved in making decisions. It shows that despite overt transparency in relation to the facts of an incident, and clear rules supported by sophisticated technological measurement, experts (and armchair pundits) can still disagree about what decision should be made.

Examples such as this may also spur some organisations to consider establishing a clear appetite for reputational risk that reflects the complexities of decision making, and the realities of governing in an era of social media.

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