

Towards an understanding of big points in tennis: perspectives of coaches, professional players and junior players

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Abstract:

Introduction: Tennis is a game with different mental challenges during a competitive match. With this, the importance of some points over others is well-accepted; so-called ‘big points’ may have a decisive character on the outcome of a tennis match. However, even if the term itself is used regularly by players, coaches and commentators, a definition of a ‘big point’ is still required. **Objective:** The present study aimed to elucidate the wider understanding, ideally an approach for a definition, of big points in tennis. **Methods:** For this purpose, a number of tennis experts (licensed coaches, professional players, junior player and “others”; n= 174) participated in an online survey, classifying pre-categorized potential big points in tennis (i.e., the match situation and score from a serving- or returning perspective). For this, the participants of the survey answered standardized closed questions, one multiple choice-question and one opened question. **Results:** Findings reveal a substantial agreement about the existence of big points (97.30%) and a general consensus about the classification of points as big points between professional players and junior players. However, other than a clear definition of a big point, in particular coaches and players show different understandings. Thus, an additional summary of self-reported understandings on the term ‘big point’ itself supports a more general defining approach; however, the subjective understanding on the importance of a point remains to be decisive for its classification as big point. **Conclusions:** Big points exist in professional tennis. The performance of these decisive moments is one key factor for success in professional tennis and regular mental training is recommended to keep or even raise the level of performance in these moments.

Key Words: mental pressure, mental training, survey, decisive moments, game-changer

Introduction

Tennis is a complex sport, which does not only depend on talent and physical aspects, as well as technical and tactical skills, but also on psychological challenges (Samulski, 2006). Tennis is referred to as a mental game (Kovalchik & Ingram 2016; Weinberg, 2013) and when two players with identical physical abilities play against each other, the outcome of the match is often determined by psychological skills (Richardson, Adler, & Hanks, 1988). Beside an unpredictable match duration and dealing with an “error sport”, a tennis player has to perform alone in almost all singles competitions without any help from a coach. In this context, Hill and Shaw describe that players’ psychology in individual sports like tennis, has a greater effect on the performance than in team sports (Hill & Shaw, 2013). Knight and O’Donoghue (2012) indicate that tennis is a sport causing mental challenges and stress in different match situations. One example is the challenge to close a match when leading clearly. The opponent has nothing to lose and plays without pressure and the win favourite has to deal with this situation (Meiß, 2016). Additionally, the specific scoring system in tennis allows a player to win a match at any given time (Meffert et al., 2018; Meiß, 2016) or even win a match with fewer points won (Lisi et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2013).

For example: in the 2019 Wimbledon final Novak Djokovic beat Roger Federer 7-6[5] 1-6 7-6[4] 4-6 13-12 [3] although Federer not only had better serve and return statistics and a better break point conversion, he also produced 40 more winners and won 14 points more than his opponent in the match (www.tennisabstract.com). However, it was Djokovic who hold the trophy at the end. Not only the match facts of this Wimbledon final show that some points are more important than others.

These so-called big points can decide about win or loss or lead the match in one’s direction. Kovalchik’s approach reveals that not all points are equal of importance by measuring clutch performance in professional tennis, a method that highlights players’ performance in the most critical situations and moments of pressure (Kovalchik & Reid, 2018). Focusing on break points as an indicator of pressure, Knight and O’Donoghue (2012) found that the probability of the receiving player winning a break point is higher than at less mental challenging points. Meffert et al. (2018) confirmed these results by showing that serving players win fewer points with their 1st serve at break points compared to regular points. The understanding of break points as one possible big point situation is reasonable as the importance of breaks as an indicator of winning matches in Grand Slam tournaments matches has previously been reported (Ma et al., 2013). Pollard (2004) examined player’s performances at the score of 30-30 and 15-30 by using the definition of importance established by Morris, Ladany and Machol (1977) who assign these scores a greater importance than break points. Moreover, it was shown that in two out of three settings, the player who wins the point at 30-30 score has a higher probability of winning the game (Roure, 2014). These results are in conflict with Knight and O’Donoghue (2012) who report that the probability of breaking the serve is still higher during break points compared to the score 30-30 or 15-30, but partially in line with the results that 30-30, 30-40 and deuce are the most critical scores (O’Donoghue, 2001). According to González-Díaz et al. (2012), the difference in the probability of winning a match, as the result of the outcome of the last point played, is the importance of a point. Kovalchik and Ingram (2016) reveal tiebreak points, break point opportunities and one point away from the break point opportunity scores (so-called “set up points” :0-30, 15-30, 30-30 and deuce) as predictors for importance, because they have a greater influence on the game or set outcomes than other points. Summarising, Kovalchik (2018) describes big points as points of great importance. Every tiebreak point e.g. can be defined as a big point and it has been shown that players are able to raise their level at this stage of a match (Meffert et al., 2019). With regard to the performance of differently ranked players, it has further been suggested that seeded players perform better in big point situations than unseeded (Magnus & Klaassen, 2008). Finally, it remains to be stated that there are so called big points in tennis and that points are generally not independent (Klaassen & Magnus, 2001).

Despite the fact that the term big point is familiar for commentators and fans, and previous research results, some experts still question the existence of big points. In fact, they accentuate the meaning of treating every point the same and that players who win more points will usually win the match (Schönborn, 2012). However, the importance of mental challenges of a tennis match is undisputed in the tennis community itself.

For example: when entering Melbourne Park, the host of the first Grand Slam tournament of every year – the Australian Open – you may see a big poster with the following words of Novak Djokovic (8-time champion at this event): *“Tennis is a mental game. Everyone is fit, everyone hits great forehands and backhands”*. Two former world’s no.1 players (i.e., Jimmy Connors and Marat Safin) confirm this statement by emphasising that tennis is up to 95% a mind game (Samulski, 2006). However, Roure (2014) accentuates that even with a consensus of the existence of big points, determining exactly what those points are remains to be difficult.

Therefore, the aim of this study is an approach to classify the term big point by using data from a survey that was filled out by former and present professional tennis players, junior players and licensed coaches. It is hypothesized that (1) there is substantial agreement about the existence of big points; however, (2) that this substantial agreement may not result in a clear definition. Additionally, it is hypothesized that (3) subjectively reported understandings of big points result from different functions when competing in the game of tennis, e.g., acting as coach or player.

Material & methods

Procedures and participants

Long-term established networks – authors of this publication played (ITF/ATP tour), coach (ITF/ATP/WTA tour as well as national league) and educate in tennis (Federal Tennis Federation and academies) at professional levels – served for a distribution of the online survey (www.unipark.com) to eventually recruit licensed coaches, professional players and junior players who served as multipliers themselves. The online survey was approved by the German Sport University Ethics Committee.

Over a period of five months (February 2020 - June 2020) a total number of 205 volunteers provided opt-in online-consent prior to participating in the anonymous survey; 147 volunteers completed the survey (completion rate of 71.70%) and, thus, served as the participants groups for further analyses. Participants groups consisted of 44 professional players (25 males, 19 females), 23 junior players (16 males, 7 females) and 80 coaches (72 males with 44.00% highest license, 31.00% advanced license, 4.00% basic license, 13.00% other license and 8.00% no licence; 8 females with 12,50% highest license, 50.00% advanced license, 12,50% basic license and 25.00% other license). Additionally, 23 participants, who are distributed to the group “others” (e.g., manager, commentators...) completed the survey.

Data collection and analyses

Initially, each participant stated their sex, age (10-17 years, 18-25 years, 26-30 years, 31-40 years), their present function (professional tennis player, junior player, coach or other), their tennis experience in years (less than 5, 5-10, 11-15, 16-20, more than 20), their best world and/or national ranking and their coaching license if applicable.

The survey took four main parts (categories) into account, following a fixed scheme with a total of 16 standardized closed questions (items), one multiple-choice question and one concluding open remark section: part 1) referred to a ‘yes’ or ‘no’-existence of big points in tennis as well as its *definition* (e.g., a clear understanding); part 2) addressed a general *match situation* that is not necessarily defined by a specific *score* (e.g. a break point, set point, match point or tiebreak points) relates to the specific score itself (i.e., 0-30, 15-30, 30-30, 40-40 and first point at game scores 4-5 and 5-6), both from the *-serving* and *returning perspective*; part 3) asked to tick multiple-choice criteria (i.e., *score*, *physical fatigue*, *tactical insights*, *technical insights*, or *rally outcome* such as spectacular tweener) if one or more were considered applicable for a big point; and part 4) provided the opportunity to self-report a definition of a big point in one’s own words. Herein, predefined classifications were applied (including multiway assigning) for the analyses of each reported answer; classifications were: *importance* (refers to keywords “point of importance”, “deciding moments”, “momentum”, “key moments”, “lead the match in one direction”, and “turnaround”), *mental aspects* (refers to keywords “mental”, “feel the pressure”, “highest concentration” and “psychological momentum”), no meaning (contains answers that set no difference between points in a tennis match or answers that can’t display a clear definition for big points) and other (contains answers that did not meet any of the other predefined categories).

Statistical procedures

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 27 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive data calculated for every item of the survey included relative frequencies (%). The X^2 is used to highlight the differences between each group (licensed coaches, players) and their individual voting behavior. Cramér’s *V* was used as a post-hoc test to categorize the magnitude of effect sizes. Magnitude estimates ranging between $0.10 \leq V \leq 0.30$ indicated a small effect size, $0.31 \leq V \leq 0.50$ a medium effect size, and $V > 0.50$ a large effect size (Cramér, 1999). The level of significance is set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

For all participants, our findings reveal a great accordance regarding the *existence* of big points in tennis. Only 2.63% claim that there are no big points in tennis, whereas 97.37% confirm big point existence. Answers about a clear *definition* for big points reveal a well-adjusted spreading; 45.55% negate a clear definition, whereas 54.45% confirm a clear understanding of big points.

Between licensed coaches and professional players, analyses for *match situation* reveal a significant difference overall (i.e., combined index $p < 0.001$) as well as for tiebreak points ($p < 0.01$). Analyses for *score* reveal a significant difference overall (i.e., combined index $p < 0.001$) as well as for items 'every set up point at even score' ($p < 0.05$), '1st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6' ($p < 0.01$) and '1st point of a return game at 4-5 or 5-6' ($p < 0.01$). Analyses for *serving perspective* show a significant difference overall (i.e., combined index $p < 0.001$) as well as for items 'generally facing more big points' ($p < 0.05$) and '1st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6' ($p < 0.01$). Analyses for *returning perspective* show a significant difference for item '1st point of a return game at 4-5 or 5-6' ($p < 0.01$), but not overall (i.e., combined index $p > 0.05$; table 1).

Between professional players and junior players, analyses for all four categories (i.e., *match situation*, *score*, *serving* and *returning perspective*) show no significant differences, neither overall ($p > 0.05$) nor for any item (all $p > 0.05$; table 2).

Table 1. Licensed coaches vs. players considering big points

Category	Question	Coaches (N=80)		Players (N=67)		X ²	P	V	Es cat.
		Agree	Dis- agree	Agree	Dis- agree				
Situation	every breakpoint	0.33	0.67	0.45	0.55	2.158	0.142	-	-
	every breakpoint at even score	0.70	0.30	0.82	0.18	2.882	0.090	-	-
	every match point	0.64	0.36	0.73	0.27	1.476	0.224	-	-
	1 st point of a service game	0.15	0.85	0.23	0.77	1.433	0.231	-	-
	1 st point of a return game	0.14	0.86	0.18	0.82	0.478	0.489	-	-
	every tiebreak point	0.34	0.66	0.57	0.43	7.797	0.005*	0.230	Small
	more big points over the course of the match	0.70	0.30	0.75	0.25	0.388	0.533	-	-
	correlation between big points and the importance of the match	0.36	0.64	0.45	0.55	1.103	0.294	-	-
	combined Index	0.42	0.58	0.52	0.48	12.196	0.000*	0.102	Small
Score	every set up point	0.36	0.64	0.40	0.60	0.253	0.615	-	-
	every set up point at even score	0.60	0.40	0.79	0.21	5.915	0.015*	0.201	Small
	1 st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.46	0.54	0.69	0.31	7.849	0.005*	0.232	Small
	1 st point of a return game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.43	0.57	0.67	0.33	8.498	0.004*	0.241	Small
	combined Index	0.46	0.53	0.64	0.36	17.791	0.000*	0.174	Small
Serving Perspective	generally facing more big points	0.25	0.75	0.40	0.60	3.924	0.048*	0.163	Small
	1 st point of a service game	0.15	0.85	0.23	0.77	1.433	0.231	-	-
	1 st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.46	0.54	0.69	0.31	7.849	0.005*	0.232	Small
	combined Index	0.28	0.72	0.44	0.56	11.490	0.001*	0.162	Small
Returning Perspective	generally facing more big points	0.40	0.60	0.37	0.63	0.111	0.739	-	-
	1 st point of a return game	0.14	0.86	0.18	0.82	0.478	0.489	-	-
	1 st point of a return game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.43	0.57	0.67	0.33	8.498	0.004*	0.241	Small
	combined Index	0.32	0.68	0.41	0.59	3.481	0.062	-	-

Notes: X² = Chi-square value; P = probability value; V = Cramer's V effect size; ES cat. = effect size category.

* Significance p < 0.05

Table 2. Players vs. junior players considering big points

Category	Question	Professional Players (N=44)		Junior Player (N=23)		X ²	P	V	Es cat.
		Agree	Dis-agree	Agree	Dis-agree				
Situation	every breakpoint	0.39	0.61	0.57	0.43	1.954	0.162	-	-
	every breakpoint at even score	0.80	0.20	0.87	0.13	0.564	0.453	-	-
	every match point	0.71	0.29	0.78	0.22	0.468	0.494	-	-
	1 st point of a service game	0.26	0.74	0.17	0.83	0.572	0.449	-	-
	1 st point of a return game	0.21	0.79	0.13	0.87	0.564	0.453	-	-
	every tiebreak point	0.55	0.45	0.61	0.39	0.246	0.620	-	-
	more big points over the course of the match	0.75	0.25	0.73	0.27	0.009	0.923	-	-
	correlation between big points and the importance of the match	0.43	0.67	0.48	0.52	0.132	0.717	-	-
	combined Index	0.39	0.61	0.57	0.43	1.954	0.162	-	-
Score	every set up point	0.39	0.61	0.44	0.56	0.147	0.701	-	-
	every set up point at even score	0.77	0.23	0.83	0.17	0.308	0.579	-	-
	1 st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.68	0.32	0.70	0.30	0.013	0.908	-	-
	1 st point of a return game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.21	0.79	0.13	0.87	0.564	0.453	-	-
	combined Index	0.62	0.38	0.66	0.34	0.421	0.516	-	-
Serving Perspective	generally facing more big points	0.41	0.59	0.39	0.61	0.020	0.888	-	-
	1 st point of a service game	0.26	0.74	0.17	0.83	0.572	0.449	-	-
	1 st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.68	0.32	0.70	0.30	0.013	0.908	-	-
	combined Index	0.45	0.55	0.42	0.58	0.166	0.684	-	-
Returning Perspective	generally facing more big points	0.30	0.70	0.52	0.48	3.307	0.069	-	-
	1 st point of a return game	0.21	0.79	0.13	0.87	0.564	0.453	-	-
	1 st point of a return game at 4-5 or 5-6	0.66	0.34	0.70	0.30	0.092	0.762	-	-
	combined Index	0.39	0.61	0.45	0.55	0.743	0.389	-	-

Notes: X² = Chi-square value; P = probability value; V = Cramer's V effect size; ES cat. = effect size category.

* Significance p < 0.05

For all participants, analyses of the multiple-choice criteria revealed associations with *score* (95.51%), *rally outcome* (41.28%), conditional aspects (i.e., *physical fatigue* 38.37%) *tactical insights* (26.16%) and *technical insights* (8.14%). Self-reported definitions classified big points with *importance* (76.38%) linked to the *match situation* (30.50%) or *score* (16.67%), and *mental aspects* (14.50%) that were equally distributed to a *serving* (4.80%) or *returning perspective* (4.80%); additional classifications set no difference of big points compared to other points played in a tennis match (i.e., *no meaning* 2.00%) or *other* (4.10%).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to approach a clarification of the term big point with the help of a questionnaire for (junior) professional players and licensed coaches. Main findings were the great accordance about the existence of big points in tennis; however, it remains to be stated that the answers of all participants opened a wide number of topics.

Our hypothesis (1) that a great majority of the participants will confirm the existence of big points is approved by our findings. Almost all participants (97.37%) support this statement. These results are in line with previous research showing that not all points are of equal importance in a tennis match (Kovalchik & Reid, 2018) and that big points exist in tennis (Jekauc & Heger, 2017). With regard to a definition of the term big point, the findings of our survey raised further doubts about the clearness of the term big point itself. The fact, that only 54.44% of all participants confirm a clear understanding of big points reveals an obvious obscurity but is in line with results of a survey at the ITF Worldwide Coaches Conference 2011, showing disagreements of recognized experts for a common statement about the definition of big points (Schönborn, 2012). In professional sport the term is well-accepted and players use it regularly in interviews, like Steve Johnson (World Number 71, 02.11.2020) after his victory at Indian Wells Challenger against his countryman Jack Sock (*“Not too many secrets out there when Jack and I play, so I just had to take care of the big points and work to convert some of the break points, when I saw serving down break point, I thought I played them strong. That was the key component to my tennis all week and I thought I served really well. I'm very happy with my performance”* (<https://www.atptour.com/en/news/johnson-2020-indian-wells-challenger-title>)). However, big points do not only influence the outcome of one match, an entire season can be led into one direction by winning or losing big points (and eventually a match). Thus, female professional tennis player Laura Siegemund (winner of the US Open 2020 in doubles and WTA-ranked 50 in singles as of 2nd November 2020) declares her victory at the Porsche Grand Prix in Stuttgart 2017 with several wins of big points, and so matches, weeks before that tournament. She constitutes this with her raising self-confidence by handling difficult situations (Jekauc et al., 2017). These field reports from professional players are in contrast with Schönborn (2012) who emphasizes that all points are of equal importance and that the player who wins more points will win the match in 99% of all matches. Based on our findings this may be questioned: First of all, our survey with professional players and licensed coaches shows a considerably accordance with the existence of big points. Furthermore, the scoring system in tennis reveals another indication for the existence of big points. In a tennis match you need to win more sets than your opponent to win the match. Accordingly, winning set points have a great influence on the outcome of a match; especially in closer matches the meaning of these big points increases due to the fact that a loss of a close set challenges both physical and mental capacity to level the score. In a best of three match, you need to win two sets to win the match. To win a set you need to win six games (with a margin of at least two games) and to win a game you need to win at least four points (with a margin of at least two points). Thus, every point has its value, however, game points, set points, tiebreak points and match points are reasonably more important than regular points (Meffert et al., 2018). This statement is supported by recent research that address the behavior of professional tennis players in crucial match situations; it has been shown that both winning percentage on the serve and serve speed at break points is influenced by the match situation of a break point (Meffert et al., 2018). Moreover, it is only theoretically possible to lose a match with winning more points if the score is closer than 6-3 6-3; with this result the winner wins 48 points and the loser can also win 48 points if the opponent wins all his or her winning games without dropping a point and still wins two points when losing a game. Recent research reports that in 2017 this scenario was only imaginable for 26.70% of all matches on the ATP Tour (Association of tennis professionals, men's tour) and 38.30% of all matches on the WTA Tour (Women tennis association, women's tour; Jekauc & Heger, 2017). Overall, Jekauc and Heger (2017) indicate that on the ATP Tour 93.40% of all matches (95.70% on the WTA Tour) are won by the player who wins more points. If the match is decided in a third set, this changes to 82.70% for men and 88.20% for women. These findings support the argument that winning more points is not a guarantee for winning a match. Between 2015 and 2019 Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer were the only players on the ATP tour who won just more than 54.00% of all points they played – but they won among others 18 from 22 major titles. These data point out that it is important to win the important points and that these points can decide about the outcome of a match. The statistics of the Under Pressure Ranking© of the ATP indicate that it is more important to win the big points and it comes as no surprise that Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer and Dominic Thiem are leading the Under Pressure Ranking© for the period from November 2019 to November 2020 (i.e., % saving and converting BP, % Tiebreaks and deciding sets won) (atpworldtour.com). Rafael Nadal won e.g., only 55.77% of all his points played in 2019 (4891/8770), but he saved 67.60% of all break points and won 75.00% of all deciding sets.

Analyses of the first part of our survey reveals no statistically relevant differences between junior players and professional players (table 2). This indicates, first of all, that there are big points in junior tennis as well and that practicing these situations and playing competitions to experience these moments should be one main goal in the education of junior tennis players, because playing these big points better than the opponent is one key for success as a professional player. Analyses for the second part of our survey shows a partially different rating between professional players and licensed coaches with regard to the existence of big points in selected situations. Whereas 46.00% of the coaches refer every 1st point of a service game at 4-5 or 5-6 as a big point, 69.00% of the players sense these points as big points. Overall, with respect to the calculated combined indexes it needs to be noted that coaches classify less situations as big points in comparison to players. This seems to be reasonable as players are on court and may perceive (mental) pressure more intensely than coaches, who observe seated outside in the stands. Though, there is an accordance between players and coaches as they do not relate every break point a big point

but at even score during a set both see a great relation between break points and big points (table 1). This finding is in line with previous research that suggests pressure raising to the latter stages of a set if the score is tight (e.g. 4-4,5-5, 5-6,6-5, 6-6; Paserman, 2010). However, our findings confirm our hypothesis (3) and the visible discrepancy between players and coaches leads to a need for discussion. Coaches and players need to communicate more and presumably better in order to overcome this discrepancy and optimize the daily practice.

Analyses of the multiple-choice criteria reveal among other things a clear relation between big points and the answer *score*. This seems reasonable as all participants somehow relate to the sport tennis itself and have probably experienced that e.g., the conversion of a break point can be the key indicator for a win. Furthermore, our findings confirm the statement that special points are more important than others (Kovalchik & Reid, 2018). The findings are not surprising and confirmed by several previous researches. Thus, Knight and O'Donoghue (2012) reveal both the importance of the score in a set and the importance of the score within a service game. Furthermore, it was shown that players were affected by the state of score and performed less effectively in mental challenging moments (Kovalchik & Ingram, 2016; Meffert et al., 2018). However, if players can enhance their physical and mental effort on the important points while relaxing on the unimportant ones, the chance of winning increases (Barnett et al., 2004). The possibility of multiway ticking this question also increases other answers. In this regard, 41.28% of the participants ticked *tactical insight* from the rally as a criterion for big points. An understandable answer, as tactic represent an important issue in tennis (Schönborn, 2012).

The answers from professional players and licensed coaches for the self-written description constitute an approach of a definition of the well-accepted term big point for the first time. The statements of the participants particular accentuate the meaning of "*importance*" for players and coaches (76.38% of all answers). They describe big points as points that can change the direction of a match, important points or points that have a great influence on the outcome of a match. These results are in line with earlier research that engaged in players recognition of important points – so called "turning points" or "momentum" (Richardson, 1988) and with more recent research that describes tennis as a sport with potential dramatic match turnarounds (Spanias & Knottenbelt, 2013). Apart from that, a rising star on the ATP Tour would not probably justify his new level of tennis only with faster strokes or serves but also or instead with performing better in the crucial moments. The 22 years old Frenchman Ugo Humbert (World number 30, 16.11.2020) confirms this with his recent statement after beating Stefanos Tsitsipas and Grand Slam Champion Marin Cilic at the ATP Masters 1000 event in Paris in November 2020 ("I think mentally I'm very strong since one month and I can win matches in three sets. I think I'm better in the key moments [than I used to be]") (<https://www.atptour.com/en/news/raonic-cilic-humbert-paris-2020-thursday>).

The fact that only 16.67% of all answers are exclusively related to *score* shows that a big point's association may change. It can be any break-, set-, or game point; but it is not related to one specific score. Sometimes it is even possible that players recognize a big point only afterwards. Descriptions associating *match situation* (e.g., break point, match point, tiebreak points) were provided more often (30.50%). This seems reasonable as these points are well-accepted as deciding moments in tennis in general, and it was shown that players perform differently in these special situations (Meffert et al., 2018). With respect to tiebreak points, these results are confirmed by recent research that has shown that the importance of points is considerably higher at tiebreaks than at all other points (Jetter & Walker, 2015). Furthermore, Kovalchik and Ingram (2016) describe tiebreak points as predictors that have a greater impact on the set outcomes than any other points. The conversion of big points is a key factor in tennis and can lead to perceived mental pressure (Meffert et al., 2018); accordingly, it is no wonder that 14.50% of all participants connect big points with mental aspects for any reason. The fact that only 2.00% of the participants see no meaning in big points or cannot find an expression for them, shows the generally great accordance of the term and confirms our hypothesis (2); players and coaches agree about the existence of big points, but it seems to be difficult to reach a consensus in the definition. With this, it seems noteworthy to provide an example from the survey describing a big point not being automatically related to the score (i.e., "*Sometimes in the match there comes a time that you feel it is that moment to change the outcome of the match. No matter what the score is. There are points in the match that you feel if you win them the match might go your way*"). The great majority, however, describe specific scores or situations (e.g., "*I think every point has its value, every point is important but the big points for me are the points that are closer from the end of the game like break points, set points, match points*"). Thus, *importance*, *match situation*, *score* and *mental aspects* have been associated to big points in almost all answers of the survey, even though many answers reveal an overlapping of at least two. Finally, it must be stated that many answers show an equality of the categories *score* and *situation* with the classification *importance*. Finally, findings underline the considerable mental aspect in tennis; accordingly, the practice of these mental aspects is recommended (Samulski, 2006; Meffert et al. 2019).

Conclusions

Tennis is a sport with many potential mental challenges. Our survey reveals a great accordance about the existence of big points and a consensus between junior players and professional players; however, a partially discrepancy between professional players and licensed coaches has been found. The present findings allow us to approach a first definition of the term big point as follow:

“A big point describes a crucial situation in a match; this moment is often related to the score (break-, set-, tiebreak or match point) and leading the match in one direction”.

There is no doubt that players should work mentally. The ATP Under Pressure Ranking© shows that the best players perform better in crucial moments. Accordingly, it should be the goal of players to keep (or even raise) their level at important moments. The question remains on how to design training sessions to best practice these special moments. In 2006, Samulski already gave a short overview about common practice methods and refers to the ITF (International Tennis Federation) Tennis Development/Coaching department (ITF publication, 2006). More recent, Roure (2014) encourages coaches to teach how to play big points and Meffert et al. (2018) present several practical applications to keep the service level under pressure. However, especially with the knowledge about partial discrepancies, additional focus on the communication between coaches and players regarding big points needs to be improved to guarantee a high-quality training. With regard to professional tennis, a survey of the existence and frequency of mental training is recommended.

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