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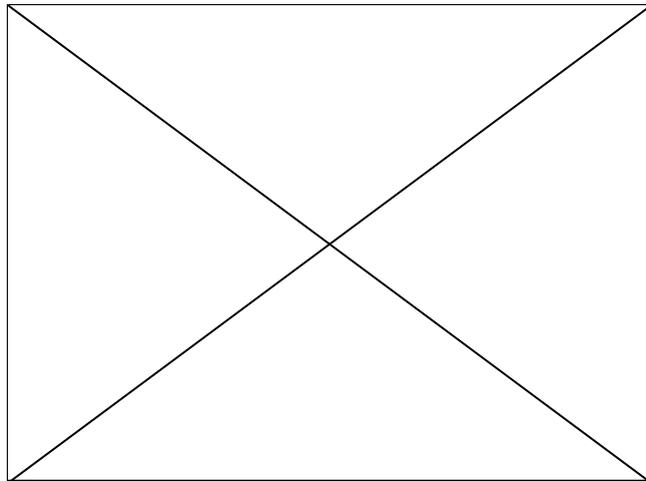
# Federer versus Nadal: Three Overlooked Factors

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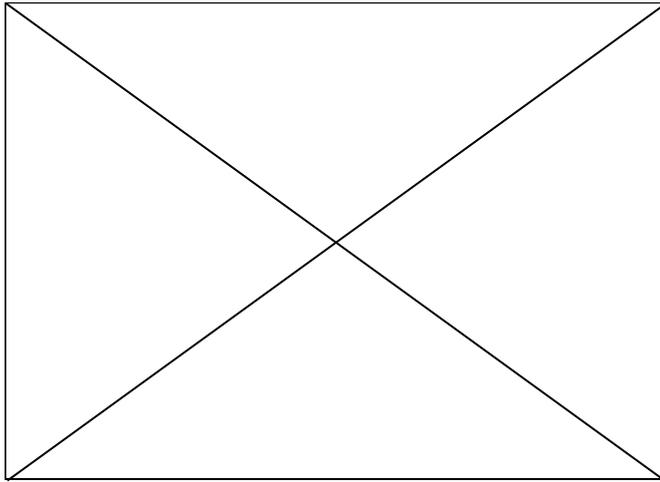
Much has been written about the incredible rivalry between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, and especially the 2008 Wimbledon final. ([Click Here](#) to see John Yandell's statistical and psychological analysis of this year's final.) But in this article we'll look at three other interesting factors that have been overlooked in other analyzes, Factors that shed new light on this historic match.

These three factors are: First, the relationship between the first serve and the ability to hit an immediate forehand. Second, the position on the court from which both players hit most of their winners. Third, the role of Nadal's passing shots and how they influenced Federer's attacking game

To analyze the matches, we used the software program SportsCounts, developed by Bart Theelen. It generates considerably more detailed statistics than the standard tour numbers. These include what shot a player hits after a serve or a return, and where on the court each player is at the time each ball is struck.



**What are the overlooked factors in the legendary 2008 Wimbledon final?**



## The Serve and the Forehand

The statistics showed that the first critical point in the Wimbledon final was which player could establish his forehand after his first serve. What happened when they could a forehand on the first ball and what happened when they hit a backhand instead?

As Federer's serve is generally considered better than Nadal's, we might expect him to be able to start the point with his forehand more frequently. The statistics show that in fact this was the case.

After a first serve Federer started 83% of the points with a forehand. When he was able to hit a forehand on the first ball, he won 59% of the points. 83%! So one of the greatest players in tennis history hits a backhand after his first serve only one or two times out of ten.

### Who won how many points when a forehand followed a first serve?

And it was basically the same for Nadal. Rafael was able to hit a forehand 72% of the time after a first serve. This is probably due in part to his incredible speed and his ability to run around his backhand. When he started with a forehand, Nadal won 62% of the points, actually a slightly higher percentage of points than Roger.

So it was very close on the forehand side, but with a slight edge in total number of points to Roger when both players backed up the first serve with a forehand.

## The Serve and The Backhand

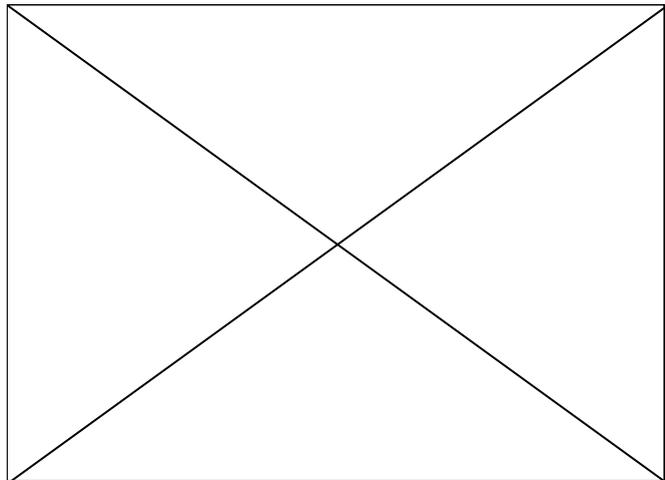
Compare this to what happened when the first serve was followed by a backhand. There is a dramatic change when the players were unable to hit the preferred forehand on the first ball.

When Federer started with a backhand after his first serve, he won only .26% of the points. When Nadal hits a backhand first, however, he won 42% of the points. This is a major key to understanding why Nadal won.

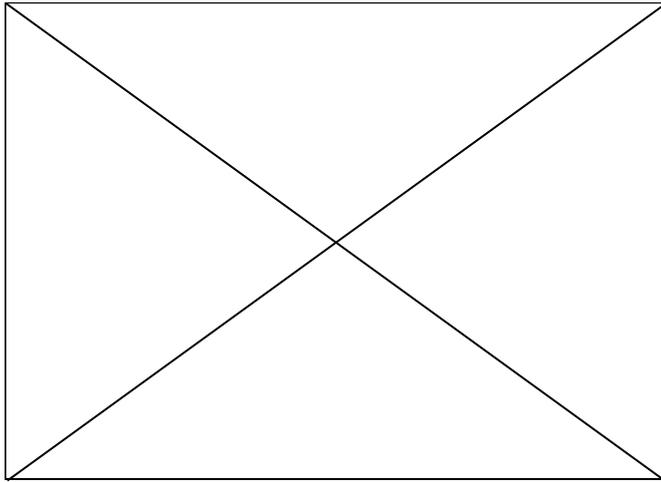
The point difference between the 2 players over 5 sets was only 5 points. In this one pattern—a first serve followed by a backhand--Nadal was 50% more successful than Roger. This goes a long way towards explaining why Federer struggles so much to beat the Spaniard.

The point is not just that in general Rafael exploits Roger's backhand. The point here is that there is a statistical difference depending on what happens on the first ball after the serve.

The lesson to be drawn from this as a player or a coach is this: good serving is obviously important, but it is even more important to immediately set up your forehand after the serve. The top players are obviously seeking to do this as often as possible. So it makes sense to practice this combination specifically. Make sure you and/or your players are aware of this, and what advantage it may give you.



### A dramatic difference when a backhand followed the serve.



### Was it surprising where Nadal hit most of his winners?

winners are forehands hit from further back, more 5 feet behind the baseline. He recorded no backhand winners in the Wimbledon final from deeper than 5 feet behind the baseline.

Compare this to Nadal. Surprisingly Rafael hits 74% of all his winners with his forehand from the same zone as Roger, an even higher percentage of all his winners coming from his forehand. 15% of all his winners came from backhands hit from the same zone.

From further back, more than 5 feet behind the baseline, Nadal used his forehand to hit only 4% of his total winners. Surprisingly again, that's slightly less than Federer on the forehand from the deeper zone.

But there is a significant difference in Nadal's favor on the backhand side. From this zone 5 feet or more behind the baseline, Nadal actually hits 7% of all his winners from his backhand side.

Both players of course hit winners from closer in, but since they continue to the net from further in the court, we consider these as a different category.

So, as we might expect, Nadal hits a few more winners from deeper positions, but the surprise is that the majority of those came from his backhand side. . Most of his winners on both sides are hit from closer in, as with Federer. But these small differences can be the deciding factors in close matches.

## Court Position

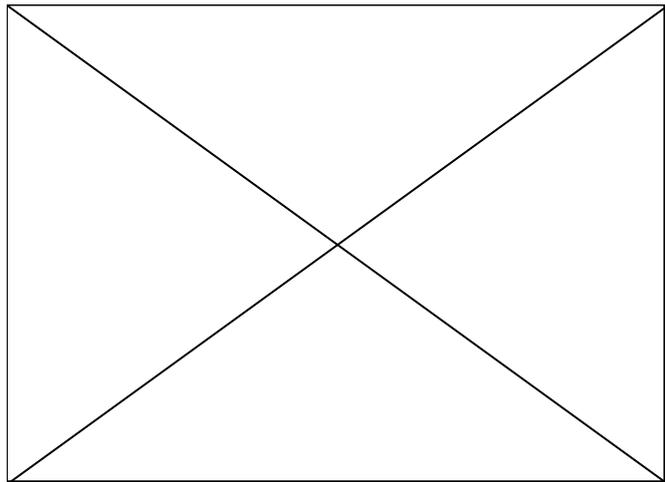
The second critical statistic we were able to chart with our software was where on the court the players hit each of their shots. We tend to think that Nadal plays much further back in the court than Federer.

But the statistics showed that both players hit most of their baseline shots in a zone that stretches from about 3 feet inside the baseline to about 5 behind the baseline.

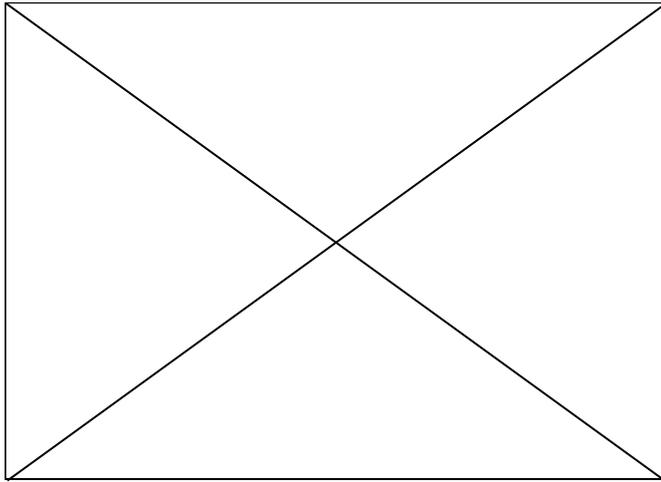
Let's look first at groundstroke winners, excluding the passing shots, which we will address separately a little further on.

Federer hits 67% of all his groundstroke winners with his forehand in this zone—again anywhere from 3 front in front of to 5 feet behind the baseline.

He produced 25% of all his winners with his backhand hit from the same zone. Interestingly, the other 8% of his



### Nadal's ability to score with his deep backhand was a factor.



## Passing Shots

If we look at passing shots we can see another key aspect that helped determine the outcome. Federer attacked Nadal by moving up into the shorter part of the court around 100 times in the course of the match.

Although he won many points with groundstroke winners, he won only 10% of these attacking points by actually a volley or an overhead.

We can see why when we look at the numbers on Nadal's passes. When Federer attacked Nadal won 19% of the total points with winning passes. Only 2% of Federer's attacking points ended with a Nadal passing shot error.

**Given the opportunity, Nadal very rarely missed a pass.**

The bottom line is that when Nadal had any chance of hitting a passing shot, he generally hit it with amazing precision, and rarely produced an unforced error. This explains why so few points ended with volleys or

overheads, especially unusual on grass. Federer was forced to try for winners on his approaches because he could feel that Nadal's passing shots would otherwise beat him consistently at the net.

The passing shots show even more spectacularly Nadal's ability to hit winners from 5 feet behind the baseline and more. The highest number of passing shots for either player was Nadal's crosscourt backhand hit from 5 feet or more behind the baseline, an amazing statistic.

These 3 statistics give some added insight into the one of the greatest matches of all time. In the next article, we'll take a look at what our numbers show about the rivalry in general but looking at all of their Grand Slam final encounters.

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**Bart Theelen** is Managing Director of SportsCounts, a company that specializes in computer assisted tennis analysis. He has worked with the Dutch Davis Cup team, and coaches both junior and professional players. He publishes regularly in *Tennis & Coach*, identifying strengths and weaknesses of several famous players and their game style.

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