


Please cite the Published Version

Patil, Swarali  (2021) French Open postponement serves as latest example of tennis players' struggles during COVID-19. The Conversation.

Publisher: The Conversation Trust

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/633384/>

Usage rights:  Creative Commons: Attribution-No Derivative Works 4.0

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Aryna Sabalenka from Belarus returns the ball to Simona Halep of Romania during their semifinal tennis match of the women's singles WTA Tour Porsche Grand Prix in Stuttgart, Germany in April 2021. (Marijan Murat/Pool via AP)

French Open postponement serves as latest example of tennis players' struggles during COVID-19

Published: May 27, 2021 6.01pm BST

Swarali Patil

PhD Candidate and Graduate Teaching & Research Assistant, School of Kinesiology, Western University

The French Tennis Federation has postponed the French Open by a week due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tennis players reacted to this announcement with surprise.

The pandemic has disrupted the lives of people globally. Professional tennis players are no different, and are facing challenges with their training schedules, ability to travel and compete, earn sufficient money and balance their mental, physical and overall well-being.

Tournament cancellations

The Association of Tennis Players (ATP), Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and International Tennis Federation (ITF) are the three governing bodies of professional tennis. Tennis players compete to win matches, which nets prize money and points, both dependent on the level of the tournament.

Tournaments	Points awarded to singles champion
Grand Slams 	2000
ATP / WTA Finals 	1500
ATP / WTA 1000 	1000 / 900 – 1000
ATP / WTA 500 	500 / 470
ATP / WTA 250 	250 / 280
ATP Challenger / WTA 125K 	50 – 125 / 160
ITF Men / Women 	10 – 20 / 12 – 150

Tennis tournaments held in a calendar year, in descending order of points and prize money available. Data tabulated from ATPtour.com, WTAtennis.com, ITFtennis.com/Swarali Patil

The biggest group of professional tennis players includes players ranked between 100 and 500. They primarily compete at ATP/WTA 250 or ATP Challenger/WTA 125K events or on the ITF circuit.

Overall prize money available on the ITF circuit is significantly lower (men: US\$15,000 to \$25,000 and women: US\$15,000 to \$100,000) than regular tour events. At the most prestigious events — Grand Slams — overall prize money awarded is in excess of US\$50 million.

List of ATP/WTA/ITF tournaments. Data tabulated from ATPtour.com, WTAtennis.com, and ITFtennis.com/Swarali Patil

The pandemic has resulted in the postponement or cancellation of several tournaments, curtailing the revenue streams available to players.

The brunt of pandemic-related cancellations have impacted players ranked outside the top 100. Fewer completed tournaments have contributed to precarious financial conditions for these players, some of whom are struggling to remain in the sport.

Ranking freeze

Points earned from match wins contribute to a player's ranking. Rankings represent players' achievements and current form, and determine qualification and direct entry at tournaments. The higher the rank, the better. At Grand Slams, for example, the top 104 ranked singles players get direct entry.

The ATP and WTA deviated from their 52-week ranking system because of the pandemic and instituted a rankings freeze in March 2020. This meant players could not lose their ranking if they chose not to participate or if a previously completed tournament was cancelled. Both tours are still using an adjusted rankings system.

Adjusted rankings have impacted players ranked in and outside the top 100. It has benefited those who chose to stay home because of COVID-19 and those who needed time off due to injuries. At the same time, it has punished those who chose to follow tournament mandated protocols and compete by essentially keeping them at the same rank.

For players ranked outside the top 100, this has been especially excruciating. Comparing total points earned by the 100th ranked singles players on the ATP and WTA tour for the past five years illustrates how much harder it is to break into the top 100 under the adjusted system.

Figure 3: Total points for the 100th ranked singles players. Data from ATPtour.com and WTAtennis.com/Swarali Patil

The ATP and WTA have announced further adjustments to slowly move towards the traditional 52-week ranking system by 2022. The latest adjustment affords players the opportunity to better, defend or retain (at least 50 per cent) points earned from 2019 events in their 2021 ranking points.

However, this adversely affects players competing on the ITF circuit whose points will unfreeze and drop off regardless of the tournament's 2021 status.

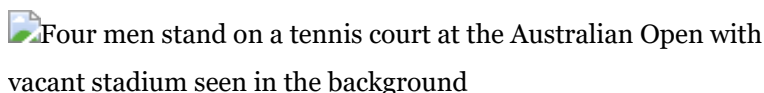
Prize money

In response to COVID-19, the ATP and WTA have hosted tournaments with reduced or no spectators. This has impacted their earned revenues. Event organizers on both tours have used the decline in revenue as a justification to reduce prize money awarded.

Three ATP/WTA 1000 events have been completed in 2021 so far, and overall prize money was down by 60 to 65 per cent from 2019 and 2020. Prize money reductions span all levels, from first round qualifying play to the championship round.

Prize money at ATP 250 and 500 tournaments has been reduced by 20 per cent and 40 per cent respectively. The initial decrease was a flat 50 per cent across both, but bonus money awarded to the top 12 ranked singles players of the year (US\$5.2 million) has been redirected to pay for the "increases."

Similar decreases are happening on the WTA tour.

Four men stand on a tennis court at the Australian Open with vacant stadium seen in the background

Slovakia's Filip Polasek, left, and Croatia's Ivan Dodig, second left, pose with their trophy after defeating Rajeev Ram, right, of the U.S. and Britain's Joe Salisbury in the men's doubles final at the Australian Open tennis championship in February 2021. (AP Photo/Andy Brownbill)

Health and wellbeing

Competing during the pandemic has been physically and mentally challenging for players.

At the 2021 Australian Open, 72 players on COVID-positive flights completed a hard quarantine (no time allowed outside their hotel room), and as a result, felt unprepared for the tournament. Several players who completed a monitored quarantine (they were allowed two hours of practice per day) suffered abdominal and/or back injuries, commonly associated with lack of adequate preparation.

Players have been outspoken about their struggles with “bubble life” arising from the adoption of stricter measures at tournaments.

Novak Djokovic, the men's No. 1-seeded player, said players currently competing are experiencing mental and motivational issues. Denis Shapovalov spoke about players' struggles with loneliness and fatigue and the anxiety of travelling for different tournaments. And Austrian player Dominic Thiem described his struggles as falling “into a hole.”

The postponement of the 2021 French Open will have a domino effect on player readiness at other tournaments. The one-week postponement has reduced the time between the conclusion of that tournament and the start of Wimbledon.

Two weeks between major championships, played on different surfaces (clay and grass), gives players a smaller window to adapt their on-court movement and reflexes, exercise and training routines and overall game strategy. Players found similar circumstances in 2020 very strange, unorthodox and challenging.

Broken economics of tennis

Tennis has rightfully been described as a “divided empire” that lacks common oversight. The sport's fragmented governance has contributed to a lack of adequate focus on player well-being, which has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professional tennis players, particularly those ranked outside the top 100, are struggling to obtain sufficient resources to continue with the sport. Lack of a healthy pipeline of competitors can and will impact tennis in the future. Governing bodies need to do more and prioritize athlete well-being, and there is no better time to start than now.