

Triumph and Disaster

'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same ...'. These words are two lines from the poem 'If—' written by Rudyard Kipling. They are written on the wall above the players' entrance to centre court at Wimbledon, home of the world's most famous tennis championship.

Kipling's words are meant to inspire tennis players as they prepare to play a match on Wimbledon's main court. But this year there were two players who weren't prepared to accept defeat and meet Disaster. John Isner from the US and France's Nicholas Mahut had hardly ever spoken to each other before they played their first-round match on Court 18 on Tuesday 22 June. They didn't know that they'd still be playing together three days and 183 games later.

Their tennis match lasted 11 hours 5 minutes, easily breaking records to become the longest recorded tennis match in history. Although the two players had different playing styles, they were very evenly matched and it was impossible for one to dominate the other. Unfortunately, as in any game of tennis, there had to be a winner and a loser. Although Mahut seemed to be in better physical condition on the final day, it was Isner who eventually won the game that would also enable him to win the match. The final score was 6–4, 3–6, 6–7, 7–6, 70–68! When it was all over, the All England Club presented both players with gifts in recognition of their achievement.

Both players had found it extremely difficult to sleep the previous night. Isner slept for four hours after his friend, the tennis player Andy Roddick, had brought him three boxes of pizzas. Mahut managed to sleep for three hours after a cold bath. All they wanted to do was finish the match.

Watching the never-ending match, it was hard not to think of the words of one of the world's greatest tennis players. In his autobiography, *Open*, Andre Agassi described tennis as one of the loneliest sports in the world. In spite of playing against another person in front of a crowd of people, a tennis player is stuck on their side of the net and has no physical contact with their opponent. They can't pass the ball to a teammate or even share their anger, frustration or joy with another player. They are totally alone, being watched by hundreds, thousands or even millions of people.

Both players in the Isner–Mahut match said the only thought in their minds was to win the game they were playing. When it was all over, Mahut said: 'We played the greatest match ever in the greatest place to play tennis' while Isner said: 'Nothing like this will ever happen again – ever'.

1 Use the words in the box to complete the description of tennis.

ball court game match net players racket set

Tennis is played on a rectangular (1) _____. Two (2) _____ stand on opposite sides of a (3) _____ and use a (4) _____ to hit a (5) _____ to each other. The aim is to win enough points to win a (6) _____. The first person to win six games wins a (7) _____. The first to win three sets wins the (8) _____.

2 Read the article and make a note of the names of the tennis players mentioned.

3 Read the article and find these numbers and things.

- 1 Duration of the match _____
- 2 Number of games played _____
- 3 Score in final set _____
- 4 Number of pizza boxes delivered _____
- 5 Number of hours Mahut slept _____
- 6 Title of Andre Agassi's autobiography _____

4 Decide if these sentences *true* or *false*. Correct the false sentences.

- 1 Players can see Kipling's words on their way to Centre Court. _____
- 2 John Isner and Nicholas Mahut played their match on Centre Court. _____
- 3 The two players were good friends. _____
- 4 The players had very similar playing styles. _____
- 5 The writer thought Isner was physically fitter. _____
- 6 Afterwards, both players felt their match was important. _____

5 Choose the correct words.

even evenly eventually extremely hardly still

- 1 Isner and Mahut had _____ ever spoken to each other before.
- 2 They didn't know that they'd _____ be playing three days later.
- 3 They were very _____ matched.
- 4 It was Isner who _____ won the game.
- 5 Both players had found it _____ difficult to sleep.
- 6 They can't pass the ball to a teammate or _____ share their anger.

6 Answer the questions in your own words.

- 1 Did you see the Isner-Mahut match?
- 2 Will we ever see a similar match again?
- 3 Do you think the scoring system in the final set is fair?
- 4 Do you enjoy watching or playing tennis?
- 5 What qualities do you think you need to be a tennis champion?
- 6 Do you agree that tennis is one of the 'loneliest' sports?

Glossary

disaster (*noun*) – something very bad that causes a lot of damage

enable (*verb*) – to give someone the opportunity to do something

evenly (*adverb*) – each person has an equal chance to win

eventually (*adverb*) – at the end of a process or period of time

frustration (*noun*) – a bad feeling you get when you are prevented from doing what you want

gift (*noun*) – something you give as a present

inspire (*verb*) – to give someone the enthusiasm to do something

opponent (*noun*) – someone who is competing against you

triumph (*noun*) – a great victory or success