

# If you're going to throw a badminton match, you have to be less obvious about it

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It may be possible based on your location to view what NBC euphemistically calls “highlights” from the women’s badminton doubles match between China’s Yu Yang/Wang Xiaoli and South Korea’s Jung Kyung Eun/Kim Ha Na. The serves go laughably into the net, there is barely any attempt to chase down shots, and returns go far out of bounds. If this is top-level badminton, I think *I* could be a world champion. Both sides had secured their advance into the next round, and Wired explained [why both teams decided that a strategic loss would be advantageous](#). Julie VanDusky-Allen provides a [game-theoretical analysis of the situation](#). (Even if you randomize the seeds in the knockout portion of the tournament, you can still get into a situation where a team in the round-robin portion of the tournament may decide that it is advantageous to lose a match on purpose.<sup>1</sup>) Partway into the match, an official warns both teams that if they do not make an effort to win, the teams will both be disqualified. That served to improve the quality of play only marginally. Okay, they need to study soccer or American professional basketball, where intentionally losing is a long-standing tradition: You need to make it *look like* you’re trying, or people are going to figure you out. For example, play normally most of the time, but then have a mental lapse and “accidentally” make an error that concedes a point. At least fake an injury. That’ll let you start playing badly with plausibility. (Although these techniques for throwing a match subtly probably don’t work if your opponent is *also trying to lose*.) Since the attempt to get both sides to play to win didn’t seem to help, perhaps the officials should have announced, “We have decided to assist in motivating the two sides by declaring that the loser of the match will be disqualified from the tournament.” Now they have something to play for.

<sup>1</sup> Consider a four-team group with teams A, B, C, and D. In round 1, A defeats B 5–1 and C defeats D 2–1. In round 2, A defeats D 5–1 and B defeats C 2–1. At this point, A is guaranteed advancement as long as it doesn’t lose to C by more than 8 points. If A defeats C, then B will advance. But A may decide that it prefers to play against C in the knockout portion of the tournament. In that case, it can intentionally lose to C in the third round by 4 points (leaving a comfortable margin of error), and as long as B doesn’t win by more than 7 points, A will get its wish: C will advance.

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