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The impact of rally length on break point saving percentage among male tennis players based on rankings: observations across different professional levels

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the tactical role of rally length in saving break points among male professional tennis players, specifically comparing ATP 250 and Challenger Tour levels on hard courts. Based on an analysis of over 500 break point instances from 31 matches played between January 2023 and March 2025, the research explores the correlation between rally duration, point length, and player ranking. Findings reveal a significant negative correlation between player ranking and break point saving percentage, with ATP 250 players saving over 80% of break points compared to approximately 65% for Challenger players. Shorter rallies—specifically those under five shots and lasting less than seven seconds—were consistently associated with higher success rates across both tiers, although ATP 250 players demonstrated superior tactical maturity in effectively shortening points during these critical moments. Challenging the traditional notion of stationarity, these results suggest that elite players proactively alter rally dynamics under pressure, underscoring the critical importance of "first-strike" tennis and the ability to dominate neutral rallies as essential factors for improving break point performance and advancing in professional rankings.

Key words: Rally length, break point performance, tactical decision making, ATP ranking.

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INTRODUCTION

Tennis, as one of the most dynamic sports, demands an intricate blend of physical endurance, mental toughness, and strategic awareness (Sánchez Mencia et al., 2023). The outcome of a tennis match is often decided in pivotal moments, with break points standing out as critical junctures that can drastically shift momentum and determine the winner (O'Donoghue, 2012; Knight & O'Donoghue, 2012). The ability to save break points, defending one's service game under pressure, is widely regarded as a key indicator of a player's mental fortitude, consistency, and composure (Meffert et al., 2021). Indeed, the concept of "big points" underscores that not all points carry equal weight, and success in these high-stakes situations is often what differentiates elite performers (Kovalchik & Reid, 2018; Meffert et al., 2018).

Performance in these critical moments is not solely a function of psychological resilience; tactical decisions, such as the strategic manipulation of rally length, play a significant role (Cui et al., 2019; Conde-Ripoll et al., 2024). The temporal structure of tennis, characterized by intermittent dynamics, short repetitive actions, and varying intensity, inherently involves rally duration as a key component (Torres-Luque et al., 2014). Rally length itself is a multifaceted variable, influenced by factors such as court surface, player level, and specific match situations (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021; Prieto-Lage et al., 2018). For instance, research indicates that shorter points (0-4 shots) are particularly decisive on faster surfaces like grass (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021), and distinct rally patterns emerge during break point situations (Prieto-Lage et al., 2018). However, the conscious strategic use of rally length, specifically on hard courts during break points, and how this varies between different professional tiers, remains an area requiring more detailed exploration.

The cognitive demands of tennis, especially during high-pressure moments, are substantial. Research in cognitive psychology suggests that an overabundance of tactical information or too many variables to consider can lead to cognitive overload, impairing decision-making and performance (Sille, Turner, & Eubank, 2020; Ozsoy et al.,

2023). Consequently, adopting a simplified yet effective tactical focus—such as consciously aiming to shorten or extend rallies based on a pre-defined strategy or opponent tendencies—might be a beneficial approach for players. This could reduce cognitive burden, allowing for more decisive action and composure (Raizada et al., 2025). While extensive research has explored various performance indicators in tennis, including serve effectiveness (Meffert et al., 2018), and point-by-point dynamics in Grand Slams (Cui et al., 2019; Escudero-Tena et al., 2020), there is a specific need to understand the nuanced relationship between rally length strategy and break point saving efficacy across the ATP 250 Tour and Challenger Tour levels. These two distinct tiers of professional men's singles tennis present different competitive pressures, skill execution levels, and potentially, tactical proclivities, particularly on hard court surfaces where rally dynamics can vary significantly. Furthermore, match statistics such as serve and return point percentages have shown a significant relationship with professional ranking (Reid, McMurtrie, & Crespo, 2010), underscoring the importance of effective play in these key areas for career progression.

Previous research has highlighted differences in how players approach break points, with higher-ranked players often exhibiting superior strategic skills (O'Donoghue, 2012). For instance, top-ranked ATP 250 players might possess a greater ability to control rally length, employing aggressive play to shorten exchanges (<5 shots), thereby minimizing opponent opportunities. Conversely, Challenger Tour players might engage in longer rallies more frequently, perhaps due to differences in first-strike capabilities or tactical confidence under pressure. Understanding these distinctions is vital, as even marginal advantages gained through optimized rally length strategies during break points can significantly impact match outcomes (Cui et al., 2019).

Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to investigate the impact of rally length on break point saving percentage among professional male tennis players on hard court surfaces. Specifically, this research will focus on comparing performance patterns and tactical approaches between players competing at the ATP 250 Tour level and those at the Challenger Tour level. It is hypothesized that: (a) shorter rally lengths will generally be associated with a higher break point saving percentage across both tiers, and (b) ATP 250 players will exhibit a more pronounced and effective use of specific rally length strategies (particularly shorter rallies) to save break points compared to Challenger Tour players, reflecting greater tactical maturity and execution under pressure. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for players and coaches in developing targeted training regimens and pre-match strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a comparative, observational, retrospective design to analyse the relationship between rally length, player ranking, and break point saving percentage in professional men's tennis. Data were analysed across two distinct professional tiers, the ATP 250 Tour and the Challenger Tour, with a specific focus on matches played on hard court surfaces.

Sample

Data were collected from a total of 31 official men's singles matches played on hard court surfaces between January 2023 and March 2025. The sample comprised 16 matches from the ATP 250 Tour and 15 matches from the Challenger Tour. These matches were purposively selected to ensure representation from both tournament levels and to obtain a sufficient number of break point situations for robust analysis. Across these matches, over 500 break points were identified and analysed (226 from ATP 250 matches and 276 from Challenger Tour matches). Specific details of the included matches, including tournament, year, and participating players, are provided in Table 1 (Appendix A). This selection strategy aimed to encompass a variety of players and competitive contexts within each tour level. Player rankings (ATP Ranking) at the time of each match were recorded for all participating players. Matches that were not completed due to player retirement or walkover were excluded from the sample.

Data collection and variables

Data were retrospectively collected from publicly available, official match statistics and point-by-point data provided on the ATP Tour (Tennis TV) and Challenger Tour online viewing platforms. These platforms offer comprehensive databases of match events. For each match, match logs and point-by-point summaries were meticulously reviewed to identify every instance where a player faced a break point on their serve. Once a break point was identified, several variables were extracted.

Independent variables included:

- Tournament Level: ATP 250 Tour, Challenger Tour.
- ATP Tennis Ranking: ranking of the serving player at the time of the match.
- Rally Length (shots): total number of successful strokes exchanged by both players within the rally, commencing with the serve and concluding when the point was decided (an ace was recorded as a 1-shot rally, a double fault as a 0-shot rally).
- Point Duration (seconds): time elapsed from the initiation of the serve to the conclusion of the point.

Dependent variable included:

- Break Point Saved Percentage (%): calculated for each match as: (Number of Break Points Saved / Total Number of Break Points Faced) * 100.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations (SD), ranges, and percentages, were calculated for all variables to summarize the sample characteristics and performance indicators across the two tournament levels. The relationships between player ranking and break point saving percentage, and between rally length/point duration and break point saving percentage, were examined using Pearson correlation coefficients (r), stratified by tournament level.

To further explore these relationships and derived predictive equations, linear regression analyses were conducted. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was reported to indicate the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variable(s). Prior to conducting parametric

tests, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were assessed using Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests, respectively. Comparisons of break point saving percentages, rally lengths, and point durations between ATP 250 and Challenger Tour players were performed using independent samples t-tests. In instances where parametric assumptions were violated, non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests were employed as an alternative.

Graphical representations, such as scatter plots with trendlines, were generated using Microsoft Excel's plotting tools to visualize key relationships. All inferential statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics Version 28 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) and R Version 4.X.X (R Core Team, Vienna, Austria). The alpha level for statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all inferential tests.

RESULTS

Statistical analysis of the 31 matches, encompassing over 500 break points, revealed significant relationships between player ranking, rally length, and break point saving percentage, with notable differences between the ATP 250 and Challenger Tours.

Relationship between ATP ranking and break point saved percentage

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between a player's ATP ranking number and their break point saved percentage. As observed in Figure 1, higher-ranked players (a lower ranking number) tend to save a greater percentage of break points.

The linear regression analysis indicates this trend is considerably stronger in ATP 250 tournaments ($R^2 = 0.53$) compared to Challenger tournaments ($R^2 = 0.23$). This suggests that at the ATP 250 level, a player's ranking explains a larger proportion of the variance in performance during critical moments. Descriptively, the analysed ATP 250 Tour players averaged a saving percentage above 80%, whereas Challenger Tour players averaged approximately 65%.

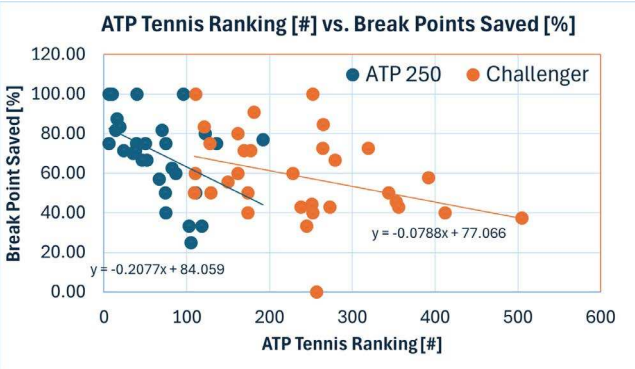

Figure 1. *Relation between player ranking and percentage of break points saved.*

Impact of point duration on performance

The analysis of point duration proved to be a decisive factor in break point outcomes. Figure 2 illustrates a significant negative correlation between point duration (in seconds) and the break point saved percentage across both tournament levels.

Notably, the correlation was much more pronounced for ATP 250 players ($R^2 = 0.54$) than for Challenger players ($R^2 = 0.22$). This indicates that the strategy of shortening points has a more consistent and successful impact on the performance of higher-ranked players. Players who saved over 75% of break points predominantly did so in points lasting less than seven seconds. Conversely, a high percentage of lost break points occurred in rallies that exceeded this duration.

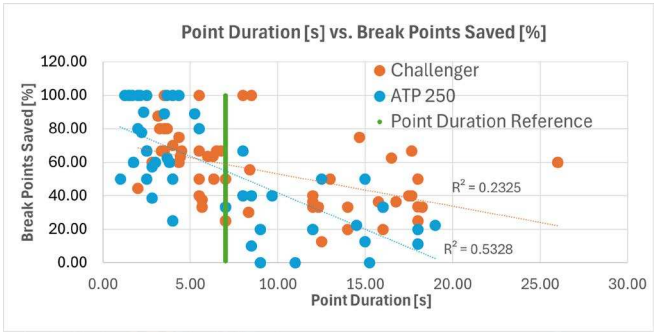

Figure 2. *Break point saved percentage vs. point duration.*

Comparative analysis of rally length

To further investigate tactical strategy, the percentage of break points lost was analysed based on whether the rally lasted fewer than five shots or more than five shots. Figure 3 reveals a drastic performance difference based on this variable.

In short rallies, players of all rankings maintained a low percentage of break points lost, generally below 30%. However, in long rallies, the percentage of break points lost increased significantly, especially for players ranked outside the top 100. This finding suggests that while lower-ranked players can successfully execute short-point tactics, their performance sharply declines as the rally extends—a vulnerability less evident in elite players.

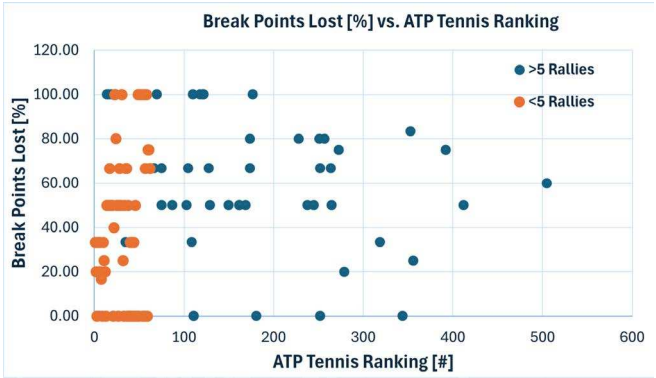

Figure 3. *Visual representation of break point loss [%] compared to players' ranking as analysed from points over and under 5 rallies.*

DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence that the strategic manipulation of rally length is a crucial tactical factor for saving break points in men's professional tennis, particularly on hard courts. The results confirm our hypotheses: shorter rallies are associated with a higher break point saving percentage, and this strategy is employed more effectively by ATP 250 players compared to their Challenger Tour counterparts.

Our central finding challenges the classic assumption of "stationarity" in tennis, the idea that the probability of winning a point remains constant regardless of the score (Knight & O'Donoghue, 2012). Our data strongly support more recent research indicating that player performance is context-dependent and elevates on critical points (O'Donoghue, 2012). The key contribution of our study is to propose why this stationarity fails on break points: higher-ranked players are not merely reacting to pressure but are consciously executing a proactive strategy to shorten exchanges. This aligns with the perspectives of elite players and coaches, who overwhelmingly acknowledge the existence of "big points" like break points, where tactical decisions and mental composure are paramount (Meffert et al., 2021). By simplifying the tactical objective to keep the point short, a strategy designed to conclude the point within the average 5-7 second duration typical of hard-court rallies (Torres-Luque et al., 2014), players can reduce cognitive load and execute with greater confidence.

At first glance, our findings might seem at odds with studies like Conde-Ripoll et al. (2024), which found that break points, on average, feature longer rallies than non-break points. However, this is not a contradiction but rather two sides of the same coin. The findings of Conde-Ripoll et al. represent a descriptive reality of what occurs across all outcomes, whereas our study offers a prescriptive conclusion on how to achieve success. In essence, players who successfully save break points are the ones who manage to defy the trend and end the point quickly. Those who get drawn into longer exchanges, as is common on break points, are the ones who are more likely to lose the point, thus explaining the overall longer average rally length.

Differences between professional levels and strategic approaches

The performance gap between ATP 250 and Challenger players, especially in rallies extending beyond five shots, is a critical insight. While both levels may attempt short-point tactics, the elite players' superior ability to execute their "first-strike" tennis (serve + first shot) under pressure is what differentiates them. This is supported by broad analyses of Grand Slam matches, which consistently find that winners significantly outperform losers in serve quality, return performance, and break point conversion percentage (Raizada et al., 2025).

Crucially, the ability to excel on break points is directly linked to the statistics that define elite players. In a seminal study, Reid, McMurtrie, and Crespo (2010) found that of all the match statistics available, the two most significant predictors of a player's Top 100 ranking were the percentage of second serve points won and the percentage of second serve return points won. These two metrics alone accounted for 52% of the variance in professional ranking. This adds a critical layer to our findings. Success on break points is not merely about hitting an unreturnable first serve (a 1-shot rally); it is about possessing the tactical acumen and baseline solidity to dominate the rally when a second serve brings the point to a more neutral state. Many break points are contested on second serves, making proficiency in these situations, both offensively and defensively, the ultimate differentiator for climbing the rankings.

Furthermore, the mantra "shorter is better" requires nuance. A study on grass court tennis by Fitzpatrick et al. (2021) revealed that while 1-shot (aces/return errors) and 2-shot rallies were critical for winning, the classic "serve plus one" (3-shot rally) was surprisingly not a differentiating factor between winners and losers. This suggests that the most decisive actions are the serve and the return themselves. Similarly, the optimal strategy can be highly dependent on the player and surface. For example, a case study of Nadal and Djokovic on clay courts showed that in that specific context, it was Nadal who won more break points in long rallies (>7 shots), leveraging his unique defensive and attritional capabilities (Prieto-Lage et al., 2018). This highlights that while a short-point strategy is a robust general model for success on hard courts, it is not universally absolute.

Limitations and future lines of investigation

The primary limitation of this study is its focus on a single surface type. Our findings are specific to hard courts. As the comprehensive review by Torres-Luque et al. (2014) details, the temporal structure of tennis, including point duration and work-to-rest ratios, is highly conditioned by the playing surface. Rallies are inherently longer on clay and shorter on grass. Future research should therefore conduct a direct comparative analysis of rally length strategies on break points across all surfaces to build a more complete tactical framework. Additionally, expanding this analysis to the WTA tour would be a valuable step, as rally dynamics and strategic priorities may differ.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides strong quantitative evidence that the ability to proactively shorten rallies is a cornerstone of successfully defending break points in elite men's tennis on hard courts. This tactic is a conscious departure from baseline rally patterns, reflecting the heightened importance players place on these moments. The strategic priority of winning the point early aligns with the broader statistical markers of elite performance, particularly the ability to win a high percentage of second serve points, which is a key predictor of professional ranking. For players and coaches, particularly at the Challenger level, the practical implication is clear: developing the technical and tactical capacity for "first-strike" tennis is not just a general goal, but a critical tool for mastering the high-pressure situations that ultimately define career progression.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest, nor have they received any funding related to the development of this study.

APPENDIX

TOURNAMENT	MATCHUP	INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	DEPENDENT VARIABLES		
		RANKING *R* (#)	BREAK POINTS SAVED (#)	NUMBER OF BREAK POINTS (#)	BREAK POINTS SAVED (%)
Challenger Gwangju Open 2024	**Lloyd Harris**	128	9	12	75.00
	Tung-Lin Wu	257	0	5	0.00
Challenger GNP Seguros Open 2024	**Adam Walton**	111	2	2	100.00
	Tristan Schoolkate	252	2	5	40.00
Challenger Hamburg 2024	Ergi Kirkin	251	4	9	44.44
	Yuta Shimizu	264	8	11	72.73
Challenger Chennai 2024	**Dalibor Svrcina**	174	5	10	50.00
	Evgeny Donskoy	353	5	11	45.45
Challenger Chennai 2024	**Sumit Nagal**	121	5	6	83.33
	Dalibor Svrcina	174	2	5	40.00
Challenger Busan 2024	**Blake Ellis**	392	11	19	57.89
	Antonie Escoffier	228	15	25	60.00
Challenger 75 Temuco Chile 2023	**Aleksandar Kovacevic**	110	3	5	60.00
	Gilber Klier Junior	356	3	7	42.86
Challenger Yokkaichi Japan 2023	**Zizou Bergs**	129	2	4	50.00
	Marc Polmans	150	5	9	55.56
Challenger Oeiras 2, Portugal 2024	**Aleksandar Kovacevic**	109	3	6	50.00
	Zsombor Piros	238	3	7	42.86
Challenger Noumea, New Caledonia	**Shintaro Mochizuki**	169	5	7	71.43
	Moerani Bouzige	412	4	10	40.00
Challenger Noumea, New Caledonia	**Constant Lestienne**	177	5	7	71.43
	Jake Delaney	505	3	8	37.50
Challenger Chennai Open 2025	**Shintaro Mochizuki**	181	10	11	90.91
	Enrico Dalla Vale	279	10	15	66.67
Challenger Tenerife 2025	**Henrique Rocha**	162	8	10	80.00
	Abdulah Shelbayh	265	11	13	84.62
Challenger Tenerife 2025	**P. Martin Tiffon**	252	4	4	100.00
	J. Monday	319	8	11	72.73
Challenger Tenerife 2025	**Henrique Rocha**	162	3	5	60.00
	Edas Butvilas	245	2	6	33.33
Challenger Pune 100 2025	**Masamichi Imamura**	344	2	4	50.00
	Jay Clarke	273	3	7	42.86
ATP 250 Los Cabos 2024	**Alexander Zverev**	6	13	13	100.00
	Thanasi Kokkinakis	103	1	3	33.33
ATP 250 Los Cabos 2024	Alexander Zverev	6	9	12	75.00
	Jordan Thompson	35	7	10	70.00
ATP 250 Delray Beach 2024	**Tommy Paul**	14	9	11	81.82
	Alex Michelsen	75	6	8	75.00
ATP 250 Marseille 2024	**Alejandro Davidovich Fokina**	24	5	7	71.43
	Gregoire Barrere	105	1	4	25.00
ATP 250 Doha 2024	**Andy Murray**	50	3	4	75.00
	Alexandre Muller	75	2	5	40.00
ATP 250 Auckland 2024	**Ben Shelton**	16	7	8	87.50
	Roberto Carballes Baena	67	4	7	57.14
ATP 250 Auckland 2024	**Cameron Norrie**	19	5	6	83.33
	Luca Van Assche	87	6	10	60.00
ATP 250 Adelaide 2024	**Daniel Evans**	40	2	2	100.00
	Rinky Hijikata	70	9	11	81.82
ATP 250 Open Occitanie 2025	**Alexander Bublik**	39	3	4	75.00
	Dominik Koepfer	118	2	6	33.33
ATP 250 Open Occitanie 2025	**Andrey Rublev**	10	3	3	100.00
	Christopher Eubanks	111	3	6	50.00
ATP Marseille Open 2025	**Hamad Medjedovic**	96	5	5	100.00
	Raphael Collignon	122	8	10	80.00
ATP Marseille Open 2025	**Zhizhen Zhang**	52	2	3	66.67
	Quentin Halys	74	2	4	50.00
ATP Marseille Open 2025	**Pierre-Hugues Herbert**	192	10	13	76.92
	Harold Mayot	136	9	12	75.00
ATP Marseille Open 2025	**Daniil Medvedev**	8	5	5	100.00
	Jan-Lennard Struff	46	8	12	66.67
ATP Delray Beach 250	**Matteo Arnaldi**	38	10	14	71.43
	Learner Tien	82	5	8	62.50

AVG RALLY LENGTH	B.P. SAVED (%) (< 5 RALLIES)	AVG POINT DURATION(s)	AVG RALLY LENGTH	B.P. SAVED (%) (> 5 RALLIES)	AVG POINT DURATION(s)	B.P. LOST	B.P. LOST (%) (<5 RALLIES)	B.P. LOST (%) (>5 RALLIES)
1.75	44.44	2.00	7.60	55.56	8.4	3	33.33	66.67
3.00	0	2.00	13.25	0.00	17.25	5	20	80
3	50.00	4	4.5	50.00	5.5	0	-	-
3.5	100	5.5	6.33	0.00	7	3	33.33	66.67
4	25.00	7.00	9.33	75	14.67	5	20	80
3	37.50	5.67	10.2	62.5	16.2	3	33.33	66.67
2.67	80.00	3.67	8	20	16.5	5	20	80
3	60.00	4.33	8.5	40	12	6	16.67	83.33
2.40	100.00	8.50	-	0	-	1	0	100
2.5	100.00	8.00	-	0	-	3	33.33	66.67
3.29	63.64	6.00	9	36.364	15.75	8	25.00	75.00
2.83	40.00	8.00	12.44	60	26	10	20.00	80.00
2.5	66.67	3.5	7	33.33	14	2	0	100.00
3	66.67	4.5	7	33.33	16	4	50.00	25.00
4	50.00	7	9	50.00	13	2	50.00	50.00
2.00	40.00	5.50	15.33	40.00	17.67	4	50.00	50.00
3.33	33.33	5.67	9.33	66.67	17.67	3	66.67	33.33
4.50	66.67	6.75	11.33	33.33	12.33	4	50	50
2.50	80.00	3.25	9.00	20.00	16.00	2	50	50
3.33	75.00	4.33	10.00	25.00	18.00	6	50	50
4	80.00	3.5	8.00	20.00	14	2	-	100
3.5	66.60	5.5	10.00	33.40	18	5	40	60
3.43	70.00	4.00	6.67	30.00	8.33	1	100	0
2.9	60.00	2.80	9.8	40.00	12	5	80	20
1.86	87.50	3.17	8	12.50	12.5	2	50.00	50.00
3.57	63.63	4.43	13.50	36.36	16.75	2	50.00	50.00
3.50	100.00	4.00	0	0.00	0	0	0.00	0.00
2.29	63.63	6.29	7.00	36.36	12.00	3	66.66	33.33
1.50	66.66	6.50	6	33.33	12	2	50.00	50.00
2.00	100.00	3.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	4	50.00	50.00
4.33	50.00	6.33	13	50.00	18	2	100.00	0.00
3.33	66.67	3.33	12.75	33.33	18.25	4	25.00	75.00
2.0	38.46	2.8	11.63	61.54	22.88	0	-	-
-	0	-	8	33.33	19.5	2	50	50
1.875	88.89	3.5	8	11.11	18	3	66.67	33.33
2.8	50.00	4	7	20	12	3	66.67	33.33
2.0	77.78	2.21	9	22.22	14.5	2	0	100
2.6	62.5	3.67	7	12.5	15	2	50	50
2.25	57.143	2.8	6	20.00	12	2	0	100
3	25	4	-	0	-	3	33.33	66.67
4,5	66.67	8	9	33.33	16	1	0	100
2	100	2.5	-	0	-	3	33.33	66.67
1.71	100.00	2.14	-	0.00	-	1	0	100
2.5	100.00	4.33	-	0	-	3	33.33	66.67
3.00	80.00	5.50	7	20.00	18	1	0	100
1.75	66.67	2.50	7.5	33.33	16	4	50	50
1.00	50.00	1.00	7	50.00	15	0	-	-
3.29	88.89	5.25	12.5	22.22	19	2	0	100
2	100	1.67		0		1	100	0
1.5	100	1.5	11.75	0	15.25	4	0	100
2.5	66.67	2.50	6	33.33	7	0		
2.5	100.00	2.00	8.5	0	11	3	100	0
2.33	60.00	3.00	7.50	40.00	8.50	0		
2.50	50.00	2.50	10	50.00	12.5	2	0	100
2.67	100.00	3.67	-	0.00	-	1	100	0
1.50	100.00	1.25	-	0.00	-	2	-	-
2.25	60.00	1.75	7	40.00	8.00	3	66.67	33.33
1.92	100.00	1.50	-	0.00	-	3	100.00	0.00
2.50	80.00	2.00	7	20.00	9	0	0.00	0.00
3.55	100.00	4.00	7	0.00	9	4	75.00	25.00
2.58	90.00	2.33	8	10.00	8.5	4	75.00	25.00
4.00	60.00	3.80	7.67	40.00	9.67	3	66.67	33.33

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