

At Wimbledon, Behind-the-Scenes Tennis Politicking Comes to the Forefront



Novak Djokovic has been juggling playing at Wimbledon with his role as president of the ATP player council. Andrew Coultridge/Reuters

By Ben Rothenberg

July 5, 2019



WIMBLEDON, England — Novak Djokovic is the No. 1 seed and the defending champion at Wimbledon, but in the first week of the tournament, his status as ATP Player Council president has been the bigger burden.

He has lost only one set in reaching the fourth round, but he has faced pointed questions in his news conferences about his leadership of the council.

On Wednesday, Djokovic had a tense six-minute exchange with a reporter about his relationship with Justin Gimelstob, a former player representative on the ATP board who resigned in May after pleading no contest to a battery charge.

It was the latest example of off-court politics in men's tennis seeping into tournaments, and of the additional burdens that Djokovic has taken on during the prime of his playing career that he has [admitted can be to the detriment of his tennis](#).

He took over in 2016 as president of the 10-player council, which represents the players in the ATP's joint governance structure. Djokovic has been an aggressive agent for reform, leading a renewed call for increased prize money at four events, exploring ideas for restructuring the tour's business model and supporting the ouster of chief executive Chris Kermode.

Then three days before Wimbledon began, three players resigned from the council after a contentious seven-hour meeting, more fallout from Gimelstob's criminal case and resignation.

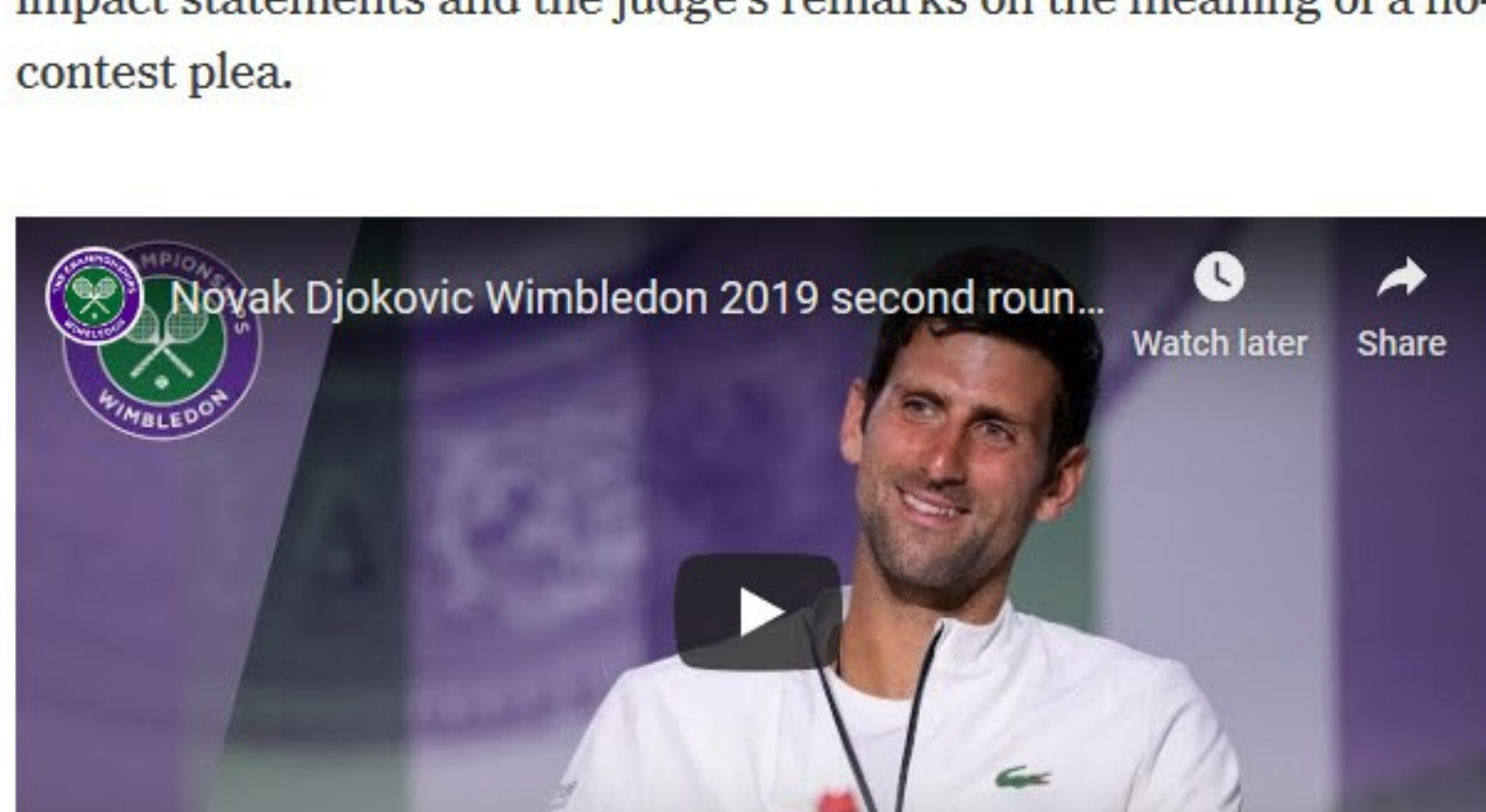
In November, Gimelstob was charged with felony battery, accused of hitting a friend of his ex-wife dozens of times on Halloween in Los Angeles. The board did not reach the unanimity [it needed to remove him](#), and despite suggestions that he should step down, Gimelstob kept his seat representing the Americas region for another seven months while his criminal case was ongoing. During that time, he was involved in the [pivotal decision not to renew the contract](#) of Kermode.

Gimelstob ultimately pleaded no contest in April, and the charge was reduced to a misdemeanor. Under intensifying pressure from players like [Stan Wawrinka](#), Gimelstob [resigned from the board just over a week later](#), saying he had "become too much of a distraction and a liability."

But he remains a distraction. Gimelstob, who lives in California, was in London during the lead-up to the tournament. Djokovic raised eyebrows after his first-round win on Monday when he said he was still in contact with Gimelstob, and did not rule out the possibility of his making a return to an ATP leadership position.

"I have friendly relationship with Justin; he did advise me when he was in London," Djokovic said. "We saw each other shortly. We keep in touch through the phone."

Those comments led to further questioning about their relationship after his second-round victory on Wednesday. He was asked if he had read the documents in Gimelstob's case, including victim impact statements and the judge's remarks on the meaning of a no-contest plea.



Novak Djokovic's news conference at Wimbledon on Wednesday. Video by Wimbledon.

Djokovic said he would read the documents, which have been available for months, and balked at any implication of guilt by association.

"I feel like you're pointing the guilt at me for some reason for what he has done or for supporting him," Djokovic said. "I am telling you I have very good relationship with him, and I always have. I'm not going to lie about that."

A news release by Gimelstob's lawyer, Alan Jackson, before Djokovic's third-round match on Friday said Gimelstob was "deeply disturbed and disheartened that Wimbledon players continue to be harassed about their relationship with and support of him, whether it be personally or professionally."

By agreeing to a no-contest plea, Gimelstob chose not to present his account of the incident in court. He has continued, however, to try to clear his name publicly and privately. In the release, Gimelstob's lawyer called the victim statements "exaggerated, untested and untrue" and "not subject to penalty of perjury, cross-examination or rebuttal."

Djokovic is not the only player to be drained by off-court politicking.

The 10 council members, including the top 10 players Kevin Anderson and John Isner, were part of a meeting on June 28 that lasted from 5 p.m. until past midnight, according to Djokovic. Many players said how depleting the experience was on the cusp of the year's third Grand Slam event.

The day after the meeting, the player council was depleted too: three of the 10 players — Robin Haase, Jamie Murray and Sergiy Stakhovsky — had resigned. So did Dani Vallverdu, who served in an auxiliary coaches' seat on the council.



Justin Gimelstob resigned from the ATP board in May, saying he did not want to become a distraction. But he remains one. Press Association, via AP Images

Even those players who remained on the council noted the toll it had taken on them.

"It is exhausting," the doubles specialist Bruno Soares said. "For me, it's constant work. In order for us to be there and talk about those topics, we've got to be informed, and talk to tournament directors, groups of players. It's quite a lot of work — and it's not our main job."

The council elects three representatives to the ATP board, which also has three tournament representatives. The dispute at the heart of the seven-hour meeting last week was over who would replace Gimelstob on the board: Weller Evans or Nicolas Lapentti. The players were deadlocked at 5-5, just as they were when they first voted at the Italian Open in May.

Djokovic, Isner, Vasek Pospisil, Sam Querrey and Lu Yen-Hsun — who had been more supportive of Gimelstob — voted for Evans, a longtime ATP executive seen as an experienced insider who is opposed to Kermode's change being renewed. The others chose Lapentti, a former top-10 player from Ecuador seen as a strong communicator, especially with the Latin American constituents covered by the seat.

The election was rescheduled for later in the year, and the two other player representatives on the board, David Egdes and Alex Ingot, picked Evans to serve as an interim board member for a six-month term. That incensed many of the five who were against his election for months.

The first [to quit was Haase](#), who didn't even last until the end of Friday's meeting.

"All I can wish them is the best knowledge in how to proceed," Haase said. "I hope they do a good job. But for me, I couldn't be part of the process in the way it is."

Resignations from the player council members during their two-year terms are rare.

"I understand and appreciate passion," Evans said, "but there feels as if there is more to these sudden resignations than simply being on the short end of a specific issue."

With another election coming in six months, it seems tennis politics will continue to loom over men's tournaments.

It's perhaps not surprising that Djokovic said last week that he too had considered resigning from the council.

"I think my team wants me to step down, honestly," he said, smiling ruefully.

But, he added, "I feel something is telling me from inside that I'm supposed to still stay there because I feel that we are part of the big transitional phase in tennis at the moment."

Christopher Clarey contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on July 5, 2019, on Page B10 of the New York edition with the headline: Behind-the-Scenes Tennis Politicking Comes to the Fore. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

