As discussed below by Anthony Bedford, eight doubles badminton players were disqualified from the Olympics yesterday for trying to lose their matches. The players, from South Korea, China and Indonesia, purposely played badly in attempts to lose their matches to get a better position in the draw in the following round.

Their behaviour has been described as being “against the spirit of the Olympics”, and the players have been comprehensively criticised for their behaviour, but was it cheating, or were the teams were using the rules of this competition to maximise their chances of winning?

Apparently this was the first time the badminton competition at the Olympics was organised using a round-robin format. In a round-robin, teams are placed in groups according to their ranking in the field. Each team plays all the other teams in their group, and at the end of the round-robin, the top ranked teams in their group (those who have won the most matches) progress to the following knock-out round.

In the singles competition only the winner of their group progresses to the knock-out round. But in the doubles competition the top two teams from each group progress to the knock-out round. The draw for the knock-out round is pre-determined: The winner of group A plays the second-place player in group C, and so on. So the players had a good idea of who they would play if they won vs. if they came second.

A strategic doubles team could look at the draw and determine who they’d be likely to play if they won their group, or if they came second. Depending on who they’d prefer to play, they might elect to lose their final match rather than win.

As a spectator I would be very disappointed to attend a match like the ones played by the disqualified badminton players who were playing ridiculously badly on purpose in order to lose. But the other side of me says that these players were trying to maximise their chances of winning the tournament. They were trying to use the rules to their advantage. The people to blame here aren’t necessarily the players. Rather, the rules structure seems to be most culpable.

While purposely losing a match goes against the spirit of the Olympics, it was not against the rules and so does not constitute cheating. Unsporting perhaps, but not cheating.