

Naomi Osaka Starts an Important Conversation

Vidya Subramanian

Only someone with the clout of a world champion, the purse of one of the top-paid athletes of the world, and the influence of a millennial social media celebrity can afford to take on the antiquated and antediluvian notions of mental health among those who run world tennis. Naomi Osaka might just be that hero.

In the spectacular face-off between the 23-year-old tennis champion Naomi Osaka and the organisers of the French Open, all three parties (the press, the tennis establishment, and the player) came out on the losing side of the imbroglio. Many members of the press who were quick to criticise Osaka for what they saw to be a [‘petulant’ and ‘uppity’ stance](#) lost an opportunity to reflect upon how to make the relationship between the press and players more meaningful. The French Open lost one of its biggest stars and proved that they had little awareness and even less sensitivity to matters of mental health. And Osaka herself lost an opportunity to master her least favourite surface in the sport and improve her already great rankings. The only good thing that can (and we hope, will) come out of this controversy is that we start a much-needed conversation about mental health in tennis, and indeed all sport.

In hindsight, Naomi Osaka should probably not have made a social media statement about not doing press meets without first talking to the organisers. To make matters worse, she was, the joint statement released by the four Grand Slams suggests, unavailable for conversation with any of the organisers when they reached out to her. It would certainly have been inconvenient to talk about these issues even as she focussed on her game in the tournament, but it might have been better than a unilateral statement with no room for negotiation. But the tennis establishment didn’t behave in a mature fashion, either. Instead of trying to understand the problem, [they came down heavily on her](#) and imposed not just a very strict fine, but also threatened the young player with dire consequences including future grand slam suspensions. Imagine what that will do to someone already grappling with anxiety and depression.

A particularly vicious op-ed had insinuated that she didn’t have the guts to pull out of the tournament because of the money she could win. But Osaka did the thing the critics thought she couldn’t afford to do. Refusing to be intimidated by such criticism, she withdrew from the tournament.

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This wasn't a move the Grand Slams had anticipated. The [second statement](#) put out by all the Grand Slams, after Osaka walked out of the French Open, is far more tempered than the first, going so far as to agree to 'improve the player experience at our tournaments, including as it relates to media.'

A jarring note was the [statement](#) of the French Tennis Federation president, Gilles Moretton, who said he wished Osaka 'the quickest possible recovery' as though she had pulled out of the French open because of a minor injury; and he hoped it would heal quickly. It is proof of what we have suspected all along: that the tennis establishment has no clue what to do about problems of mental health among the players. Writing on the subject, K Srinath Reddy, President of the Public Health Foundation of India, put the analogy of physical versus mental health issues in context, [asking](#) what a tournament would do if a player had, say, a severe speech impediment. 'Would they be as unyielding in dealing with a physical disability as they were while dealing with a serious mental health concern?' he asks.

Naomi Osaka is a fantastic champion of the sport of tennis – on and off court. She has carved a space for herself in a sport that boasts of heroes such as Serena Williams, Roger Federer and Martina Navratilova. Last year at the US Open, she wore face masks with the names of Black victims of police violence, making a political statement that few in her position would have had the courage to make, given how finicky corporate sponsors can be about openly political sportspersons. At 23, she is the [highest paid female athlete in the world](#). So yes, she has the privilege to pull off what she did, both with the Black Lives Matter stance at the US Open and the French Open withdrawal. But this was her using her privilege for good, in a way that no one else has dared to...yet. We live in a world where sport psychology is all about how 'mental toughness' and 'resilience' can help win matches and tournaments. Where the 'mind game' on the field is the only conversation about mental health, Naomi Osaka has used her power, her influence, and indeed her privilege to draw attention to an issue that is horribly under researched, and most people are still embarrassed to talk about.

She wrote in her statement that she had been suffering from anxiety and depression since the 2018 US Open, in which the then 20-year-old Osaka beat her idol Serena Williams and became the first ever Japanese player to win a Grand Slam. Watching her distress in the [post-match trophy ceremony](#) and the [press conference](#) explains a lot about how that could have happened. First, she was subjected to Serena Williams' on-court outbursts that coloured her victory many shades duller than she deserved; next, she was booed by a crowd upset about the loss of their favourite champion; and at the press meet, she was almost exclusively asked about her opponent's on-court problems; as though her victory was simply Williams' loss.

This is not to say that the media has no place in sport; there really can be no sport without media coverage of it. And journalists are well within their rights to ask questions of athletes, just like they would with any other public figure – politician, musician, scientist, movie star, anyone. It is only with a robust media that fans and the general public can really know what is going on, be it at the French Open or inside the White House. Without journalists, all we will have will be the well-curated social media posts of celebrities, that are essentially brand building exercises, probably handled by a team of publicists.

But it would be irresponsible to pretend like it's not time for the media to introspect about its role in the exploitative ecosystem of selling news. And to perhaps consider for a moment the other side – to put oneself in the shoes of a young person under the kind of scrutiny that individual players can be subjected to at these press meets. Spare a thought for a shy 23-year-old who writes about herself that she's '...not a natural public speaker and get huge waves of anxiety before I speak to the world's media,' and gets 'really nervous and find it stressful to always try to engage.' Instead of finding a way to help a young person deal with these very real issues, it is irresponsible to argue that she should simply 'toughen up' because no one else has complained.

Women players – even in tennis, which is more egalitarian than most sports – are often subjected to silly, and sometimes even demeaning interlocation. Who can forget Australian Open presenter Ian Cohen who asked reigning Wimbledon champion Eugenie Bouchard to 'give us a twirl' in 2015; or the journalist in 2004 who asked a then 17-year-old Maria Sharapova what it felt like to be a 'pin-up' now that she had won Wimbledon. 'Is that good? Do you enjoy that?' he followed up. The fact that we're beginning to comment on such things is by itself progress because there was a time when such incidents were simply par for the course; but obviously, there's quite a long way to go.

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