

Osaka Sets Precedent for Mental Health Prioritization

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Abstract: Elite tennis athlete Naomi Osaka has competed in the world’s most prestigious tennis tournaments, representing her home nation of Japan. While Osaka has many athletic accolades to her name, she also leads the conversation on mental health support and regulation in elite athletic organizations, including the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) and Grand Slam Governing Body. In May 2021, after receiving a fine for missing a press conference, Osaka faced the decision of whether to withdraw from the French Open due to her mental health concerns or to finish the tournament to preserve her ranking and avoid further fines. After the fine, other questions arose including how the Grand Slam fines are allocated, how the media depicts Osaka, and how Osaka’s background mirrors those of other tennis legends. Osaka’s story outlines the importance of mental health advocacy in addition to policy and legal frameworks that support athletes throughout changing medical and personal events.

The Opening Decision

“I never wanted to be a distraction,” the 23-year-old Naomi Osaka noted via Twitter (Wamsley 2021, n.p.). Osaka was ranked the second-best female tennis player in the world when she received a \$15,000 fine for skipping a French Open press conference on May 30th, 2021. Osaka had won four Grand Slam titles and had recently defeated Romanian player Patricia Maria Tig that Sunday morning in Paris (Leicester and Dampf 2021, n.p.). She declined to attend the press conference following the match, citing stressful media questions as harmful to athletes’ mental health (Ponciano 202, n.p.). Media criticism and the French Open’s institutional dismissal of Osaka’s mental health concerns sparked a multifaceted debate on the media’s bias against female athletes and their lack of mental health support.

In the context of her career, Osaka was a well-established competitor, playing her first events on the International Federation Circuit in the United States in 2012 (Osaka 2021, n.p.). She then went on to win the US Open in 2018 and 2020 and the Australian Open in 2019 and 2021. Although passionate about tennis, Osaka admitted that the media coverage and question-and-answer sessions continually drained her excitement for the sport (Ponciano 2021, n.p.). Following her financial penalty for her press conference absence, she stated that she had “suffered long bouts of depression since the U.S. Open in 2018” (Ponciano 2021, n.p.). Despite this, her Australian Open Title in 2019 proved that she could play through her depression, as is often expected from top-performance athletes. The decision to fine Osaka for prioritizing her mental health demonstrated the French Open organizers’ ‘play at all costs’ mentality.

Now, Osaka must make a critical choice between her career and personal well-being. She can remain in the competition, and potentially win another title at the expense of her declining

mental health, or withdraw from the tournament to focus on mental health recovery, while risking a decline in her WTA ranking and long-term career implications.

Growth Through Sport

Naomi Osaka came from a family dedicated to hard work and sacrifice. Her father, Leonard Francois, a Haitian man, met her Japanese mother, Tamaki Osaka, in Sapporo, Japan. Despite the vocal disapproval of Tamaki's parents—as interracial marriages were uncommon and discouraged in their community—the couple married. Mari and Naomi were born in 1996 and 1997 respectively, taking their mother's last name in accordance with a Japanese law requiring children to take the last name of their Japanese parent (Singh 2021, n.p.). At age three, Naomi and her family moved to the United States, landing in Long Island, New York. Naomi and Mari attended public school in New York before their father, Leonard, made the strategic decision to move the family to Florida. Leonard encouraged his daughters to play tennis, basing his strategy off that of Serena and Venus Williams's father. Florida's sunny climate allowed the Osaka sisters to practice tennis during the day and receive their education through homeschooling at night (Singh 2021, n.p.). Despite lacking tennis coaching experience, Leonard coached Naomi and Mari, utilizing instructional books and DVDs, while Tamaki worked to support the family financially (Singh 2021, n.p.).

Naomi and Mari's parallel childhood experiences united the two in a relationship of competition and care for one another. Naomi challenged her older sister in hundreds of tennis matches over the years, without success (Hodgetts and Macfarlane 2019, n.p.). Nonetheless, Naomi contributes her competitive drive to her sister, admitting, "It took 12 years to beat her—it was probably one of the biggest moments of my career. She beat me probably more than 1,000 times over my childhood" (Hodgetts and Macfarlane 2019, n.p.). Leonard, Tamaki, and Mari's constant support and presence in Naomi's life contributed to the skill and competitive spirit that enabled Naomi's breakthrough into elite tennis.

Youth Tennis

In contrast to the typical route of competing in ITF Junior tournaments for two to four years before entering the ITF women's circuit, Osaka entered directly into the ITF women's circuit, playing her first two ITF matches at age 14 (Osaka 2022, n.p.). At 15 years old, she began training at the ISP Academy, a step up from her initial training with her father (Osaka 2022, n.p.). Later, she joined the Harold Solomon Tennis Academy and the ProWorld Tennis Academy. She switched coaches at the Harold Solomon Tennis Academy, and at age 16, Naomi "turned pro" by competing in her first Women's Tennis Association (WTA) season.

Osaka and her coaches' decision for her to skip the ITF Junior Circuit and enter directly into the WTA season mirrors the journey of tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams. Serena and Venus's father, Richard Williams, raised and coached both sisters in tennis, and encouraged them to become aspiring elite tennis players (Singh 2021, n.p.). Although Venus Williams initially played in the ITF junior circuit, her father later withdrew her from the circuit, citing overwhelming competition and less emphasis on her happiness and overall development. Venus's coach Rick Macci explained, "The parents just get so caught up in it... And they lose perspective, and they don't really understand that this is a journey." (Singh 2021, n.p.). Venus's experience in the junior circuit cautioned other players, including Osaka, of the dangers of entering intense tournament play at a young age. Osaka's entrance into the WTA circuit at the age of 16 positioned her to avoid

some of the stressors of the junior ITF circuit yet still placed her in international competition as a young adult.

Athletes' Mental Health

Osaka and other athletes' struggles with mental health and youth competition led is connected to the concept of athlete burnout. A study titled "Anxiety and Burnout in Young Athletes: The Mediating Role of Cognitive Appraisal" demonstrates the danger of entering intensive training and competition at a young age. Although developing strength, precise form, and endurance enhances young athletes' performances in their adult careers, the intensity of the sport at this age contributes to the athletes' future stress levels and anxiety surrounding the sport. (Gomes, Faria and Vilela 2017, n.p.). Evidence in this study further suggests a direct relationship between burnout¹ and anxiety in athletes, meaning that if a player feels on the brink of their physical or mental limitations, they are more likely to experience anxiety.

Fortunately, a psychological technique called cognitive appraisal helps mediate the effects of anxiety for youth athletes. Cognitive appraisal in sports relates to the way an athlete assesses a situation and how a previous event may affect them. For example, if after a loss, an athlete remains discouraged and self-deprecating, this will negatively affect their mental well-being and future attitude towards the sport. On the contrary, if an athlete evaluates their performance by thinking of areas they did well on as well as areas to improve, the cognitive appraisal helps prevent future anxiety surrounding matches. Naomi Osaka indirectly referenced this concept when she discussed the pressure of youth athletes to be successful, with less emphasis on the enjoyment of the sport. Osaka explained this pressure to young athletes at the grand opening of the refurbished tennis courts in Queens, New York in August 2021, saying, "My biggest piece of advice is to enjoy what you're doing," she said (Zagoria 2021, n.p.). Youth tennis, along with other elite youth sports, emphasizes constant progression and development to get to the next stage, such as the Junior Circuit or the WTA. This often-rushed development process, coupled with the lack of psychological training tools in coaching such as positive cognitive appraisal, can lead to burnout and eventually anxiety in young athletes.

Other harmful realities surrounding athletes' mental health include the misconception that athletes' superior strength and physical health to non-athletes should translate to lower prevalence of mental illnesses like depression (Gorcynsky, Coyle, and Gibson 2017, n.p.). A 2017 study from the National Library of Medicine found high-performance athletes to be just as likely to report depressive symptoms as non-athletes (Gorcynsky, Coyle, and Gibson 2017, n.p.). In comparison to male high-performance athletes, female high-performance athletes were 52% more likely to report mild or severe depressive symptoms, due to increased personal and professional pressures (Gorcynsky, Coyle, and Gibson 2017, n.p.). The prevalence of burnout and depression in elite female athletes affects elite tennis players, including Naomi Osaka.

The Business of Tennis

The financial pressure to consistently win matches may also contribute to players's stress levels. Professional tennis players, like Osaka, earn money through entering tournaments, playing matches, and receiving endorsements from brands. Elite tennis players's earnings are dependent on their ranking and success over a sustained period, as players earn tournament prize money and

¹ Burnout is defined as the physical or mental collapse due to overwork or stress (Oxford Language 2022).

appearance fees, as well as endorsement deals, exhibition fees, and bonuses (Hadlich 2022, n.p.). Unlike sports such as football, baseball, and soccer, most elite tennis athletes do not sign contracts, as they represent themselves or their nation instead of a team. Without contracts, less job stability may exist for tennis players than their counterparts in other sports. Injuries or mental health issues can also cause players to miss crucial, compensated tournaments. Therefore, tennis athletes must rely on brand endorsements and sponsorships to remain paid during a lapse in tournament play. Financial pressure to remain healthy, fit, and at one's peak athletic ability for sustained periods of time can exacerbate other sources of stress on young tennis players.

As an individual sport, tennis contains ranking systems that add to the pressure on athletes. A female tennis player's WTA ranking is compiled from her results at a maximum of 16 singles tournaments and 11 doubles tournaments (Nag 2022, n.p.). Points are earned from the four Grand Slams and four mandatory WTA 1000 tournaments wherever possible (Nag 2022, n.p.). WTA rankings not only reveal the top players and how they compare, but the rankings also incentivize competition between players to climb higher in the rankings each year. This numerical demonstration of career progression may prove detrimental for those players who lose to a better-ranked opponent or fail to improve in rank. In addition to internal competition, the rankings determine who qualifies for top tournaments as well as participants' seeds, which set their initial opponent in the tournament bracket. On television broadcasts of the tournaments, players' seeds or rankings are often announced before their names—for example, "36th-ranked Naomi Osaka" (WTA 2022, n.p.). A player's ranking proceeds their name, implying that their athletic status trumps their individuality and legacy. This announcement style solidifies the importance of rankings to not only the players themselves but also to the media and spectators worldwide. WTA rankings and realities around compensation add to the difficulty and competitiveness of the sport of tennis.

The Gendered History of Tennis

Historically, the sport of tennis has been a setting full of instances of gender discrimination. In 1972, players Donald Dell, Jack Kramer, and Cliff Drysdale, founded the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) for male tennis competitors (ATP 2020, n.p.). The ATP stated its goal was to "protect the interests of professional tennis players," but the organization neglected to include female tennis players (ATP 2020, n.p.). A year later, in 1973, Billie Jean King founded the Women's Tennis Association (WTA), with the goal of uniting all professional tennis players, especially through tournaments (King 2017, n.p.). Prior to the creation of the 'Open' Tournaments, such as the US Open, French Open, and Australian Open, elite tennis players either played in the exclusively-male World Championship for Tennis or the National Tennis League, open to men and women. The Open tournament structure created an environment where both men and women could compete. However, professional tennis associations failed to do the same, as the ATP's male-only organization led to the founding of the WTA, instead of ATP initially creating one unified institution to represent all elite tennis players.

Another instance showcasing sexism in tennis history occurred during the "Battle of the Sexes," a match between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King. In 1973, Bobby Riggs was a 55-year-old former elite tennis player, who had a successful tennis career in the 1930s and 1940s. Riggs claimed "the women's game was so inferior to the men's game that even someone as old as he could beat the current top female players" (King 2017, n.p.). Billie Jean King, an elite female tennis player, accepted the challenge to play Riggs "to disprove his baseless assertions" (King

2017, n.p.). The media embraced this unprecedented match, coining it “The Battle of the Sexes” and broadcasting it on primetime television. On September 20, 1973, an estimated 90 million viewers worldwide watched as King beat Riggs in three straight sets, earning a \$100,000 prize (King 2017, n.p.). Following the match, King commented on the pressure she felt to win the match and uphold the respect and progress female tennis players and athletes worldwide had fought for, admitting: “I thought it would set us [female athletes] back 50 years if I didn’t win that match. It would ruin the women’s [tennis] tour and affect all women’s self-esteem. To beat a 55-year-old guy was no thrill for me. The thrill was exposing a lot of new people to tennis” (King 2017, n.p.). Billie Jean King’s talent allowed her to beat Bobby Riggs, but the sexist nature in which Riggs challenged King, as well as the media’s discriminatory promotion of the event, depict another occurrence of extreme sexism in the sport of tennis.

Keeping Tennis Alive

Along with tennis’s sexist history, the sport faces an additional problem with declining popularity in the United States due to its smaller fanbase and reliance on a few star figures. The Tennis Creative’s Tennis Popularity Statistics 2021 report cites that since tennis stars Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, and Andy Roddick retired from the sport, tennis’s popularity has declined, yet “recent success of American youngsters could likely continue to give the sport the boost it so needed” (Czermak 2021, n.p.). Due to tennis’s waning fan base in the United States, elite tennis players’ personas and media presences are crucial to the sport’s longevity. Figures such as Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka have high media followings, with 15 million and 3 million followers on Instagram respectively (Instagram 2022, n.p.). The ATP and WTA only have 2.4 million and 1 million Instagram followers, respectively, demonstrating that famous tennis players hold more attention and value to fans than the tennis organizations themselves.

Additionally, sports journalism attempts to add to the popularity of tennis. Tennis-specific publications such as *Tennis View*, *World Tennis Magazine*, *New York Tennis Magazine*, and *Inside Tennis Magazine*, all release issues targeted at the tennis community. *Sports Illustrated* placed Serena Williams on the cover of the 2015 Sportsperson of the Year issue and Naomi Osaka on the cover of the 2021 swimsuit issue (Sports Illustrated 2022, n.p.). These publications highlighted Osaka and Williams’s athletic skills and off-court personas while also representing strong female body types. Moreover, media outlets rely on players’ post-match interviews, sponsorship deals, and personal lives for written content. The post-match interviews and panels, therefore, prove important for the media outlets and for furthering the sport of tennis overall. However, the athletes who partake in interviews for media outlets may not agree with their depiction in the media and possibly find these interactions detrimental, as in Osaka’s case.

Osaka’s Mental Health History

In a statement posted on her Twitter feed in 2021, Osaka wrote: “The truth is I have suffered long bouts of depression since the US Open in 2018 and I have had a really hard time coping with that” (Wamsley 2021, n.p.). Databases and publications lack the exact diagnoses and information needed to describe Osaka’s mental health history. The highly personal, medical, and recent nature of Osaka’s statement leads to limited public information regarding her mental health status.

Naomi Osaka declined the French Open press conference to protect her current and future mental health. Her decision to either continue to compete in the French Open matches or withdraw represents a choice between ‘playing through’ anxiety or stepping out. A common phrase in

sports—“tough it out”—illustrates the priority of an athlete’s success and grit over mental or physical wellbeing. A dissertation by Arna Erega investigates the dangers of “pushing through” challenges, either physically or mentally. Erega utilizes data from a study of female track and field athletes, finding:

Athletes who chose to train and compete through pain and injuries face identity challenges, which are further facilitated by the student-athlete-coach relationship, one's support system, and acceptance of the "push through the pain" mindset. This mindset was found to be further facilitated by the underlying belief that the athlete role is a job for which participants have been compensated (Erega 2021, n.p.).

The Grand Slam Committee’s choice to fine Osaka for her decision to not “tough out” her mental health struggles at the press conference reinforced the notion that an athlete’s performance on the court is most important, rather than their holistic wellbeing.

The Fine

A joint statement released by the heads of the U.S. Tennis Association, the French Tennis Federation, the All-England Tennis Club, and Tennis Australia informed Osaka of her \$15,000 monetary punishment, stating that the press conference was “mandatory” (Ponciano 2021, n.p.). Despite the \$15,000 fine making up 0.025% of Osaka’s estimated \$60 million salary in 2021, the messaging from the tennis associations implied a lack of care and consideration for the elite tennis player’s mental health (Forbes 2022, n.p.). The announcement declared that Osaka “chose not to honor her contractual media obligations” and listed a fine according to the code of conduct (Madani 2021, n.p.). The article continued on to address mental well-being, claiming that “The mental health of players competing in our tournaments...is of the utmost importance to the Grand Slams” (Madani 2021, n.p.). However, the statement nevertheless insisted that “a core element of the Grand Slam regulations is the responsibility of the players to engage with the media, whatever the result of their match” (Ponciano 2021, n.p.).

Although the strict requirement for players to engage with media outlets seems harsh, the media engagement is an important avenue for players to initiate sponsorships and paid endorsements. The Grand Slam committee acknowledged that for the organizations to improve, they “need engagement from the players to understand their perspective and find ways to improve their experiences” (Madani 2021, n.p.). However, Osaka admitted that facing press questions, pictures, and bright lights after a crucial loss led to further devastation. She referred to this situation as “kicking a person while they’re down” and did not support the inflexibility of the press conference scheduling (Ponciano 2021, n.p.). Already wary of the post-match commentators and critics, Osaka faced an additional stipulation. The Grand Slam organizers warned that if she were to decline another press conference in the future, she could face additional fines or suspension from upcoming tournaments (Ponciano 2021, n.p.). This additional threat required her commitment to full attendance at all French Open media events, regardless of her mental health status or preference.

The Grand Slam Committee

The four organizations composing the Grand Slam committee include the U.S. Tennis Association, the French Tennis Federation, the All-England Tennis Club, and Tennis Australia.

Current policies, including The Grand Slam Code of Conduct, outline the manner in which players must behave while competing. Players are liable for fines for breaking rackets, shouting obscenities, leaving the court without permission, audible or visual abuse, unsportsmanlike conduct, and even not performing to the best of their ability (International Tennis Federation 2022, n.p.). Additional offenses, such as “major offences,” include aggravated behavior. Aggravated behavior can involve one serious incident or a compilation of smaller offenses.

While fines for mental health considerations seem less justified than those for unsportsmanlike conduct, the money does enter a fund for the development of future tennis players called the Grand Slam Development Fund (Renton 2021). The Grand Slam Development Fund “has contributed over \$55 million to tennis development since its inception in 1986” (Renton 2021, n.p.). Of this sum, about \$200,000 comes from players’ fines (Renton 2021, n.p.). The funds in the Grand Slam Development Fund have contributed to the breaking of accessibility barriers for players who come from nations with fewer tennis training opportunities. In The International Tennis Federation’s article, “Grand Slam Fines: Where Does the Money Go?” author Jamie Renton explains:

The fund has played its part in some milestone achievements for players hailing from nations hardly renowned for tennis. Mayar Sherif, the first Egyptian woman to compete in the main draw at a Grand Slam in the Open Era at 2020 Roland Garros; Hyeon Chung, the first Korean player to reach a Grand Slam singles semi-final at the 2018 Australian Open and Ons Jabeur; the first Arab woman to make the last eight at a Grand Slam at the 2020 Australian Open, have all received Grand Slam Player Grants since 2017 (Renton 2021, n.p.).

Fortunately, these funds financially support athletes whose nations are not highly represented in the Grand Slam Tournaments. Regardless of the fine’s usage, the reason behind mental health fines and their quantities remains unclear.

Problems of The Grand Slam Code of Conduct

Contradicting clauses within the Grand Slam Code of Conduct further complicate the justifiability of Osaka’s fine. By stating that fines can be issued to players for both performing “less than their ability” yet also for skipping media commitments in order to prioritize their mental health, players are left with a paradoxical choice. Putting mental health and wellness at the forefront of a player’s athletic considerations allows them to perform to their best ability, making the fine counterintuitive. The Grand Slam Code of Conduct lacks any specific clauses regarding mental health considerations—even the 2022 version fails to propose solutions or structural support for these considerations (International Tennis Federation 2022, n.p.).

Another flaw in the Grand Slam Code of Conduct lies in the range of fine quantities. The monetary amount is relative to the player’s ranking status and earning potential. The fine can range from \$1,000 to \$20,000, with trends showing that higher-ranked players receive larger fines (Renton 2021, n.p.). Players ranked in the Top 10, as Osaka was at the time, receive closer to \$20,000. Thus, a less skilled player and a more skilled player could commit the same offense, and the more skilled player would receive a substantially larger fine. In comparison to a criminal offense, this would be considered unjust, as fines for equal offenses should ideally be similar. Inequal and unspecific fines could contribute to the unfair Grand Slam Code of Conduct.

Alternatively, one could defend the current scale for fines as a fair policy because it aims to take the same approximate percentage of the players' wages. However, the Grand Slam Code of Conduct does not detail the salary percentages each player is fined, making this system inaccurate and contingent upon the referee's decision, which could enable gendered or racial discrimination. For example, the 2022 Grand Slam Code of Conduct outlines each offense's fine parameters too vaguely. Following the description of each type of misdemeanor, the document notes "Violation of this Section shall subject a player to a fine up to \$20,000 for each violation," lacking any clarity on the reasoning behind larger or smaller fines (International Tennis Federation 2022, 47). Therefore, with a different referee, Osaka's \$15,000 fine could have been a slightly different amount. However, in an attempt to make the penalties more equal, if a conduct violation occurs during a match, players may be subject to the Point Penalty Schedule (International Tennis Federation 2022, 49). The Point Penalty Schedule states that for offenses committed during matches, the first offense receives a warning, the second a point penalty, and the third and subsequent offenses receive a game penalty. Osaka did not receive any point penalties because her offense did not occur during a match. The lack of defined amounts for fines based on players' rankings adds to the potential corruption of the Grand Slam Code of Conduct.

Osaka's Depiction in the Media

After Naomi Osaka's refusal to speak at the media conference, reporters and media outlets initially criticized her stance, including subtle references to misogynoir². Osaka's bias in the media often consists of "race talk," or the explicit insertion of "racial signs and symbols" (Razack 2021, n.p.). For example, ABC's article states Osaka "framed the matter as a mental health issue," suggesting that her mental health status was an excuse to get out of the press conference, rather than an action to protect herself (Leicester and Dampf 2021, n.p.). In 2019, Mark Knight, a reporter and cartoon artist at an Australian media outlet *The Herald Sun*, drew a cartoon of Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams after Osaka beat Williams in the U.S. Open Final. The cartoon stereotypes both Osaka and Williams, depicting Osaka as a white woman with blonde hair and Williams as "sambo-like," mimicking racist Jim Crow caricatures (Held 2019, n.p.). The National Association of Black Journalists described the cartoon as "repugnant on many levels," adding it "exudes racist, sexist caricatures of both women" (Held 2019, n.p.). Writer Tobi Ordein noted the cartoon captures misogynoir. She said, "At the heart of 'misogynoir'... is a caricature of the angry, black woman. And it dehumanizes us, and it stops us showing emotion" (Held 2019, n.p.). While the cartoon draws Williams as an "angry black woman," Osaka's racial identity is whitewashed³, showing media misogynoir in both cases.

Previously, Osaka faced media misogynoir in 2019, when Nissin Foods, a noodle corporation, released two advertisements that whitewashed the Japanese-Haitian tennis player, meaning they portrayed Osaka's skin tone as lighter; making her appear Caucasian. Neglecting to represent Osaka truthfully is racist; Nissin Foods implies that they would rather advertise Osaka as white than highlight her as a Haitian Japanese woman. Nissin's advertisements "reflect racialized and gendered ideologies in an allegedly homogeneous Japanese society" (Ho and Tanaka 2021, n.p.). Furthermore, Osaka's outspoken statements regarding her decision to not attend the press conference have been said to "complicate her identities" instead of elevating them.

² Misogynoir is anti-Black misogyny, with both race and gender biases and is typically directed towards black women (Blackburn Center 2020, n.p.).

³ Whitewashing is defined as portraying a person of color as white, neglecting their original ethnic background (Lacina 2021, n.p.).

This statement provides unnecessary commentary that she is a Haitian Japanese woman *and* she discusses mental health, which the media finds “complicated” (Ho and Tanaka 2021, n.p.). In an article discussing Osaka’s interactions with misogynoir in media, authors Sabrina Razack and Janelle Joseph write:

In the contemporary “culture of grievance,” most people are familiar with the “angry Black woman” or the “angry Brown woman”—however, rarely does the “angry Yellow woman” have a voice. Osaka’s Yellow and Japanese American *nikkei* (migrant) identities are complicated by her connections to the Black diaspora, the racist tropes which assume Black athletic excellence, and specifically, the Haitian *jaspora* (diaspora), largely made invisible in international sport (2020).

Razack and Joseph argue Osaka’s popularity is attributed to her race and “exoticness.” Following the press conference, some believed “It was not her talent that made headlines,” but rather being biracial and therefore having a unique story (Razack and Joseph 2020, n.p.). Tennis fans view Osaka’s experience as parallel to Serena Williams, who has faced endless discrimination from the media in the sport. Studies on Serena Williams (Douglas 2002, 2012; Ifekwunigwe 2018; Rankine 2014) show the perpetual discrimination Williams experiences as an elite tennis player, noting, “The rise in global popularity and unquestionable weight of Williams’s persona also catapulted Osaka to gain celebrity status, including scrutinization” (Razack and Joseph 2020, n.p.). Suggesting that Osaka’s media popularity and attention come from her marginalized identity more than her abilities further illuminates the prevalence of misogynoir surrounding Black female athletes.

Despite the prevalence of misogynoir in the media’s depictions of Osaka, the 2022 Grand Slam Code of Conduct writes that media events and press conferences “enable players to put across their opinions on their performance and provide valuable exposure to the media and fans” (International Tennis Federation 2022, n.p.). However, how ‘valuable’ is this exposure to the player? The debate regarding the pros and cons of media exposure encompasses the benefits of financial profits, name recognition, female empowerment, and unfiltered conversation with fans, but also the potential harm of racism, sexism, media misinterpretations, and mental illness.

Epilogue: Sparking New Mental Health Initiatives

Osaka’s decision to skip the press conference and her resulting fine led her to withdraw from the French Open tournament altogether. She released a statement via social media:

The best thing for the tournament, the other players and my well-being is that I withdraw so that everyone can get back to focusing on the tennis going on in Paris. I never wanted to be a distraction and I accept that my timing was not ideal, and my message could have been clearer. More importantly, I would never trivialize mental health or use the term lightly. The truth is I have suffered long bouts of depression since the US Open in 2018, and I have had a really hard time coping with that (Wamsley 2021, n.p.).

Naomi’s openness to discussing her mental health caused many fellow athletes to release supporting statements. Fellow tennis stars Serena Williams and Martina Navratilova voiced their empathy for Osaka. Williams noted: “Everyone is different, and everyone handles things

differently. You just have to let her handle it the way she wants to and the best way she thinks she can...I think she is doing the best she can" (The Score 2021, n.p.). Navratilova followed "As athletes we are taught to take care of our body, and perhaps the mental and emotional aspect gets short shrift. This is about more than doing or not doing a press conference" (The Score 2021, n.p.). Basketball star Stephen Curry criticized the French Open and Grand Slam governing bodies' actions, writing, "the powers that be don't protect their own," pointing to the prominent officials that chose to penalize rather than support Osaka (Wamsley 2021, n.p.). Other individuals in the public eye added notes of support, including actors, filmmakers, and mental health advocates.

More important than her strong backing by athletic and high-profile individuals was the effect of her actions on the female sports community. In Tony Collins's book review of *Work, Rest, and Play: Recent Trends in the History of Sport and Leisure*, he writes, "The significance of sport is dependent on its wider social or cultural importance" (Collins 2007, 399). The cultural influence of Osaka's decision lies in the awareness and vulnerability she has encouraged within athletic circles when discussing her mental health. As a result, this awareness has helped to create policies and programs to support those struggling with depression, anxiety, and stress in various sports. For example, the NBA has created an initiative called NBA Mind Health that assigns an NBA Director of Mental Health to support both developing athletes and professional basketball players (NBA 2021, n.p.). Other sports associations may look to this initiative for guidance in developing their own. While the Grand Slam Committee has not released many mental health support initiatives, Osaka's gesture had overarching effects and furthered the conversation of mental health prioritization in all careers, especially athletic professions.

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