Serena is Still Treated Differently Than Male Athletes

Billie Jean King

The ceiling that women of color face on their path to leadership never felt more impenetrable than it did at the women’s U.S. Open final on Saturday. Ironic, perhaps, that the roof of Arthur Ashe Stadium was closed for the championship match. What was supposed to be a memorable moment for tennis, with Serena Williams, perhaps the greatest player of all time, facing off against Naomi Osaka, the future of our sport, turned into another example of people in positions of power abusing that power.

Lost in the craziness of the evening was the fact that Osaka played excellent tennis and won her first major title. Competing against her childhood idol, she summoned her A game and earned her championship — no need for any asterisk in the record book. She was the best player on the court Saturday.

But that’s not what many will remember. For fans, Osaka’s stellar play was overshadowed by an archaic tennis rule that eventually led to an abuse of power.

The cause and effect of this unsatisfactory sequence of events are pretty clear.

The cause was the inconsistent application of a rule — and the rule itself — that led to the warning that chair umpire Carlos Ramos gave to Williams for coaching coming from her player’s box: If tennis would catch up with the 21st century and allow coaching on every point, the situation on the court would never have escalated to the level of absurdity that it did. Every player, after all, still has to *play* the match — she has to execute on every point, and she should never be held responsible for the actions of a coach. Coaching happens all the time, at all levels of tennis. So why not just allow it?

The effect was an abuse of power: Ramos crossed the line. He made himself part of the match. He involved himself in the end result. An umpire’s job is to keep control of the match, and he let it get out of control. The rules are what they are, but the umpire has discretion, and Ramos chose to give Williams very little latitude in a match where the stakes were highest. Granted, Williams could have taken some responsibility and moved on after the first warning (and, speaking from experience, it’s debatable whether she knew this was a warning or not), and before the point and game penalties started flying.

But, for her, and for many other women who have experienced an abuse of power at their workplaces, there was more at stake.

Did Ramos treat Williams differently than male players have been treated? I think he did. Women are treated differently in most arenas of life. This is especially true for women of color. And what played out on the court yesterday happens far too often. It happens in sports, in the office and in public service. Ultimately, a woman was penalized for standing up for herself. A woman faced down sexism, and the match went on.

Women have a right, though, to speak out against injustice — as much right as a man. I found myself in similar situations in my career; once, I even walked off the court in protest. It wasn’t my proudest moment, but it may have been one of my more powerful ones. I understand what motivated Williams to do what she did. And I hope every single girl and woman watching yesterday’s match realizes they should always stand up for themselves and for what they believe is right. Nothing will ever change if they don’t.

Women are taught to be perfect. We aren’t perfect, of course, and so we shouldn’t be held to that standard. We have a voice. We have emotions. When we react adversely to a heated professional situation, far too often, we’re labeled hysterical. That must stop. Tennis is a game, but for Williams and Osaka, it’s also their job, their life’s work. Yes, Williams was heated during the match because she felt Ramos wasn’t just penalizing her, but also attacking her character and professionalism. Her true leadership and character were revealed after the match, in the trophy presentation, when she shifted the spotlight to Osaka. She didn’t have to, but she did. I know her — that’s who she really is, and she knew it was the right thing to do.

Serena’s a champion. She has done and continues to do the hard work. She was right to speak her mind, to put a voice to the injustice, and she was right to know when to call for the controversy to end.