

Serena: Nobody's right, when everybody's wrong

By [Bruce Jenkins](#)

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Serena Williams of the U.S. and Naomi Osaka of Japan at the trophy ceremony for the U.S. Open after Osaka defeated Williams in the final at Arthur Ashe Stadium in New York, Sept. 8, 2018. Her tirade may be long remembered and the umpire who penalized her could have acted differently, but the meltdown tarnished the sport and sportsmanship, Juliet Macur writes. (Chang W. Lee/The New York Times) CHANG W. LEE; Chang W. Lee / New York Times

■ It's easy to pick a winner out of the circus that passed for the U.S. Open women's final on Saturday. That would be the actual winner, Naomi Osaka.

Osaka was dominating Serena Williams throughout the match, and she was going to win it under any circumstances. There is no asterisk. The fact that she steeled herself to beat the greatest player in the history of women's tennis, through tears and sympathy and emotions unknown, spoke to a champion's mentality the 20-year-old was forced to develop on the sport's biggest stage.

In time - especially if Osaka continues on that path - her victory will be the episode most remembered. But as we sort out the immediate aftermath, there are so many losers:

• **Chair umpire Carlos Ramos.** This is a highly respected man in tennis, a fact emphasized by many, including Serena herself ("He's always been a great umpire," she said afterward). Why would he be even the slightest concerned about hand signals in the stands from Williams' coach, Patrick Mouratoglou? For that matter, why would Mouratoglou even bother? There was no evidence that Serena was looking in his direction, and she has spent a career resisting any form of coaching during a match. She's old-school that way; she'll deal with things on her own.

"Patrick, stop coaching," Mary Carillo said on the Tennis Channel broadcast.

"Serena doesn't need it, and she doesn't want it." For Ramos to assess a violation

was absurd - such coaching happens routinely at every event in the world - and it's a critical matter, because it triggered the chain of events to follow.

When a frustrated Williams shattered her racket by firing it to the ground, Ramos didn't have to call a violation. It's in the rules, but many racket-destroying incidents have gone unpunished in the past, and this was the U.S. Open. Players should be allowed an irrational moment; just let it go. Instead, in the wake of the coaching violation, this became a second offense - two strikes, as it were.

Ramos' biggest mistake, though, was not warning Serena when she continued her harangue from a courtside chair. He should have said something along the lines of, "Serena, I know you're upset, but if you don't calm down, I'll cite you for verbal abuse - and that means a game penalty."

It's rather comical that Ramos lost his patience over being called a "liar" and a "thief." Those are unkind words, but profoundly tame when compared to the vile, vulgar displays staged by the likes of Pancho Gonzales, Ilie Nastase, Jimmy Connors and John McEnroe over the years. These guys said things, right in the chair umpire's face, that aren't fit for a family newspaper. They became *known* for their temper. It made them heroes in certain sectors. "Oh, there goes bad-boy McEnroe again, that wild man." With rare exceptions (McEnroe was disqualified from the 1990 Australian Open), their matches were allowed to continue.

"Serena's right," McEnroe said on ESPN. "The guys are held to different standards. It's like, 'How dare she do that?' She needed some leeway. I said far worse."

Instead of keeping his cool, Ramos made himself the story, effectively ending the match by assessing that game penalty and handing Osaka a 5-3 lead. Sorry, but you just can't do that. Now we're hearing charges of sexism and racism, and perhaps that's a stretch in Ramos' case. Thanks to his inexcusable behavior, we can't be sure.

“Ramos took what began as a minor infraction and turned it into one of the nastiest and most emotional controversies in the history of tennis,” wrote Sally Jenkins in a superb Washington Post column, “all because he couldn’t take a woman speaking sharply to him.”

(Interesting: Normally, the first order of business in the post-match ceremony is to summon the chair umpire in a job-well-done sort of gesture. Ramos was escorted off the court before that could happen.)

•**Serena.** Everything she said was correct. She’d been wronged, and it was outrageous. “I don’t cheat to win,” she told Ramos, defiantly. “I’d rather lose.” Absolutely. But she went way over the top by refusing to get her mind back on the match. She wouldn’t stop demanding an apology, and that wasn’t going to happen. Maybe later, in a message from Ramos, but not during the match. It was wretched injustice, but Serena became furious to the point of tears, with points yet to play.

Meanwhile, the racists are having a field day. Mark Knight, an editorial cartoonist for the Herald Sun in Australia, illustrated a bloated, grotesque-looking Serena leaping in the air to stomp on her racket while Ramos says to Osaka, “Can you just let her win?”

On the flip side, and something to be remembered, is Patrick McEnroe’s comment on ESPN: “We aren’t standing in Serena’s shoes.” She and her sister, Venus, got a singular perspective of what it means to be a black woman (and girl) in America as they rose through a white-person’s sport. In doing so, they conducted themselves with great dignity, making inroads in social activism and becoming worldwide celebrities.

So why can’t Serena be like Venus, a model of comportment, someone who always rises above the fray? Because she’s just *not that way*. Recalling some of Serena’s comments over the years: “I’m the baby (of the family), the youngest. I was always treated the best. I’m a whiner, a complainer. It doesn’t help . . . I do have a temper tantrum sometimes. I’m like one of those girls on a reality show

that has all the drama and everyone hates them . . . But I think it shows my passion. If I don't have that intensity or that anger, I'm not doing as well as I need to do to win. Sometimes getting angry really works for me."

And while the cartoonists and ignorant critics have a field day, some prominent African American women are having their say:

Rebecca Traister on *The Body Politic*: "This has been the ask of women, and most especially of nonwhite women, since the beginning of time. Take the diminution and injustice and don't get mad about it. If you get mad, you will get punished for it, and then you will be expected to fix it, to make sure everyone is comfortable again."

Lonnae O'Neal of *The Undefeated*: "Anyone who can see that Williams is a woman can also see she's black. But there is only room in the American psyche to engage one visual. Power dynamics and gender issues are having a moment in our national conversation. But that fear of an angry black woman is as old as the republic."

•**The Grand Slam's rules of conduct.** When tournament referee Brian Earley was called to the scene, one's first thought was, "Do what's right. Overturn that game penalty." Apparently, such a call cannot be changed, and that's wrong. Things were now completely out of hand, and if Earley had the power to do so, he could have restored a measure of order.

•**The WTA tour and its stance on coaching.** How's this for a really idiotic double standard: In regular tour events, on-court coaching is not only allowed, it's encouraged. Coaches come right down to the court, kneel in front of their players and say a few words. But it's not allowed in Grand Slam events, and if one coach makes an ill-advised signal at the wrong time, all hell can break loose. I don't agree with Billie Jean King when she says (via Twitter), "Coaching on every point should be allowed in tennis." It should be *eliminated* once the match starts. The beauty of tennis is its one-on-one theater, the changes of mood,

players thinking their way through to success or failing to gain the upper hand. You shouldn't get any help of any kind.

I'd get rid of the on-court nonsense, but there's nothing anyone can do if a coach wants to deliver signals from the stands. That has to be allowed now, in the wake of Serena's disaster. Then we'll see which players honor the game's basic tenets, competing strictly as an individual, and which ones pathetically gaze toward their coaches over every little thing.

In the end, Serena showed the side of her personality that has lifted her to great heights. She hugged Osaka as they met at the net, sweetly consoled her during the ceremony and told the fans to appreciate the winner's great moment. That was the true Serena, just as real as the one who refuses to let anyone insult her character. It's just a shame that as we reflect on Saturday at Arthur Ashe Stadium, we feel only regret.

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