

Annika Sorenstam and Justine Henin

5-15-2008

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Annika Sorenstam and Justine Henin" (2008). *On Sport and Society*. 780.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/780>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Annika Sorenstam and Justine Henin
MAY 15, 2008

I have been trying to remember a time when two players who dominated their sport retired within a day of one another. Two of the most significant people in sport have walked away well before time demanded. In the case of Justine Henin the fact that she is only 25 adds to the surprise, while even with Annika Sorenstam at age 37 it seems as if she is leaving early.

In many ways Justine Henin was an unlikely superstar of tennis or any other sport. Henin is small of stature, at just a shade under five-foot six-inches and 126 pounds, so it seemed improbable that she could dominate opponents with her power. But she could, and she did. Her small frame hiding under a baseball cap did not fool anyone who ever faced her across a net, nor anyone who had ever seen her on the court.

Henin's career was a victory of mind over matter, as well as dogged dedication to the endless hours of practice required of her. It was also filled with tragedy, and that came to full public view last year. The death of her mother when she was twelve, the estrangement from her domineering father over both tennis and her marriage, the breakup of her marriage, and her reconciliation with her brothers and sister and then her father are now a familiar story. Indeed by the end of last tennis season it seemed as if Justine Henin was at the top of her game and the top of her life.

She won ten tournaments last year including the French Open and the U.S. Open and her personal life was whole once again. As this season began her game seemed to be deserting her. Plagued by bad play and fatigue she lost in the third round of the German Open and pulled out of the Italian Open. Shortly thereafter she came to her decision to retire, effective immediately.

The tennis world was shocked. The sports world was surprised. And everyone asked, why?

Henin's answer was clear and simple. "I feel like I already lived three lives. I gave the sport all I could and took everything it could give me," she said. "I take this decision without the least bit of regrets. It is my life as a woman that starts now." It has never been said any better.

Henin ended her career on court with 41 singles titles, seven grand slam titles, 117 weeks being ranked number one in the world, and nearly \$20M in career earnings. Those numbers are one measure, but the sum total of her life is a better one.

One day before Henin's surprising announcement, Annika Sorenstam announced her retirement. Although less surprising than Henin's, Sorenstam's retirement caught the golf world off guard given how well she was playing this year.

Since the mid-90s Sorenstam has been the dominant player on the LPGA tour. She won 72 tournaments, third on the all-time list, 10 majors, and eight Player of the Year Awards. Her career earnings are over \$22M. She has been inducted into the LPGA Hall of Fame and the World Golf Tour Hall of Fame. This year Sorenstam has won three of the eight tournaments she entered, although she is second on the money list to the new star of the tour, Lorena Ochoa.

Annika Sorenstam was asked about the most significant moments of her career. She included the ten majors and three U.S. Opens on her list, but also near the top was shooting a 59 at Moon Valley CC in Phoenix in the 2001 Standard Register Ping, an LPGA record. She had thirteen birdies and five pars and was unhappy she didn't come in at 58 as she missed a ten-foot putt on the final hole of the round. It was a near perfect round of golf. Only three men have shot 59 on the PGA Tour.

Sorenstam brought to the LPGA what Tiger Woods brought to the men's tour. She has raised the level of play and the expectations of everyone connected to the game. It is not surprising that she and Woods have become friends. They seem to be very much alike in their commitment to golf and their dedication to improving their skills. Nor is it surprising that the two have become playing partners at special events.

In 2003 at the Colonial Annika played on the men's tour. Although she did not make the cut she played with grace under pressure as the first woman to play on the men's tour in 58 years. She considers this as one of the proud moments of her career.

What interests me about both of these athletes is that they achieved greatness in their sport and these achievements are not, as they might have been in the past, being diminished by the fact that this is women's sport.

There are still issues of gender in sport, in fact far too many, but a change has begun and the careers of Annika Sorenstam and Justine Henin are evidence of the change and both have been catalysts for further change.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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