

The U.S. Open (Correction)

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE U.S.OPEN (CORRECTION)
SEPTEMBER 10, 2018

For several decades ABC Television's "Wide World of Sports" opened with a video clip that illustrated what the announcer called "The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat." On Saturday the U.S. Open Women's Final delivered "The Agony of Victory and the Agony of Defeat."

Over the years, the U.S. Open has been the scene of some of the best tennis ever played, featuring stirring comebacks, incredible shot making, and fierce competitive battles. It has been the place where fans would go to see the best tennis players in the world compete at the highest level. At times, the level of tennis reached the sublime.

On Saturday, many expected more of the same. The extra added attraction was the debut of a young player, aged 20, who might just be the harbinger of the arrival of the next generation of women stars. Her opponent was the best woman tennis player of this or any other generation. Naomi Osaka of Japan was matched up with her childhood idol, Serena Williams, aged 36. It was a hyperbolist's dream.

For Osaka this was her first grand slam final. For Williams, it was an opportunity to win her 24th Grand Slam singles title and tie the record held by Margaret Court. Serena was seeking to put a cap on her comeback from a layoff following childbirth. So much was at stake.

The focus around the Women's Championship over the past two weeks has been all about Williams. Was she back? Could she win? How different was her game? Wouldn't it be wonderful when, not if, she won this championship on September 8. She is the greatest of all time, and this will be her rightful coronation. As the matches rolled on and Williams disposed of one opponent after another, it all seemed inevitable, and for many, a before the fact *fiat accompli*.

At the end of the first set, won by Osaka 6-2, few seemed concerned. After all Serena Williams on many occasions had come out and lost the first set of a match and then roared back to win the next two sets. Still there had to be some doubts,

although not likely in Serena Williams' head. Surely experience would tell, and the pressures of the moment would prove to be too much for this 20 year old newcomer.

However, in the second set Osaka kept up the pressure, and it looked very much like Williams was not yet back. This 20 year old with the power serve and excellent baseline game was taking control of the match.

Then, an ominous darkness descended on the court. First came the warning from the umpire who detected Serena's coach signaling to Serena to come to the net. Coaching from the stands is a code violation, Williams seemed both shocked and insulted by the warning. She let the umpire know that she did not cheat. It was not part of her game. The umpire said he understood, but there had been coaching. That might have been it, although Serena was highly agitated by having her integrity questioned and it continued to show. As Martina Navratilova said, "It should've ended right there with the point warning, but Serena just couldn't let it go."

And so, the stage was set for further trouble. A few games later when Osaka broke serve, Williams slammed her racket to the court smashing it. Another code violation was called, and Osaka was awarded a point. Williams responded with a verbal lashing for the umpire calling him a liar and a thief. It was an ugly scene and led to a third code violation and the awarding of a game point to Osaka. Serena was suddenly down 3-5 and serving to stay in the match. She would hold serve, although Osaka looked as though she had lost her fire and was slow to react during that game.

Osaka then served for the match. Refocused and overcoming the pressure of the moment as well as the massive distraction of Williams' confrontation with the umpire, Osaka served out the match, winning in convincing fashion 6-2 and 6-4.

There should be no mistake about it. Naomi Osaka won this match. She dominated the first set and controlled the second set. Part of winning under pressure is controlling your emotions. Osaka did that in impressive fashion in territory that she had never been before and under circumstances that had to be unnerving.

Serena Williams did not. She lost control of herself and clearly was pushed over the edge by the issues with the umpire. Again,

Naomi Osaka won the U.S. Open because she played excellent tennis and because she didn't succumb to the extraordinary events of the match.

As for Serena Williams it was a tragic day. If you have ever lost your temper, if you have ever been faced with the sense that things were slipping away and there was nothing you could do about it, and you went into a rage or something near it, then you should be able to empathize with Williams. Blame can be placed in many places for the spiraling of forces in the second set, but in the end, one of the things that any athlete must do, is to control what they can control and get past what they cannot control. On this day, at this time in her professional career, Serena Williams was not able to look past the obstacles thrown in front of her.

After it was all over and after Williams regained her composure she took command of the moment. She told her fans to stop booing; she acknowledged the great match played by Naomi Osaka; and she did her best to comfort the tearful Osaka, whose dream had been achieved in a nightmarish scenario.

Naomi Osaka treated the fans to very high-level tennis, and she will do so many more times in the years ahead. It was her day and should only be remembered that way.

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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