

How Gender Affects Sports And Mental Health: Vulnerability And Social Structures


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Not many weeks have **passed** since netizens and all of us were appalled by the greatest Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic. They were eating and chewing every opponent alive on the clay and grass. Whether it was their mental resilience, hard work, injuries, or wit, all of us were in awe of how they conducted themselves, managed to love their fans and get the love back. All these and many factual truths made me re-visit all these players not as how they get portrayed in the public domain but how their personhood gets impacted.

Is there a distinction between the two? Or do they both complement each other? All these conjunctions made me re-visit the personhood of Naomi Osaka, one of the brightest, egalitarian voices in the tennis domain, and her recent discussion to not participate in the Press Conference and later Tournaments citing 'mental well-being' as one of the strong grounds behind it. Or Time's magazine cover page featuring her with the caption, 'it's okay, not to be okay.'

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Osaka’s Twitter handle once featured all this information. Not to my surprise, it was flooded with good wishes, hopeful words, solidarity, kindness and above all, humaneness. Off course, there was a segment lecturing her on being strong, how weakness is a disappointment and other shenanigans. Not to forget, Osaka would be one of the few tennis players who opened the discourse on mental well-being and how it impacts our personhood. She started the discourse on how players walk on this thin rope of anxiety, vulnerability, restlessness, and upheaval of thoughts. In most cases, their match decides whether they were able to walk on the rope without falling or not.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/cBkbJTTG3yI>

As a philosopher and a counsellor, it made me re-visit this rope, this non-performance of vulnerability. Brene Brown as a philosopher, has extensively worked on vulnerability. She describes it as a sign of courage, resilience, and empathy.

*“**Vulnerability**, if nothing makes us more empathetic towards people. The unique manner in which Naomi Osaka experienced and shared her aspect of vulnerability in terms of mental well-being would fit into this category. Vulnerability is not merely a condition that we are obliged to ameliorate but, when understood in the more fundamental sense, is also the ground for our responsiveness to one another.”*

“It is **because** we are vulnerable that we need ethics and social justice, but it is also because we are vulnerable — because we can be affected and made to feel **sorrow**, concern or empathy — that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically or seek justice.”

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Osaka, by taking a firm stand, makes us re-think the commodification of sports, the pressure that athletes have to go through and most importantly, the relationship between gender and mental health.

In the late 21st century, athletes like Osaka give us hope as they go beyond the commodification of sports. Osaka understands what else is at stake apart from endorsements, image, and success. Her Netflix documentary made us understand her as a human being who wasn’t afraid of showing her fragilities, and frail sense of being. She shared the pressure behind what goes into making the perfect athlete as she cried on the court when her opponent was Serena Williams, and the crowd was too busy booing Osaka. She never failed to express her weakness, frailty, and vulnerabilities.

Osaka ponders not on ending vulnerability, not suffering but seeking and seeing our ability to suffer as an important aspect of our existence. Our fragility isn’t as futile as others think it to be. It is one of the important aspects of our being. Naomi teaches us that suffering is an aspect which is inevitable.

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Beginning from physical pain as well as the pain of emotional heartbreaks, moral dilemmas, physical discomforts, losing a match, what goes behind their making of a tennis player etc. We cannot escape pain, suffering and vulnerability.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/dakoO8WJ3mY>

As a philosopher, I think that instead of trying to eliminate suffering in totality, we should try to understand and live our lives in a manner where this suffering should give meaning to our existence. Osaka endorses a new way of living our life, where suffering and vulnerability are essential aspects.

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Tennis players like Nadal teach us that it is alright to cry when you win; it is alright to get emotional when you experience reaping the fruits of your hard work. Novak makes us understand the importance of aggression and resilience, and Nadal makes us believe in wit. These players teach us to engage with life and emotions. However, Osaka made us revisit vulnerability, as a ray of hope, as a blessing in disguise.

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