



Osaka Naomi's BLM Activism Wins More Worldwide Respect Than Her US Open Victory

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Osaka Naomi walks onto the court wearing a mask with the name of Tamir Rice prior to her final match of the 2020 US Open tennis tournament on September 12, 2020.

Photo: USA TODAY Sports/Reuters/Aflo

On September 12, 2020, Osaka Naomi won her second US Open women's singles title, a victory which clinched her third Grand Slam title.

Her opponent in the final was former world number one Victoria Azarenka. After losing the first set in a nightmare start, Osaka recovered brilliantly to turn the match around and triumph. This dramatic comeback also caused a sensation, as it was the first time in 26 years the women's final was won by the player who lost the first set.

On September 13, the day after her victory, the *New York Times* featured a large photograph of Osaka and sang her praises across two pages. The headline of the article read “*Naomi Osaka, While Rallying for Social Justice, Wins U.S. Open Title.*” I cannot remember the last time the face of a Japanese – politician or sportsperson – had featured so prominently in the *New York Times*.



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An overwhelming majority of US media outlets praised Osaka as much for her comments and actions off the court as for her tournament victory. The ESPN sports channel reported that “She’s playing for much more than herself, and it’s much bigger than collecting another trophy” and the US Open’s official website featured the headline “Naomi Osaka cements her status as leader on and off the court with 2020 US Open run.”

Osaka’s influence in the world of sport and wider society and the public perception of her changed dramatically. It is probably fair to say that she has now made the transition from a “gifted athlete” to a “respected athlete.”

“Before I am an athlete, I am a black woman”

As everyone knows, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which confronts anti-Black racism, is currently gaining traction across the United States. BLM has been around since 2013 when it was created in response to the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012. Following the killing of George Floyd, which reignited the movement at the end of May, Osaka flew to Minnesota where the killing took place to take part in anti-racism protests. She has also been vocal about racism on her social media accounts.

In July, *Esquire* featured a piece titled “*Tennis star Naomi Osaka on why she flew to Minneapolis days after George Floyd’s death.*” As a mixed-race person, Osaka says that the pandemic gave her the opportunity to re-evaluate what was actually important in her life and she decided it was time to speak up about systemic racism and police brutality. She goes on to say that being “not racist” is not enough and that we have to be anti-racist; in other words, we have to speak out against racism in all its forms.

On August 26, Osaka posted the following on her Twitter account:

“...before I am an athlete, I am a black woman. And as a black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis.”

“...if I can get a conversation started in a majority white sport I consider that a step in the right direction.”

“Watching the continued genocide of Black people at the hand of the police is honestly making me sick to my stomach.”

This was, in effect, a statement of her intention not to play her semifinal match at the Western & Southern Open, which is played as a tune-up to the US Open. The statement was made in protest to the news that Jacob Blake had been shot seven times in the back in Wisconsin on August 23. While Japanese media mostly portrayed her action as a “withdrawal” from the competition, English-speaking media used the term “boycott,” which has an altogether different nuance.

Jacob Blake’s shooting sparked boycotts across the United States, with the National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball (MLB) also postponing games. Following Osaka’s boycott announcement, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) decided to postpone all matches scheduled for August 27. It then issued a statement saying that “As a sport, tennis is collectively taking a stance against racial inequality and social injustice....” The Women’s Tennis Association

subsequently asked Osaka to rejoin the tournament following the pause in play and Osaka also reversed her boycott decision.

Under the Grand Slam Code of Conduct rules, players were previously not allowed to wear clothing with “social justice cause messaging” during matches. However, at this year’s US Open, this rule was waived for the first time. The USTA stated that it “...*is committed to promoting racial equality. [...] We further believe that in these unprecedented times, athletes be given the ability to express their beliefs while on court.*”

Osaka emerged for each of her matches, wearing seven different masks bearing the names of seven Black victims killed in recent years. After her win, when asked by a reporter “What was the message you wanted to send?” Osaka, instead of answering, asked him “Well, what was the message you got?” and this again caused a stir.

Osaka captured her first Grand Slam title in the US Open two years ago when she beat veteran Serena Williams. However, her victory was overshadowed by angry booing by Williams’ fans directed at the umpire, leaving Osaka in tears, saying “I’m sorry it had to end like this.” Two years on and Osaka has grown beyond recognition both as an athlete and as a human being.

Criticism aimed at Osaka

The media coverage of Osaka’s decision to boycott her Western & Southern Open semifinal prompted critical comments about her on social media and some negative media reports. While it comes as no surprise that taking such bold action divides opinion, as far as I could tell there were more critical comments in Japanese than in English, something I found worrying.

The posts in Japanese included comments along the lines of “If you say you’re Black, then you’re not Japanese,” “If you’re a professional, then start by doing your job,” “What about the inconvenience you’re causing your sponsors and those around you?” “Don’t bring politics into sport,” and even “BLM supporters are terrorists” and “Blacks need to commit less crime for a start.”

In Japanese society, an individual who puts forward their own point of view to the point that this disturbs the harmony is often seen as selfish or a nuisance. However, was Osaka’s decision to boycott in order to protest racial injustice really selfish and indicative of a lack of professionalism? On June 5 and again on September 16, in the wake of her victory, Osaka reacted to her critics in tweets such as the following:

“I hate when random people say athletes shouldn’t get involved with politics and just entertain. Firstly, this is a human rights issue.”

“All the people that were telling me to ‘keep politics out of sports,’ (which it wasn’t political at all), really inspired me to win. You better believe I’m gonna try to be on your tv for as long as possible.”

As she points out, human rights are rights inherent to all human beings and are to be respected above all else. In response to the criticism “If you’re a professional, start by doing your job,” Osaka said categorically “...before I am an athlete, I am a black woman.” What is more, she took action precisely because she is a true professional and because she is aware of her own influence and role. She also stated “I feel like a vessel to spread awareness.”

Protest movements as a legitimate means of expression

Looking back, protest movements have played an important part at many critical junctures in American history, with the civil rights movement, the women's suffrage movement and the gay rights movement to name but a few. Some 200,000 demonstrators took part in the 1963 March on Washington, renowned for the "I have a dream" speech delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr.. Most recently, the Women's March, a protest demonstration in 2017 prompted by the inauguration of President Trump, was attended by more than 5 million people.

Such protest movements are a legitimate and important means of expressing an opinion in a democracy and taking part in them is considered a "civil right" just like voting. Even when the BLM demonstrations took off in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the Governor of New York State Andrew Cuomo did not once call on people not to go to the demonstrations. Instead, Cuomo said he understood the anger and frustration and stood figuratively with the protesters but at the same time he urged protesters to wear masks.

The claim that "BLM is a terrorist movement" has over time been proven to be based on misinformation and prejudice. A demonstration and a riot or looting are two completely different things. A riot is something that happens when criminal elements exploit the disruption caused by a demonstration, and demonstrations are mostly peaceful. Most recently, on September 3, the *Washington Post* reported that "93% of Black Lives Matter protests this summer were peaceful."

In fact, all the demonstrations and rallies I have seen in New York since May 2020 have been calm and peaceful – some were family-friendly protests which parents could attend with their children. Likewise, at the time of the September 2019 climate strikes, the mayor of New York promised that state-run schools would allow students to skip classes to participate in the protests, suggesting that some things were more important than school. Seeing children brought along by their parents or teachers and taking part in the strike with their placards made me realize that the US education system thus encourages US citizens to have their own opinions and be proactive about social issues from a young age.

Tradition of protesting athletes

The criticism of Osaka telling her to "keep politics out of sport" and telling athletes to "stick to sport" seems misdirected when seen in the context of American history and the changes that are currently taking place in the world of sport.

The United States has produced many athletes who have spoken out in support of their political beliefs or against racial injustice in the past and several of these have become legends. What is more, a dramatic shift is currently underway in response to the trend of public opinion, with numerous professional sports associations and teams starting to issue statements clearly expressing their opposition to racism, like the USTA mentioned earlier.

Probably the most famous legendary athlete to consistently speak up and fight for human rights was Muhammad Ali. He consistently spoke out against the Vietnam War and advocated for black civil rights. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who both raised a black-gloved fist into the air in a "Black Power Salute" (a gesture to protest racism) on the podium at the medal ceremony for the

men's 200 meters at the 1968 Mexico Olympics, are also famous. As a result of their actions, both these athletes were suspended from their national team.

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick playing for the San Francisco 49ers in the National Football League (NFL) was criticized by President Trump for kneeling during the national anthem at the start of NFL games and saying "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." His refusal to stand became a nationally divisive issue and Kaepernick has been unable to find a spot in the NFL since his contract with the 49ers expired.

However, in June 2020, the NFL commissioner hit the headlines when, in response to the building momentum of the BLM movement, he issued a de-facto apology and announced a change of position, saying "We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest." The NBA, MLB and Major League Soccer (MLS) then also followed suit.

Reaction of corporate sponsors

On September 11, Japanese newspaper the *Mainichi shimbun* featured an article entitled "*Japanese sponsors of tennis star Naomi Osaka not 100% on board with anti-racism actions.*" In the article, a source linked to a Japanese corporate sponsor of Osaka's is quoted as saying: "She's taken on a leadership role as a Black person, and what she's doing is great as a human being, but whether that will help raise the value of a corporate brand is another thing. There hasn't been any impact in particular, but it's not something we're openly happy about." The article also featured comments of another source linked to a different Japanese corporate sponsor to the effect that: "I think it's wrong to bring the issue of racial discrimination and her trade, tennis, together."

On September 14, AP News ran an article entitled "Japan celebrates Osaka: Sponsors cautious about activism" detailing the reactions of Osaka's corporate sponsors. These were mostly passive reactions, with one sponsor declining to comment on the masks, another saying it planned no statement, and another declining to comment on Osaka's campaign for social justice calling it "her personal matter."

Personally, I feel this is a real missed opportunity. Surely, if you are a company sponsoring a star athlete attracting so much attention, then you would seize this opportunity to openly support her courageous actions, which would in turn improve your own corporate value. After all, the reason companies sponsor her and use her in their advertisements is because they want to improve their own corporate image through her, right?

Currently, many European and US companies are grappling with the question of how to communicate a message in response to the BLM protests which will win the hearts and minds of consumers, employees, investors, and society at large. The announcement of a corporate philosophy timed to coincide with a period of social upheaval like the present is an opportunity to improve brand image, whereas failure to communicate a message or take clear action now could be construed as tolerance for racism and could expose a company to various risks.

Some companies, like the sports brand Nike, are well aware of this. Nike's latest ad was very striking, simply featuring a photo of Osaka with the caption "You won on your own, but you played for many." It is an ad which conveys Nike's values.

Nike is also the company which was bold enough to use Kaepernick – the source of the controversy in the NFL, in an ad campaign in 2018. The ad features the words “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” on a photo of Kaepernick. This ad campaign triggered a huge debate, even prompting some to burn their Nike sneakers in anger. However, Nike subsequently hit a new record stock price and was selected as Marketer of the Year for 2018 by *Ad Age*, the most prestigious advertising magazine in the United States, which praised the campaign as “a textbook example of how a marketer can change the conversation.”

The fortunes of those companies which properly understand the power of such messages and those which do not are likely to be very different in the future. Ten years from now, the Millennial Generation (currently 24–39 years old) and Generation Z (currently 8–23 years old) will be increasingly important both as consumers and as employees. Osaka is also part of Generation Z. Indeed, such young people who are driving the BLM movement have strong opinions about the environment, racism and social justice in general and they scrutinize companies to determine their corporate values. If they object to a company’s values, they will boycott its products or spread their views about the company on their social media platforms. To capture their hearts and minds and to maintain their trust, a company must first ask itself what kind of values it wants to stand for and to openly uphold these values.

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