

PROTECTING YOUR POSSIBILITIES PODCAST WITH LUKE FEDLAM

Episode Professional Athletes and Mental Health: Understanding Naomi Osaka: Title | June 2, 2021

The following is a transcription of the audio podcast recording. It is largely accurate but in some cases it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors.

Luke: I'm sports attorney Luke Fedlam, and welcome to the Protecting Your Possibilities podcast. Each conversation we focus on sharing information and having conversations around how athletes can best educate and protect themselves or their life outside of their sports.

Thank you so much for tuning in to the protecting your possibilities podcast. I'm your host, Luke Fedlam. And I'm excited for another episode. And this one, this one is really, I think, important for people to think about. And I've had some conversations and episodes on it before where we've had various guests discussing these topics. But today, I want to spend a little bit of time just talking about mental health and wellness for athletes.

I think it's oftentimes something that goes overlooked. And we were really brought back into the spotlight of issues dealing with athlete mental health and wellness, this past Memorial Day weekend, with Naomi Osaka, in tennis. So just to give folks some context, if you don't know, Naomi is the second ranked tennis player in the world right now. And just one of the stars in tennis really. And I think when you think about tennis players that the average person could just rattle off by name. Naomi, Osaka is one of them. And it's just probably a handful, both men's and women's tennis players that the average sports fan would be able to rattle off.

And so in this situation, Naomi is definitely one of the up and coming stars and really just one of the current stars of the game, she's 23 years old. And if you didn't know, it's the French Open right now, which is one of the Grand Slam major tournaments. And so Naomi withdrew from the French Open on Monday making her announcement on social media that she was going to take some time away. And it's important to understand why, why she's taking time away from the game. And so she decided that she was not going to be partaking in any post match press conferences at this year's tournament. And that was something that she talked about her social anxiety, and she has talked about how she's introverted, and how she'll wear headphones and things like that, to try to help her through some of these situations. She's talked about dealing with depression.

And so at 23 and as an amazingly talented and elite athlete, she made the decision for her own sanity, to not participate in these post match press conferences. And what came of that, well, they decided that she would be fined at first. And when you think about that, it's something that we've seen in other sports, if you miss your media time, or if you don't attend a press conference after your game, then you can be fined. And after she did not speak with the media, following her first round when she was fined \$15,000 by the French Open. That's one piece, right. But the follow on to that, which I think is where we want to spend a little time discussing is, then the officials of the French Open said that she was exposing herself to possible further Code of Conduct infringement consequences. The other major matches also stated that she

would be potentially open to penalties just for not speaking with the media. So I want to take a second and just read her statement, because I think this is so important as we think about athletes and their humanity, and the fact that they're more than just athletes. Elite athletes are not just robots, right? They're not people who are machines that just come in, do what they're supposed to do and leave and don't have feelings. And, and when we think of all that's going on in sports right now, and we're going to get into it, especially as it relates to the NBA here in a second. We have to recognize the humanity in athletes. And if we think about this podcast, as protecting your possibilities, well, we need to protect our athletes and their mental health and well-being as well. So I'm about to read to you the statement that Naomi Osaka made on social media as she withdrew from the French Open. And again, this is a really big deal in tennis, right? This is one of the major tournaments and to withdraw, especially when you are the second ranked women's player in the world is a really big statement to make. And so at this time, I'm going to quote Naomi Osaka:

"Hey, everyone, this isn't a situation I ever imagined or intended when I posted a few days ago. I think now the best thing for the tournament the other players in my well-being is that I withdraw so that everyone can get back to focusing on the tennis going on in pairs. I never wanted to be distraction, and I accept that my timing was not ideal. And my message could have been clear. More importantly, I would never trivialize mental health or use the term lightly. The truth is that I've suffered long bouts of depression since the US Open in 2018. And I have had a really hard time coping with that. Anyone that knows me knows I'm introverted and anyone that has seen me at the tournaments will notice that I'm often wearing headphones, as that helps dull my social anxiety. Though the tennis press has always been kind to me (and I wanna apologize, especially to all the cool journalists who I may have hurt), I'm not a natural public speaker and get huge waves of anxiety before I speak to the world's media. I get really nervous and I find it stressful to always try to engage and give you the best answers I can. So here in Paris, I was already feeling vulnerable and anxious so I thought it was better to exercise self-care and skip the press conferences. I announced it preemptively because I do feel like the rules are quite outdated in parts and I wanted to highlight that. I wrote privately to the tournament, apologizing and saying that I would be more than happy to speak with them after the tournament as the Slams are intense. I'm going to take some time away from the court now, but when the time is right, I really want to work with the tour to discuss ways we can make things better for the players, press and fans. Anyways, hope you all are doing well and staying safe. Love you guys. I'll see you when I see you.

So that was the statement that Naomi Osaka made. And I think there's just so much there to so rich with transparency with honesty, not a prepared statement that sometimes you'll see very much something that it seems like or comes across like she wrote from her heart. And when you think about what she talks about her social anxiety, suffering long bouts of depression, being introverted and trying to manage social anxiety. I mean, this is someone being honest, transparent and truly vulnerable.

And it's interesting, because I don't think there's two sides of this coin. I've read a few different analysts talk about how they understand her and understand the importance of mental health. But at the same time, this is what you signed up for. This is what you are required to do, speak to the media and everything. And I don't think it's that way. I don't think that there is two sides of this. Yes, we all know that there are certain requirements that athletes have when they are playing in tournaments, playing in games, within their leagues, in playoffs, etc. Where they have to speak with the media. But this is one were for a player to choose her own mental health and well-being over the spotlight of potentially adding another major championship to her ever

growing resume of victories. It's a really big deal. And I think, for athletes to focus on their own humanity and protecting themselves. I just, I tip my hat to her and truly wish her the absolute best. It is interesting, because when we talk about how this system is really not meant to acknowledge the humanity of the athlete. Roland-Garros, which is where the tournament in Paris is held, or the French Open is held, they interestingly posted photos of other athletes participating in press conferences and media responsibilities with a caption, "they understood the assignment." o it's really interesting that they would kind of approach it this way with one of the top players in the game, as we know that mental health, wellness and humanity is so critically important for our athletes. So let's break that down even some more, let's expand beyond just tennis and what's going on in the NBA Playoffs?

I think it's so telling as we kind of combined both what happened with Naomi Osaka and the French Open, but also then just in what we've seen in the NBA Playoffs and fans, injecting themselves into the game and really crossing that barrier of fans in the stands and athletes on the court. We just heard again over Memorial Day weekend, where there was a Celtics fan who threw a water bottle at Kyrie Irving who plays for the Brooklyn Nets, used to play in Boston. And to think about that, to have a fan throw water bottle, captured on video, and everybody knows this stuff gets captured on video. That fan was arrested. He's been charged with assault and battery, I believe. And again, this is just one instance. Right? There have been other fans in New York who spit on Trey Young from the Atlanta Hawks caught on video of fans pouring popcorn, a fan who poured popcorn on Russell Westbrook.

I mean, there is no reason for this interaction, engagement between the fan and the athlete. And when we think about protecting athletes, athletes want to be able to play their sport, it's their job, right. So even though to many people, it's a release, it's an escape, it's a joy, it's, it's something that's just fun to do. for athletes, it's their job. And to then not only have to deal with the stress of your job and being on this media platform, and the stress that just comes with that of being a celebrity athlete, to then have to deal with fans who, who we have so many reports of fans who have been verbally abusive to players. And to a degree, there's always been a part of booing and yelling and things like that within a game within an arena. But there have been more and more stories that have come forward of race-based yelling and belligerence in these games. And, to think of athletes having to deal with that, on top of all of the other stressors that come with being a professional athlete.

I greatly applaud Naomi Osaka for acknowledging her own mental health challenges. And, choosing not to put herself in a situation that she's just not comfortable with. And I think we need to continue to evaluate what it is that we are seeking out of our athletes in various game experiences, match experiences. At the end of the day, I think we should want our athletes to be balanced, to be in a good mental place, and to be able to perform at the best of their ability. And I think that seeing someone like Naomi Osaka take a stand like that I think is big. Obviously she's gotten support across professional sports, for taking a stand and for deciding to withdraw from the French Open. And in doing that, I think she really chose herself. And I think that that's important.

So again, we're going to have continue to have more and more conversations around athlete mental health and wellness week, we had a previous episode, and you can find it in the show notes, where we had Dr. Victor Kidd who talked about the mental health and well-being of professional athletes, and we have more to come. We've had conversations in the past on athlete identity, and understanding your identity as being more than just an athlete. To me, these are the things that are important, right. So whether you're a professional athlete, or a CEO of a company, or an entrepreneur, you are so much more than what you do for as a profession,

what you do for a living what you do for your job. I'm an attorney, but I am so much more than an attorney attorney. I practice law, right? That's part of what I do. But I'm so much more. And I constantly will. Even with the stress of being an attorney, I will choose myself when it comes to making sure that I have the ability to have a balanced situation in my life and in my head when dealing with the stresses that we all face on a regular basis. And I encourage you to do the same.

So again, more conversations in the future will come of this. But I think it is it is great to see an athlete making a very challenging decision for themselves and putting themselves first and putting their own mental health and wellness first. So again, thank you so much for tuning in to the protecting your possibilities podcast. I really appreciate you listening. I appreciate the comments that I'm getting. I am thankful for all of you who leave rankings and share this with others. And again, if you have any topics you'd like to see me tackle, feel free to reach out. I love getting into various new topics. Until then, have a great day.

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