

Tennis

Osaka's withdrawal raises important questions on media and mental health, athletes say

'There's that sense of stoicism' says mental health counsellor for Canada's Olympic teams

[Lori Ewing](#) · The Canadian Press · Posted: Jun 03, 2021 10:05 AM PDT | Last Updated: June 3, 2021



Tennis star Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open on Monday citing mental health concerns, following a \$15,000 US fine for skipping a news conference after her first-round victory. (Julian Finney/Getty Images) (Julian Finney/Getty Images)

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There were times Patrick Chan wanted to march right past reporters after his skate.

The three-time world figure skating champion knew that particularly after a bad program, he'd be asked questions he had no answers for. Where did it go wrong? He had no idea. There'd been no time to process. But the Canadian felt the pressure to provide thoughtful answers while dancing around his devastating disappointment.

"In figure skating, you've never felt so exposed in your life as when you're on the ice," Chan said. "And then when you get off the ice, it's your voice, and it's a very vulnerable time to have to explain your actions after such a short period of time to absorb it, and understand what happened and process it yourself. And while you're processing it, you're being asked to make statements and explain.

"It always felt unnatural to me, whether it's a good performance or bad performance, you're quickly taken out of that experience, your moment of celebration or moment of disappointment, and thrust into the limelight of like 'OK, what happened?'" I actually don't know, I need time here."

- FRONT BURNER [Naomi Osaka vs. the French Open](#)

Chan can relate to the feelings experienced by Naomi Osaka.

The Japanese tennis star withdrew from the French Open on Monday, saying she experienced "huge waves of anxiety" before speaking to the media, and revealing she has "suffered long bouts of depression." Her move came a day after she was fined US\$15,000 for skipping a news conference after her first-round victory, which she said she planned to skip following every match.

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Tennis star Naomi Osaka has pulled out of the French Open citing an ongoing battle with depression and social anxiety. Osaka had previously said she wouldn't do any press conferences during the tournament because of mental health concerns.

Osaka joined other high-profile athletes such as former Toronto Raptor DeMar DeRozan and swimmer Michael Phelps in pushing the once-taboo topic of mental health in sports into the spotlight. Her withdrawal also prompted questions about the role of the media.

"If an athlete has an ankle sprain, and you're saying, 'Hey jump up and down on it 10 times,' the athlete should say, 'No, that's not healthy for me, this could be more damaging for me.' And so, if an athlete says, 'I just don't think this is OK for me [to speak to media] right now, can I give it some time?' I think we need to listen to that," said Karen MacNeill, a performance consultant and mental health counsellor for Canada's Olympic teams.

"It's hard enough for an athlete to speak up and show any vulnerability or weakness. There's that sense of stoicism . . . about enduring difficulty without issue or complaint. It's 'suck it up, just forge on.' And so when athletes are saying [no], we need to listen."

Support for Osaka

Osaka's vulnerability was met with an outpouring of support. Everyone from Hillary Clinton to recording artists Pink and Dionne Warwick to actress and producer Viola Davis to numerous fellow athletes applauded her decision.

Seven-time Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton called Thursday for more support for young athletes dealing with media duties, and criticized French Open organizers.

Pairs skater Kirsten Moore-Towers said athletes "sign up" for potentially life in the spotlight as entertainers, and with that comes media obligations.

"But at what cost?" she said. "We do all of this in the public, but I think [Osaka] was just so brilliant to be able to draw a line, and enforce that she was leaving a space that didn't serve her mentally. I thought that was so important."

The 28-year-old Moore-Towers felt the spotlight's sharp glare in 2013 when she split with pairs partner Dylan Moscovitch and teamed up with Michael Marinaro.

- [Japan, sponsors join athletes to support Osaka after French Open withdrawal](#)

"I was in the thick of a pretty bad eating disorder, and was getting a lot of negative attention from the media, which really lends itself to having a hard time being able to process anything that I was feeling," said Moore-Towers. "This was almost eight years ago, and we didn't put quite the same emphasis on our mental health and sharing how we were feeling and using our resources to help us get through these types of things. We just kind of forged ahead.

"And I think a lot of people do still forge ahead. And I'm hoping that this story by Osaka, which was so brave and important, will help us to kind of see things a little bit of a different way."

Moore-Towers, who along with Chan is a Skate Canada safe-sport ambassador, said that athletes should be permitted to send a representative to provide a post-match statement to media in cases such as Osaka's.

'You feel so powerless as an athlete'

Chan, who was always gracious with the media, said underage athletes in particular, of which there are many in figure skating, should have a say in whether they do interviews. The hard line Roland Garros organizers reminded Chan of the International Skating Union.

"You feel so powerless as an athlete. They're a multi-million dollar organization, and it shocks me that they just treat their athletes, who are their source of income, like pawns," Chan said.

Chan said he struggled with bouts of depression and anxiety while competing, and even still now while he's navigating post-competitive life of "not being Patrick Chan, the figure skater anymore." He was a nervous competitor, he said, who was easily distracted by his surroundings.

"If I could start it all over again, I would have implemented a sports psychologist much sooner in my career — way, way sooner — just to understand how my mind works, because each person is so different and we have such different personalities," said Chan.

The 30-year-old, who retired after the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, now coaches hockey players in power skating and is working in commercial real estate.

- [Naomi Osaka withdraws from French Open, says it's 'best thing' for her well-being](#)

MacNeill said social media has added another layer to mental health in sports. After Toronto was ousted by Montreal in the first round of the NHL playoffs, a broadcaster superimposed Leafs forward Mitch Marner's face on the body of a child playing hockey in a video on Twitter. The replies ranged from "shameful" to "he's a millionaire who should suck it up."

Marner said Wednesday that social media can be a great thing, but "its impact can be terrible as well. I know that, so I got off that early."

MacNeill, who played field hockey for Canada, said the important thing to remember is "it's being done to a human."

"[But] there's a different standard and expectation put on the athlete role. We must not show weakness. We've got to be stronger, fitter, faster. We must not let this stuff bother us, it's part of our job," she said. ""[But] we're wired as humans to want to belong and be accepted. And so when you're getting criticism constantly, that can have an impact. Some are able to handle it and manage it, and some say 'This isn't healthy for me at this time, and to protect my mental health, I don't think this is a healthy practice.' Unfortunately, there's often not that choice given."

'Canada is a world leader on that'

MacNeill said Canada is one of just two countries in the world — the United Kingdom is the other — that has a national mental health working group and strategy for high performance sport.

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One of the messages, she said, is that a mentally healthy athlete is more likely to be a high-performing athlete. She used former NBA player John Amaechi as an example. Amaechi was completing his PhD in psychology while still in the NBA, and there were questions around his commitment as a player.

"He talked about how we need to protect the athletes' plurality," MacNeill said. "And so I think it's not just being an athlete, it's not just mental health, it all goes hand-in-hand. A proactive, preventive approach, having a mental health strategy, just like athletes have physical and technical development [strategies], it's got to be part of the same system.

"Canada is a world leader on that."

Also this week, the company behind Calm, an app for meditation and sleep, announced it would pay the fine for any player who opted out of 2021 Grand Slam media appearances for mental health reasons.

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