

The Natural Enemy: US Open Women's Tennis Final, Serena Williams and the Sporting Umpire

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Should it matter this much? A wealthy, successful individual expressed fury at the most popular object of vitriol in any sport. The umpire or referee is only ever neutral in the eyes of a falsely contrived standard: that someone must be objective, neutral and mindful of enforcing the rules of the game. In the eyes of the player, the figure who judges and assesses the course of a match can become an enemy, a monster of burden. In the US Open Women's Tennis Final, that beast was umpire Carlos Ramos.

It all began with coach Patrick Mouratoglou, who seemed to be signalling to Serena Williams during the match, thereby committing a violation in attempting to steer the game. Williams lost one point as a result. Calls of "liar" and "thief" followed, resulting in another violation. Matters escalated, and Williams was held to have committed another code violation in demolishing her racquet. Her call of fury: "Sexism!"

Williams was truculent, justifiably at first instance for not necessarily noticing her coach and being punished as a result. But a person who has won 23 times at the highest level is bound to feel slighted by certain decisions, notably those that throw her off her stroke. The blood, and mind, has adjusted to glory. It did not take time for the machine of social media and commentary to boil down the details and decide that a strict reading of the rules by Ramos entitled him to be pilloried. He was all establishment, all power, and poor discretion. A woman, [accused](#) former world number one Billy Jean King, is deemed hysterical if she disagrees with an umpire's ruling; a man, she suggested, is considered outspoken and forthright, the bad boy to be celebrated.

King went so far as [to see](#) the entire spectacle in terms of archaic laws and an "abuse of power", a small step towards throwing the entire rule book out, along with its musty ridden representatives. She fantasised about the injustice of the whole thing, and proceeded to strain the scene of every single implication of identity: "The ceiling that women of colour face on their path to leadership never felt more impenetrable than it did on at the women's US Open final on Saturday."

Commentators [focused](#) on the denial of Williams' entitlement for a suitable comeback "just one year after having a baby and fighting for her own life after childbirth." Destiny had been confounded. Shaded into obscurity was Williams' victorious Japanese opponent Naomi Osaka, herself of colour and her country's first Grand Slam title winner, and of a state not exactly renowned for splashing out on hand clapping ceremonies of racial tolerance and cuddly harmoniousness.

Image on the right: Carlos Ramos



As is rarely the case in such suppositions, a closer examination of the Ramos record to men and women would have been instructive, including those super stars who feel they are above reproach from the person in the chair. Many less robust umpires prefer to let the hotheads be; we live in an age of extreme trigger warning laced sensitivity.

Ramos, for his part as a firm, if pedantic umpire, has stared down players of all sorts, merits and vintages. The men should know. Novak Djokovic [received](#) a fault for time violations during the 2017 French Open; the inevitable loud retort landed him a code violation. Andy Murray received a rap over the knuckles for uttering “stupid umpiring” during the 2016 Olympics. Ditto the perennially volatile infant-in-a-man’s body Nick Krygios, whose abuse of a towel boy earned him a violation that same year.

The issue of gender never featured during this particular final, bar an anguished cry from Williams suggesting it might have. For Ramos to have *not* issued code violations could just as well have led to arguments of sexism in reverse. Attempts to read it otherwise return to the traditional hostility (archaic or otherwise) shown towards a figure touted as neutral when he is deemed sporting kind’s appointed enemy. This was a more traditional spat between sports performer and the ruling figure, one imposed upon the players by authority and regulation. Williams bucked it and was duly punished. Her opponent could only watch and feel embarrassed.

Mouratoglou, who has bleached himself of blame, [added](#) further grist to that troubled mill in the match’s aftermath, suggesting that all coaches breached the code during matches. He, however, had not been caught doing it – at least till now. “All coaches are coaching throughout the match. But check the record. I’ve never been called for a coaching violation in my career.” It’s not a violation if you’re not caught.

He also found time to [dash off](#) other locker-room opinions, showing an urgent need to sing for his supper:

“The star of the show has been once again the chair umpire. Second time in this US Open and third time for Serena in a US Open Final. Should they be allowed to have an influence on the result of a match? When do we decide that this should never happen again?”

The umpire will always have an influence on the outcome of a match because decisions change the course of proceedings. Perhaps a ceremonial and deterrent lynching might be in order? (King makes a more modest recommendation: permit coaches latitude to be involved during the match.)

Gender codes and socially stretched theories have a habit of denying the individual free will. Forget it, banish it; the spectator, commentator and agonisingly opinionated will foist one upon you. Agency is banished, subordinated to a superstructure. Williams is not treated as a grand slam champion and athletic phenomenon (her track record heavenly screams it), but a creature crushed by the “male” perception that looms large, or some other impediment that does wonders to distract from her brattish appeal. (During the 2009 US Open, the brat was in full flight when Williams [threatened](#) to deposit a tennis ball down

an unfortunate lineswoman's throat.)

This was a battle of wills, and Williams lost it. We return to the old story: the umpire did it, and thank the confused deities above he did. He has always been responsible for the Great Flood, syphilis and famine. He might be cruel to children, perhaps even eat them. He will always be and coming out in defence of the umpire in any sport is much like siding with Colonel William Bligh against the mutineers. We all need our anointed alibis to justify defeat and loss.

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