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# Fame brings Osaka the chance to fight racism

By Mike Street  
Special to The Asian Reporter

Just as the sports world was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, another crisis shook it to its foundation. Sparked by the murders of Black people by police and vigilantes, people surged into the streets in protest, and many athletes struggled with how to support their cause.

When Jacob Blake, another Black man, was shot by police in August, the protests continued with greater force, and the athletes elevated their support too. Baseball, soccer, and basketball games were postponed when players refused to play in protest. In tennis, Japan's Naomi Osaka joined them, finding her own way to deliver an anti-racism message.

Osaka delivered her message during two tournaments, the Western & Southern Open and the US Open, played within two weeks of each other in New York City due to the coronavirus. She made her first statement after advancing to the Western & Southern semifinals, which was scheduled for the day after the other sports postponements. In solidarity with those athletes, Osaka announced she would not play in the semifinals.

She said, "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."

Osaka's declaration drew on her heritage as the daughter of a Japanese woman and a Haitian man. Though she was born in Japan, Osaka has spent most of her life in the United States, where she has felt the racism she is protesting.

Her determination to speak out is a recent development. In early May, Osaka revealed that she's always been painfully shy, which has kept her silent on issues about her life and about society. But that was about to change. "I'm done being shy," she wrote on Twitter. When the death of George Floyd in late May first ignited the protests, she was one of the first athletes to join the Minneapolis protests.

In July, she penned an editorial for *Esquire* about the racism she has faced and how proud she is that Black Lives Matter protests have even spread to Japan. She wrote that she sees herself, along with other biracial athletes like Rui Hachimura, as "the future of Japan." And she recognizes her power as both a role model for young Japanese biracial girls and a superstar athlete who can raise awareness of "systemic racism and police



brutality."

Osaka's voice is made more powerful when she wins, which she has done consistently since her 2018 breakthrough. That year, she won the US Open, becoming the first Asian, man or woman, to win a tennis major, and she also won the BNP Paribas Open, sometimes called "the fifth major."

In 2019, Osaka followed up her US Open victory by winning the Australian Open, a back-to-back major victory that earned her the No. 1 spot in the world tennis rankings. That year, she won two more tournaments, one in Japan and another in China.

She's continued her success in 2020. After her dramatic statement at the Western & Southern, the tournament

organizers postponed her match until the following day. Osaka won her rescheduled semifinal but tweaked her hamstring and had to withdraw from the final against Victoria Azarenka. She also wanted to recuperate before the US Open, just days later.

At the US Open, Osaka made her second statement to raise awareness about racism. To win the tournament, she needed to win seven matches, so she had seven special coronavirus face masks made. Each one bore the name of a different victim of racist violence: Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Tamir Rice.

Osaka wore the masks before and after

**MASK MESSAGES.** Naomi Osaka, top photo, holds up the US Open championship trophy while posing for photographs at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center on September 13, 2020 in New York. In the bottom photo, Osaka hits balls into the stands after defeating Anett Kontaveit of Estonia during the fourth round of the tournament. (AP Photos/Frank Franklin II)

each match — and she used all seven of them, battling her way to the final. There, she again faced Azarenka, who had ousted Serena Williams in the semifinals, and Azarenka nearly triumphed again.

Azarenka stormed to an early lead, winning the first set, 6-1, in just 26 minutes. She carried that momentum into the second set, winning the first two matches and leading 40-30 in the third game when Osaka suddenly turned it around. Osaka won six of the next seven games to take the second set, 6-3.

Azarenka battled hard in the third set, but Osaka had won 11 straight third sets in Grand Slam competition, and she kept the streak alive this year. Osaka won the third set, 6-3, becoming the first woman since 1994 to win the US Open final after dropping the first set. Osaka also became the first women's player since Maria Sharapova in 2008 to win three majors before turning 23, and she is just the sixth woman to win her first three major finals since the Open Era began in 1968.

In May, Osaka became the world's highest-paid female athlete, and the US Open victory will further boost her earnings and profile, helping spread her message even more. She has already been named to *TIME*'s annual list of the 100 most influential people for the second year in a row. And she led off a recent *Forbes* feature called "A Decade of Disruption," about the 10 most prominent young game-changers from the last decade of its annual *Forbes* "30 Under 30" list.

Osaka recognizes how to use her stage to further her causes, and others are seeing and appreciating her efforts. After the US Open quarterfinals, ESPN showed Osaka video messages from Trayvon Martin's mother and Ahmaud Arbery's father, thanking her for raising awareness of the death of their sons and others like them.

But social justice is not Osaka's only motivation; she also draws inspiration from her heritage. After her US Open victory, she proclaimed on Twitter, "I would like to thank my ancestors because every time I remember their blood runs through my veins I am reminded that I cannot lose." With her values, talent, and motivation, we can expect to see Osaka win — and deliver her powerful messages — long into the future.

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