

Breaking the Ranks: New Images in Sport

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Just when the sports world seemed like it was being consumed by--or fed--endless sexual images of Anna Kournikova, the sea breeze blew sports world's most unique stars onto the staid stage of Wimbledon, setting the world of sports on its head.

The drama surrounding the Williams sisters got the attention of people who could care less about tennis. Take note, tennis officials. According to recent reports, the circulation of Tennis magazine is spiraling downward and TV ratings for the French Open were pitiful. There may be some new fans in the wings. Sex may sell product, but not the game itself. Great play by charismatic and talented pros could just sell the game. Yes, Anna made the cover of Sports Illustrated in a story authored by perhaps America's most distinguished sportswriter, Frank Deford. But this was not about playing tennis as much as a discussion of America's lingering tendency to market sex over talent. It did nothing for our interest in tennis other than draw extra photographers to center court whenever Anna played.

Venus Williams' victory is a great human story that is about tennis. The semi-final match final photo of a sad Serena and a solemn victorious Venus stood in stark contrast the joy on Venus' face after she followed in the footsteps of Althea Gibson and won the crown. It took more than four decades for a black woman to reach that peak again. Venus and Serena may be Althea's successors but who is Arthur's?

I remember so clearly that it hurts. After Gibson and Ashe won their first Grand Slam events, the pundits of the press suggested that the floodgates were opening, that the ranks of black American tennis pros would swell. That is why I now reserve part of my celebration, waiting to see if the floodgates of opportunity will now open. I hope so but I wait. I wait in part because of the reservations about the triumphs of these women.

It happened that on the night after the semi-final match, I was the keynote speaker at the banquet of the Professional Football Players Mothers Association. If there were 55 Moms there, 53 were African-American. They had some questions, mostly about all the scrutiny of Venus and Serena's father, Richard Williams. In the days leading up to the semi-final, there was not much to criticize about the play of the sisters. But there were plenty of stories critical of their Dad. He is no doubt opinionated. Sometimes he surprises reporters and the public as when he did not attend their semi-final confrontation.

There is so much discussion about what the media views as his unconventional behavior. From the perspective of the NFL Moms, Richard Williams had helped raise two powerful, intelligent, self-confident young women who had achieved incredible heights. The sisters talk about education and ideas, about creative lives after sport. They talked about those lives in their teens. Unlike so many stars, they are not obsessed by a game as much as by vitality for life. Politically conscious, Serena even stood up on the issue of the Confederate flag in South Carolina. The NFL Moms are proud of these women ? and their controversial father. They asked why were the supposed negatives being brought out at the time of the sisters' great triumph?

I wait in part also because the questions remind me of the emergence of Notah Begay, another young star in a sport where whites have reigned until Tiger Woods buried the opposition so regularly. Begay, the only Native American on the PGA Tour, was on the golf team at Stanford University with Tiger. In only his second year on the Tour, he won his 4th tournament and 2nd in two weeks by capturing the Canon Greater Hartford Open while Wimbledon was in progress.

Every story I read about him discussed his problems with alcohol and that he went to jail for his second DUI conviction earlier this year. Again, what relevance did the negatives have at Begay's moments of victory? Most writers did not mention that Notah was about to be released until he told the judge about the first conviction. When he served his seven nights, he was lambasted because he was allowed out during the days on the same work (his work was golf) release program that also applied to most low risk prisoners in that facility.

Here is man who spoke up, knowing it would cost him. He was honest. He is no longer driving and shouldn't be until whatever demons he faces with alcohol are safely buried. Begay speaks about Native American issues. I know a lot of people in Albuquerque, including many from the reservation he was raised on, who think Notah Begay is a hero for his people. So many Native Americans struggle with alcoholism. Perhaps his open battle with it can show the way for others.

Even Tiger Woods faced the scorn of the media in the beginning of his pro career. I cheered when I saw his first TV commercial in which he criticized restrictive golf courses where many people of color were prohibited from hitting off the first tee. Why the attack as this star shot out into orbit?

I have worked on issues of race in sports for more than three decades. Tiger, Notah, Serena and Venus were not even twinkles in their parents' eyes when I started. For all these years I have worked to get athletes to speak out on issues of race with meager results. For the most part, athletes, black and white alike, have been understandably afraid that the structure of sports, which happens to be overwhelmingly white and plays a conservative marketing game, would come crashing down on them if they spoke out.

So there stood Tiger, bold from the start, being burned by the press for what I saw as his courage. Now his professional greatness makes him pretty unassailable. Golf officials have taken note and marketed Tiger with unprecedented success. He is making huge money for his sport. Maybe that will happen for Serena, Venus and Notah.

Maybe their collective success will really open the floodgates, not just for more players who look like them but also for an openness of attitude that will celebrate their individualism, creativity, courage and honesty.

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