

Defuse the Situation Before It Escalates

The ending of the 2018 US Open Women's tennis tournament was unfortunate. American Serena Williams was matched against 20-year-old Japanese Naomi Osaka on center court. Osaka won the first set (6-2) and had a narrow 4 games to 3 lead in the second set when the chair umpire gave a verbal warning to Williams, because her coach was giving hand signals from the stands. Coaching during a match is forbidden according to grand slam rules. Over the next few minutes the situation escalated and turned ugly. Williams told the umpire that she has "never cheated in her life." As her anger increased she smashed her racquet on the court, drawing a one point penalty for "racquet abuse."

Taking it up a notch, she pointed her finger at the umpire and called him a "liar" and "thief," for issuing the penalty. She re-iterated that she doesn't need to cheat to win and that she "would rather lose than cheat." She demanded the umpire apologize publicly over the microphone. Her name calling, finger pointing and demand for an apology caused the umpire to award her opponent an entire game, giving Osaka a 5-3 lead. Osaka, who had the most powerful serve in the women's division, served out the final game to win the championship.



In a press conference after the match Williams defended her actions as "standing up for women's rights and women's equality." Her reasoning was that men got away with foul language and verbal abuse of umpires, often without even getting a warning. She felt there was a different standard of conduct allowed for men than women.

Please understand that I have officiated competitive soccer for 34 years, so some people may feel I am biased in favor of game officials. My goal is not to take sides on this issue but to suggest that either party could have defused the situation. I have been in game situations when players or coaches pressured me to change a call or admit to an officiating mistake. There were times when I had to walk away from a contentious situation, for the good of the game, so that it didn't escalate further.

To be fair, both Serena Williams and chair umpire Carolos Ramos, each thought they were in the right. I believe Serena Williams when she said she doesn't cheat. She is an excellent, highly motivated player. The chair umpire's original warning that the coach was coaching was made as a result of observing Serena's coach making signals from the stands. The coach admitted on television that he *was* attempting to signal Serena, justifying it by saying that "everyone does it." I also believe Serena when said she did not see the signals given to her by the coach. If the situation had ended at that point there would have only been a verbal warning and a great match could have continued without further incident. But, both sides pushed their perspective and each party's response "fueled the fire."

When something like this happens few people look ahead to see how it will end, and the ramifications of the situation. They are totally consumed "in the heat of the moment" with their heart-felt point of view. Naomi Osaka would eventually head to the victory podium without feeling the joy of victory that she had earned. For her extraordinary effort she was soundly booed by the US fans. Both Williams and Osaka were in tears at the podium for the trophy presentation. To her credit, Williams told the partisan crowd not to boo Osaka and she made an effort to comfort the winner. It didn't need to happen this way.

As I watched the sequence of events unfold it also strikes me that there are at least two different confrontations. At the US Open each party "dug in their heels" on the initial incident and were not going to back down. The escalation was a second confrontation. Often times the escalation is provoked by one participant. In this case, Serena demanded a public apology. It was an attempt to embarrass the other person, vindicate themselves and to "win" at least some part of the situation – the second confrontation. This is when defusing the situation is critically important.

How do you handle situations when you think you are right? Do you demand an apology? Or, if you are in a position of authority, do you hold onto your side of the issue, regardless of how it affects others? Many situations could have been prevented from getting out of hand if *either* party had not felt that they had to prevail. I think back to a core question: What would Jesus do? We can't control others but we can control how we react to situations. Our reactions can either defuse the situation or "fan the flame." In a difficult situation seek ways you can respond that do not make the situation worse. *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires (James 1:20).* Getting "the last word" in a disagreement doesn't make us a winner.

The term righteous means to "act according to divine or moral law, to be free from guilt or sin or to be morally right or justifiable." Perhaps it is better to be righteous than right.

Question: How would you defuse the situation if you were the tennis player or chair umpire? How do you handle situations when you think you are right, but so does the other side?

Prayer: Heavenly Father. Give us the wisdom to seek righteousness over merely being right. Amen.