

Judgment, sportsmanship, and forgiveness

When the athlete disagrees with the umpire's call

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 10, 2018](#) issue



Getty Images

In the heat of Grand Slam tennis, when players are racing around to smack a little yellow ball at incredibly high speeds, the chair umpire can go largely unnoticed. Seated high up on a canopied platform that could double as a lifeguard tower, the umpire scrutinizes the action below and keeps track of the score. A mental toughness is critical for the job. Judgment calls and rule interpretation happen under the intense scrutiny of players and fans. It's not a calling for the fainthearted. Quick reflexes, keen eyesight, and a calm demeanor are requisite. Good umpires leave their subjective feelings behind in the dressing room, and they bring their personal integrity and respect for the game out to the court.

The usual decorum that accompanies the work of the chair umpire disintegrated rapidly during the second set of the U.S. Open women's singles championship last month when Serena Williams challenged three penalties assessed by chair umpire Carlos Ramos. The series of dust-ups may have cost Williams the match, though 20-year-old winner Naomi Osaka played spectacular tennis.

Media outlets love controversy involving a star, so when Williams pointed her finger at Ramos, called him a thief, and accused him of sexism, that's all reporters needed to have for weeks of news.

Williams justified her outburst as a fight for women's rights. Women may indeed face something of a double standard in pro tennis, though Ramos himself has been quite tough on men. Mary Carillo, former professional tennis player turned NBC commentator, had this to say about the incident: "At her very best . . . I respect and admire Serena beyond measure. She is so powerful, she's an important voice, she's a ferocious competitor. But at her very worst, as she was on this night, she acts like a bully." Carillo went on to praise Ramos as "very, very respected."

Umps have to make snap decisions under pressure, and they are never infallible. They have to "act decisively in the absence of certainty," to borrow words of philosopher Bertrand Russell. Williams had every right to express disappointment in the umpire's call. But dressing down the ump has no place in the game. For his part, Ramos might have softened the blunt force of Williams's accusations had he communicated better.

I vividly remember when veteran baseball umpire Jim Joyce blew a call that cost Detroit Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga a perfect game in 2010. Had Joyce appropriately called the runner out at first base, it would have been the 21st perfect game in baseball history. Joyce was distraught and emotional after the game, aware of his clear mistake. Death threats began showing up immediately on social media. Yet the subsequent humility and grace shown by Galarraga carried the day. This pitcher and umpire hugged each other after the game in a tearful moment of winsome sportsmanship. The two went on to coauthor a book about forgiveness, *Nobody's Perfect: Two Men, One Call, and a Game for Baseball History*.

There's no book in the works for Williams and Ramos, so far as I know. But it would have been nice if that ugly exchange in Arthur Ashe Stadium had included even a small gesture of humility or grace.

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