

# Survey: Fans weigh in on media and mental health debate spurred by Osaka

**NAOMI OSAKA** entered this year's French Open having never advanced beyond the Round of 32 at Roland Garros. She didn't even make it that far this year, and not because she fell victim to an underdog

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with a heavy serve or a gift for moving deftly across the red clay.

After a first-round win over Patricia Maria Tig of Romania on May 30, Osaka ended her bid for a fifth Grand Slam singles title and her

first French Open title the next day by withdrawing from the tournament. It was the latest twist in a saga that began when she announced before the tournament that she would not do post-match press conferences, citing the mental stress and anxiety she has endured in those circumstances in the past. The tournament had responded by handing Osaka a \$15,000 fine for skipping her "media obligations" after that first-round win and she announced her withdrawal the next day.

"I think now the best thing for the tournament, the other players and my well-being is that I withdraw so that everyone can go back to focusing on the tennis going on in Paris," Osaka said in a state-

ment that she releted on her Instagram account, the same place she had made her initial disclosure about skipping press conferences during the tournament.

Osaka's saga has renewed the debate over the relationship between an athlete and the press, as

## Reaction if it became public knowledge that one of your favorite athletes

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Is often accessible to fans (signs autographs, does selfies, interacts on social media, etc.)	68%	28%	4%
Shared struggles or challenges with mental health or mental illness	57%	36%	7%
Does not speak to the media beyond what's required	25%	57%	18%

Source: Kantar Sports MONITOR 2021 Fan Engagement study (4,500 sports fans, ages 12+)

well as how those stances will be perceived by fans. In a new survey of 4,500 sports fans in the U.S. ages 12 and up, Kantar Sports Monitor, a data and analytics firm, found that only 18% of respondents

said they would have a negative reaction if their favorite athletes "do not speak to the media beyond what's required," while 57% would have a positive reaction if those same athletes "shared struggles or challenges with mental health or mental illness."

In a piece accompanying the results of the survey, Ryan McConnell, Kantar's senior vice president, wrote, "Perhaps the most critical cultural shift this controversy foretells is the rise of Gen Z values amidst an accelerating 'player empowerment era' in sports. A leading-edge member of Gen Z (defined

as those born between 1997 and 2011), Osaka exemplifies many of this generation's dominant characteristics: she's multicultural, open, and empowered to act on social and conscience-led concerns over profit-driven ones. At the same time, as younger fans gravitate toward individual players instead of teams,

and lucrative economic opportunities for athletes explode, Osaka and her elite counterparts in pro sports are increasingly questioning the need to engage with traditional media outlets at all."