

We're not the good guys: Osaka shows up problems of press conferences

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Regular attendees of Arsenal press conferences at the Emirates Stadium – in the before-times, when these things still happened – will tell of a mysterious character by the name of First Question Man. Nobody ever discovered who FQM worked for, or if he was even a journalist at all. His only real talent, if you can call it that, was to sit in the front row and make sure he asked the first question, usually by barking it while everyone was still taking their seats.

Why FQM did this was never clear. It can't have been ego: I never met anybody who knew his real name. Nor was it an attempt to glean some sort of privileged insight: indeed, most of his questions were actually statements: banal bromides beloved of press conferences the world over. "Arsène, you must be happy with the win." "Unai, a point seemed like a fair result." "Mikel, a tough afternoon, your thoughts."

Naturally it was to FQM that my thoughts turned when the world No 2 Naomi Osaka announced that she would be boycotting press conferences at the French Open in order to preserve her mental health. As a journalist who has sat through thousands of these inane obligations, and entertained numerous apocalyptic thoughts in the process, my first instinct was naturally to sympathise. And yet, the resounding chorus of condemnation and blind outrage suggests that there are some surprisingly strong feelings out there. For some, the press conference is clearly a sacred way of life. You may take our lives. But you'll never take our ability to ask an athlete "how they felt it went out there today, you know?".

On Monday night, after being fined and threatened with expulsion, Osaka quit the tournament altogether. Meanwhile her stance has been universally scorned by the print media, who as we know have traditionally been the best people to judge standards of behaviour. An "uppity princess", one newspaper columnist wrote. Others have more soberly pointed out that for any athlete, facing the media is simply part of the job, and that by seceding from the process entirely Osaka is setting a "dangerous precedent".

At this point, it's worth considering exactly what this "danger" consists of. All over the world, the free press is already under unprecedented assault from authoritarian governments, tech giants and online disinformation. In many countries journalists are literally being killed for doing their job. Meanwhile in Paris, tennis journalists are facing the prospect of having to construct an article entirely from their own words. One of these things is not like the others.

The real problem here, it strikes me, is not Osaka or even the impressive self-importance of the written media. Rather, it's the press conference itself, which when you think about it is quite a weird idea, and one that essentially fails at its central function. The great conceit of the press conference is that it is basically a direct line from the athlete to the public at large, that we humble scribes are but the people's faithful eyes and ears in the land of the gods.

In case you hadn't noticed, this hasn't really been true for a while. Athletes now have their own direct line to the public, and spoiler: it's not us. Hard as it is to believe, Osaka's function as an entertainer and corporate billboard is contingent on her playing tennis at an appointed hour, rather than being forced to sit

in a windowless room explaining herself to a roomful of middle-aged men.

And so the modern press conference is no longer a meaningful exchange but really a lowest-common-denominator transaction: a cynical and often predatory game in which the object is to mine as much content from the subject as possible. Gossip: good. Anger: good. Feuds: good. Tears: good. Personal tragedy: good. Meanwhile the young athlete, often still caught up in the emotions of victory or defeat, is expected to answer the most intimate questions in the least intimate setting, in front of an array of strangers and backed by a piece of sponsored cardboard.

There's an odd ritualistic quality to all this: the same characters sitting in the same seats, the same cliches, all these millions of wasted words, the unopened bottles of mineral water. Is there not a better way of doing this? These aren't elected politicians. These are simply people who have been elevated to prominence by dint of their hand-eye coordination and superior cardiovascular fitness. Talk to us, please! Or else!

This dynamic is only exacerbated in women's tennis, a highly visible enterprise that takes place not just in a largely white male space, but a white-male-with-free-food space. That sense of voracious, engorged entitlement often manifests itself in exceptionally creepy ways. Question: "I noticed you tweeted a picture. Are you prepared that if you go on a long run you may be held up as a sex symbol, given you're very good looking?" (Genie Bouchard, Wimbledon 2013.) Question: "You're a pin-up now, especially in England. Is that good? Do you enjoy that?" (A 17-year-old Maria Sharapova, Wimbledon 2004.) And of course there are plenty of decent, curious journalists out there doing decent, curious things. In a way, this is what makes the chronic lack of self-awareness so utterly self-defeating. Read the room. We are not the good guys here. We are no longer the power. And one of the world's best athletes would literally rather quit a grand slam tournament than have to talk to the press. Rather than scrutinising what that says about her, it might be worth asking what that says about us.