



“Wimbledon Has Sent Me a Message: I'm Only a Second-Class Champion“

Venus Williams

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Have you ever been let down by someone that you had long admired, respected and looked up to? When I was a little girl, and Serena and I played matches together, we often pretended that we were in the final of a famous tournament. More often than not we imagined we were playing on the Centre Court at Wimbledon.

Those two young sisters from Compton, California, were “Wimbledon champions” many times, years before our dreams of playing there became reality. There is nothing like playing at Wimbledon; you can feel the footprints of the legends of the game — men and women — that have graced those courts. There isn’t a player who doesn’t dream of holding aloft the Wimbledon trophy. I have been fortunate to do so three times, including last year.

That win was the highlight of my career to date, the culmination of so many years of work and determination, and at a time when most people didn’t consider me to be a contender. So the decision of the All England Lawn Tennis Club yet again to treat women as lesser players than men — undeserving of the same amount of prize money — has a particular sting.

I’m disappointed not for myself but for all of my fellow women players who have struggled so hard to get here and who, just like the men, give their all on the courts of SW19. I’m disappointed for the great legends of the game, such as Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert, who have never stopped fighting for equality. And disappointed that the home of tennis is sending a message to women across the world that we are inferior.

With power and status comes responsibility. Well, Wimbledon has power and status. The time has come for it to do the right thing by paying men and women the same sums of prize money.

The total prize pot for the men’s events is £5,197,440; for the women it is £4,446,490. The winner of the ladies’ singles receives £30,000 less than the men’s winner; the runner-up £15,000 less, and so on down to the first-round losers. How can it be that Wimbledon lands itself on the wrong side of history? How can the words Wimbledon and inequality be allowed to coexist?

I believe that athletes — especially female athletes in the world's leading sport for women — should serve as role models. The message I like to convey to women and girls across the globe is that there is no glass ceiling. My fear is that Wimbledon is loudly and clearly sending the opposite message: 128 men and 128 women compete in the singles main draw at Wimbledon; the All England Club is saying that the accomplishments of the 128 women are worth less than those of the 128 men.

Wimbledon has argued that women's tennis is worth less for a variety of reasons; it says, for example, that because men play a best of five sets game they work harder for their prize money. This argument just doesn't make sense; first of all, women players would be happy to play five-set matches in grand slam tournaments. Tim Phillips, the chairman of the All England Club, knows this and even acknowledged that women players are physically capable of this. Secondly, tennis is unique in the world of professional sports. No other sport has men and women competing for a grand slam championship on the same stage, at the same time. So in the eyes of the general public the men's and women's games have the same value. Third, athletes are also entertainers; we enjoy huge and equal celebrity and are paid for the value we deliver to broadcasters and spectators, not the amount of time we spend on the stage. And, for the record, the ladies' final at Wimbledon in 2005 lasted 45 minutes longer than the men's.

Let's not forget that the US Open, for 33 years, and the Australian Open already award equal prize money. No male player has complained — why would they?

Equality is too important a principle to give up on for the sake of less than 2 percent of the profit that the All England Club will make at this year's tournament. Profit that men and women will contribute to equally through sold-out sessions, TV ratings or attraction to sponsors.

Of course, one can never distinguish the exact value brought by each sex in a combined men's and women's championship, so any attempt to place a lesser value on the women's contribution is an exercise in pure subjectivity. Let's put it another way, the difference between men and women's prize money in 2005 was £456,000 — less than was spent on ice cream and strawberries in the first week. So the refusal of the All England Club, which declared a profit of £25 million from last year's tournament, to pay equal prize money can't be about cash. It can only be trying to make a social and political point, one that is out of step with modern society.

I intend to keep doing everything I can until Billie Jean's original dream of equality is made real. It's a shame that the name of the greatest tournament in tennis, an event that should be a positive symbol for the sport, is tarnished.