

To Grunt or Not To Grunt

When classically trained sopranos begin sending letters to newspaper sports editors regarding the high-pitched grunting, no, make that screaming, in women's tennis today, you know that trouble is just around the corner. And well it should, despite the slow moving, ultra-conservative, currently voluntarily toothless hierarchy of the Women's Tennis Association.

Marilyn Vondra, a self-described "big tennis fan," did just that at the conclusion of this year's Australian Open women's final, ironically played in the Rod Laver Arena, named after the legendary player who always displayed fierce competitiveness but never without the highest level of gentility. Curious about the musical pitches of the two finalists, the reigning "queens-of-scream" Maria Sharapova and Victoria Azarenka, she went to her piano during their match, first voicing their "sounds" and then locating the exact match on the keyboard.

It turns out that they both are also sopranos, Azarenka emitting high G's with Sharapova blasting out high A-flats. Who knew? What interested Vondra even more was that their post-match voices were completely unaffected. She incredulously noted that she and her classical performing peers would be "hoarse for days."

With negative fan reaction growing and media coverage spiking, the two combatants remain completely indifferent and defiant. After dispatching another elite player — Agnie Radwanska — just prior to the finals, Sharapova, after learning her competitor complained openly that "It's pretty annoying, and it's just too loud," deadpanned, "Isn't she back in Poland already?"

Azarenka, for her part, whined that she's so tired of answering the same questions about her grunting, over and over. Poor child. Her equally out-of-touch coach, Sam Sumyk, smirked prior to the queen's final showdown, "It's going to be a very musical final." I'm betting that it's all heavy metal on his iPod.

Former world No. 1 Caroline Wozniacki is no shrinking violet on the subject. "I think there are some players who do it on purpose," she



told reporters. "They don't do it in practice, and then they come into the match and they grunt." She also accused some of trying to gain an edge by drowning out the "sound" of their shot, a key auditory marker in judging an opponent's ball speed and spin.

"I've run into a lot of people who tell me if they're watching tennis on TV, they turn off the sound," noted revered announcer emeritus Bud Collins. "I'm sure players don't need to do it because you don't hear a peep from them when they're practicing. It's gamesmanship." Yes, the same Bud Collins who, back in the day, referred to Jimmy Connors — the father of the modern grunt — as "sounding like a wounded seal."

Enter WTA CEO Stacey Allaster who stated that the "grunting issue" would be addressed last summer but did nothing. Her most recent comment, or justification, played the men's grunting card, "But our female DNA transmits it in a different way." Okay, fair point. But does that condone breaking the sound barrier? Andrew Walker, a spokesman for the tour, emerged and ultimately did Allaster's bidding by indicating that "the landscape has changed, and we owe it to the fans to take a look at it." And he added, "It's a matter of degree: grunting is fine, but excessive grunting is not." Promising.

But out of that comes the WTA's most recent position that it wouldn't be fair to "alter the way they play." Instead they've decided that educating coaches, academies and young players is the best way to proceed while leaving the existing assault on the senses of both opposing players and fans alike as is. Where's my blue blazer?

A British tabloid once alleged that Monica Seles' — the first queen-of-scream — loudest grunts at Wimbledon back in the '90's reached



98.1 decibels, which reportedly is only a tick or two lower than a pneumatic drill. Yet, when she tried to smother her distinct two-syllable grunt in the '92 finals versus Steffi Graf, after Martina Navratolva got the Wimbledon brass all fired-up about it disturbing her play in the preceding semis, she got drilled in straight sets. Or was it the death threat that unhinged her? And this was a year before she was stabbed in the back, right on-court, in a Hamburg, Germany, event by a deranged Graf supporter. The incident literally muted her and her career.

Mary Jo Fernandez, current U.S. Fed Cup coach and former top 10 player, is the first and only commentator, or player for that matter, who has mentioned the underlying emotional component involved in grunting. It has become increasingly apparent as volume levels vary from shot to shot. The bigger the moment, the more important the point, the more the "grunt-o-meter" needle gets buried. And, to Allaster's point, this is definitely not limited to the women. The impressive stable of Spanish men — the "moaners" — in particular have also embraced louder is better when their nerves are under assault, including Rafael Nadal.

Yet no one, and I mean no one, explains that loud grunting is really a guttural escalation of breathing, more specifically exhaling. Certainly not Ken Benson in his New York Times post-Australian Open article. But that omission was a major faux pas in that all professional players breathe through the racket-on-ball moment. But the court has to be heavily mic'd to hear a Roger Federer, or Graf back then, but trust me, they both are and were breathing out on every shot.

Another flaw in Benson's reporting was that "few coaches specifically teach their players to grunt..." Ground control to Benson! All good coaches teach their players, at any level, to breathe, otherwise they're doomed to becoming inefficient breath holders who tire prematurely both physically and mentally. An oxygen-starved brain undermines decision making and ball watching.

Appropriate breathing absolutely should be minimally audible to be effective, at least to the ball striking player, at every level. Not only to stave off oxygen depletion, but to reduce emotional stress and promote physical relaxation and its accompanying elevation in power. It's very much a multi-dimensional technique. As a welcome by-product, one's potentially over active, eager beaver, analytical left brain is dumbed-down into momentary optimal unconsciousness, which is precisely where that elusive "zone" of excellence that players and commentators talk about resides.

So what could be done at least at the tour level? Simple. Install an on-court decibel meter as first implied by that British tabloid in '92. Screaming and high-pitched shrieking serve no purpose and certainly has no place in the professional game, or at your neighborhood club and public parks. Radwanska had it right: "Pretty annoying."

If professional tennis can come up with an incredibly high-tech, multiple camera, computer-managed Hawkeye line calling system to virtually end the previously never-ending contentious disputes over line calls, then surely they can add simple decibel meters (set with reasonable noise thresholds) on the courts and include a no-nonsense point penalty system to penalize flagrant offenders. Start taking points away and the pro player adaptation will happen overnight.

It's long past the time the WTA, and all other tennis governing bodies, step up and put an end to behavior that's destructive to, and disrespects, the game. 