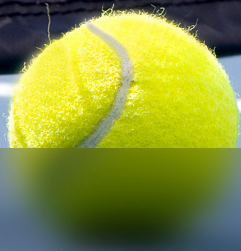


C L I F F O R D

C H A N C E



**TENNIS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
TIME TO HARMONIZE DOPING TEST PROTOCOLS**

TENNIS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: TIME TO HARMONIZE DOPING TEST PROTOCOLS

Tennis is historically an evolution from the medieval game “*jeu de paume*,” where honesty and integrity played a central role. This mother sport of tennis was regarded as an expression of a person’s character and moral values. However, professional tennis today faces a reputational problem when it comes to handling doping investigations. Recent controversies — particularly the differing treatment of rising Italian star Jannik Sinner and Romanian champion Simona Halep — have raised doubts about the sport’s ability to consistently communicate its protocols and manage doping investigations. The need for more harmonized doping protocols, especially regarding communication and transparency, has never been clearer, as recently advocated by players themselves.

The Difference: Sinner vs. Halep

There may be significant differences between the two doping investigations, and it is not the intention here to make any judgments about the results of these two investigations. The difference that needs to be highlighted is the divergence in approach and communication. When Jannik Sinner tested positive twice in March to a very small amount of the steroid clostebol, everything was investigated and handled without public communication, resulting in a very brief suspension. In contrast, Simona Halep underwent a much more complex and lengthy process after testing positive to roxadustat, a banned substance according to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) rules. Halep’s suspension led to a prolonged legal battle that has affected both her career and public image. This difference in treatment raises an important question: is there not a need for more harmonisation?

The Need for Harmonized Doping Protocols

Tennis operates under the guidelines of WADA, the International Tennis Federation (ITF), and the ATP (the organization for professional men’s tennis) and WTA (the body managing professional women’s tennis). However, there is no fully uniform approach to handling doping allegations, particularly in terms of communication. The ATP and WTA strive to follow WADA rules as closely as possible, and the ITIA (International Tennis Integrity Agency) does its best to coordinate between the two organisations, but true harmonisation is still lacking. Men’s and women’s tennis do not have exactly the same rules when it comes to doping investigations. This lack of standardisation leaves room for inconsistencies in how cases are handled, leading to confusion, perceived bias, and damage to both players’ reputations and the sport itself. Tennis needs a harmonised doping protocol that treats all players equally, regardless of their ranking, fame, or nationality. This should include at least:

- **Faster Resolution of Cases:** In Halep's case, the lengthy process has not only harmed her career but also the sport's credibility. A harmonised protocol should prioritise faster resolution, with clear deadlines for both investigation and verdict. Players should not have to remain in uncertainty for months or even years about their fate, especially in a sport where careers are short and performances time-sensitive.
- **Clear, Consistent Procedures for Handling Positive Tests:** All doping cases should follow the same timeline, with delays not disproportionately impacting one player over another. Whether a Grand Slam champion or a newcomer on the Challenger tour, male or female, the same level of urgency and transparency must be applied. This also means that significant resources must be allocated to the institutions responsible for anti-doping efforts to ensure equal treatment for everyone.
- **Unified Communication Strategy:** One of the biggest issues in recent cases is the inconsistent and often opaque communication around doping allegations. Tennis governing bodies need to adopt a single, transparent communication policy to inform the public. This means providing clear, regular updates that follow an established protocol, to prevent some investigations from being kept secret while others are blown up in the media.

To prevent reputational damage and respect the presumption of innocence as much as possible, a very brief and confidential procedure seems preferable, with clear public communication once the investigation is fully concluded. Tennis can learn valuable lessons from sports that have implemented more standardized doping protocols. Cycling, for example, which has undoubtedly suffered the most from doping cases, has developed a more cohesive system where anti-doping cases are handled with strict timelines and communication is central to ensuring transparency and consistency.

Conclusion

The sport of tennis cannot afford inconsistencies in its doping protocols. The different experiences of Jannik Sinner and Simona Halep highlight the urgent need to harmonize how the sport handles positive tests and communicates with the public. What is true in the ordinary world of tennis fans and everyday mortals without brilliant drop shots should also apply here: *"justice must not only be done, but it must also be seen to be done"*.

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