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A collective failure: Events preceding the 2022 Australian Open

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By focusing on Đoković, media reports have failed to consider the role played by the Australian federal government, the Victorian state government, and Tennis Australia in the fiasco.

The 2022 Australian Open concluded with Ashleigh Barty and Rafael Nadal winning the women's and men's singles championships, respectively. The tournament, however, may well be remembered for events that preceded it.

Men's world number one, Novak Đoković did not compete because his visa was cancelled by Immigration Minister Alex Hawke on "health and good order" grounds. The discourse has largely focussed on Đoković, but institutional, political, and social factors played a vital role, and must be understood.

Tennis Australia

Tournament CEO Craig Tiley advised players and staff that they must be vaccinated or hold a medical exemption. One of the criteria for a medical exemption was a positive COVID test result any time after 31 July 2021. Reportedly, 26 individuals applied for a medical exemption and their applications were evaluated in a blind, two-step process, in collaboration with the Victorian state government. A handful were approved, including Đoković, women's player Renata Voráčová, and coach Filip Serdarušić.

In a letter dated 18 November, Department of Health First Assistant Secretary Lisa Schofield advised Tiley, that individuals who had previously contracted COVID-19 and had not received a vaccine were ineligible for an exemption. A similar communication was sent by Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt on November 29. This message was not relayed to participants. When probed, Tiley cited the ever-changing environment and "conflicting and contradictory information" as cause for the miscommunication.

In such scenarios, and especially during a pandemic, who can participants rely on, if not tournament organizers, to receive up-to-date communication related to entry guidelines?

Political intrusion

Tiley claimed Tennis Australia sought clarity from the Australian federal government on several occasions. Victorian state government officials claimed Tiley did not inform them of the November communications regarding updated rules for medical exemptions.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison confirmed the authority of the Victorian state government to assess and provide medical exemptions on 4 January. A mere 24 hours later, the Prime

Minister reversed his position and said the federal government would instead make a call on exemptions.

Australian Border Force (ABF) officials allowed Voráčová and Serdarušić to enter Australia under the same medical exemption as Đoković, prior to his arrival. Both were deported after Đoković's detainment.

Tennis Australia, the Victorian state government, and the Australian federal government could not agree on a set of consistent rules prior to the tournament. In organizing major events, what responsibilities do tournament organizers hold, to ensure seamless entry into host nations?

Athlete wellbeing

Đoković believed he had traveled on a duly approved medical exemption. Upon arrival, he was questioned for over six hours, had his visa cancelled, then held in a detention centre for five days. He was detained again for one night before the second hearing. Had he won his case, he would have competed in the tournament without sufficient training.

Understanding and empathy were in short supply because Đoković was unvaccinated, and were further reduced with his admission of attending a 30-minute photo shoot with L'Equipe magazine in December while being COVID positive.

Voráčová had been in Australia for 10 days and had competed in a tournament, before her visa was retroactively cancelled. She has spoken about her treatment and questioning with ABF and it is a harrowing read.

Serdarušić was contacted by ABF after Đoković's initial detainment. He chose to leave Australia of his own accord.

Physical wellbeing aside, the mental wellbeing of Đoković, Voráčová, and Serdarušić was largely ignored in the discourse related to these events. If an athlete or any individual is perceived to be on the "wrong" side of an issue, is their wellbeing unimportant?

Resources available

During this ordeal, the International Tennis Federation, governing bodies for men's and women's tennis, men's and women's players councils, the coach's council, and Tennis Australia were mostly silent. Đoković had the financial capacity to hire a legal team to contest his visa cancellation, Voráčová and Serdarušić did not.

Tennis holds events globally. Many of its players come from non-English speaking countries. When facing challenging situations while traveling internationally, who can athletes turn to for advice, what resources can they access, and what support can they rely on?

Media reporting

Reporting around this case was, and remains, inconsistent. Some media outlets continue to report that Đoković was barred from playing in the Australian Open because he failed to meet Australia's COVID-19 vaccination rules. This statement is factually incorrect, because neither hearing established the invalidity of Đoković's medical exemption. In fact, in the cancellation notice of Đoković's visa, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke conceded that, "the unvaccinated Djokovic entered Australia with a valid medical exemption and [posed] a low risk of contracting the virus while in Australia and passing it on to others due to his recent infection."

Notably, there has been a lack of focus on the experiences of Voráčová and Serdarušić.

Media outlets continue to scrutinize documents submitted by Đoković's legal team, and particularly, documents related to his COVID-19 test. Though these documents are a matter of public record, scrutiny of an individual's private medical records raise moral and ethical concerns. In cases of public interest, should media members who lack expertise in health and medical issues indulge in such inspections?

Moving forward

Đoković's visa was cancelled because the immigration minister felt Đoković's presence in Australia *may* give rise to anti-vax sentiment. The decision sets a concerning precedent and has

potential implications for athletes, politicians, or celebrities with “questionable views,” who may seek to enter Australia in the future.

The Đoković case is a cautionary example to other athletes and presents them with but one solution. Irrespective of their personal feelings about introducing substances into their bodies, should athletes take the vaccine to ensure they do not experience a similar ordeal?

As Tennis Australia and the larger tennis community celebrate the achievements of its latest batch of champions, the events that preceded the tournament cast a long shadow. How does tennis move on?

Tennis (and other sport) organizations may consider adopting the following recommendations.

1. Establish a dedicated team tasked with maintaining consistent communication and collaboration with local, state, and federal authorities.

It is of utmost importance to stay abreast on vaccine, visa, and border entry requirements in this dynamic environment. Players and staff must be able to rely on communication from tournament organizers as a one-stop solution.

2. To avoid dealing with ambiguous or ever-changing government requirements, tournament organizers may consider adopting a simple entry requirement: “No jab, no play.”

Tournament organizers must be aware of what constitutes an individual being “fully vaccinated,” as requirements differ in countries. It also has implications for athletes who are unable to access vaccines approved by the World Health Organization (WHO).

3. For players and staff who are unvaccinated, sport organizations may use an ethical approach as recommended in the WHO guidelines, to reduce barriers, and to engage such individuals in an informative dialogue.

Vaccination clinics can be organized at tournament sites for individuals who do not have access to WHO approved vaccines. Those who choose to be unvaccinated can be provided with educational resources, and opportunities for consultation with medical experts, so they may ask questions and clarify any doubts in a safe and judgement-free environment.

Sport is richer in a competitive environment. Athletes, organizers, governing bodies, and governments must adapt and work together in an empathetic and understanding manner, to achieve a common collective.

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