

SHOULD THE ATP AND THE WTA MERGE?

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Human resources, Youth, Sports and related issues

Serena Williams and Roger Federer at the 2019 Hopman Cup in Perth, Australia. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

In April 2020, just after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Roger Federer floated the idea](#) of merging the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and the Women's Tennis Association (WTA), the governing bodies of men's and women's tennis, respectively. Billie Jean King founded the WTA in 1973 after failing to persuade the men to create a joint venture. Nearly five decades on, the idea to project tennis's progressive face, of men and women competing together and as equals, and thereby creating a big enough product that is financially self-sufficient, is taking shape again. It doesn't necessarily mean a merger of the two competitions, but of the calendar, governance structures, decision-making, sponsorships, etc. A year ago, investment group CVC Capital Partners, a private equity company which has bought stakes in Spanish football's LaLiga and has a presence in the IPL with the Gujarat Titans, had floated a potential \$600m agreement at turning the tours into a single commercial entity. As if on cue, on Tuesday, The Times (London) reported that CVC had struck a deal with the WTA for a 20% stake (about \$150 million). There are expectations of a similar agreement with the ATP. In a discussion moderated by **N. Sudarshan**, **Ankita Bhambri** and **Sunder Iyer** discuss various facets of the potential merger. Edited excerpts:

Sunder Iyer: Today, there are probably nine million people who play tennis. And there are so many circuits – ITF circuit, ATP tour, ATP Challengers, WTA events, Davis Cup, Grand Slams and so on. It is so vast that probably at the end of the year, nobody knows what happened at the beginning. I feel we need a structure where everything will be in one place and everyone will be responsible for what they are doing. Now, something the ITF does, the ATP would not accept, and vice versa. So you should get everything under one umbrella. A lot of the money that goes into administering these associations can be put to good use by ensuring players make more money and people working in these associations get more.

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Ankita Bhambri: Being a former professional, I can relate to a new tennis player coming on to the circuit and trying to figure out what the difference between the ATP, the WTA and the ITF is. It is so fragmented, not only for players, but for journalists and fans too. So, when Federer mentioned that it was time to get them together, I think all the players would have given a thumbs up. For women's tennis players, it will be beneficial in the long run.

Sunder Iyer: If you see why Grand Slams are more popular, it answers your question. These are the few tournaments where both WTA and ATP players compete on the same platform. If you look at the entire marketing of a Slam, it allows them to get more money. This is probably one thing that could lead to the merger of the ATP and the WTA. Grand Slams were probably the first events to give equal prize money. It took a long time, but as we move on, there cannot be any discrimination because the effort is the same. Probably it is tougher for a woman to be playing tennis because of social, economic reasons. So, it's time for us to create equal opportunities. Even now, look at how lopsided the tournament structure is. In the ATP, there are nine Masters 1000s, 13 ATP 500s, 39 ATP 250 events, and the ATP Cup. There are also 178 ATP Challenger events. If you look at the women, there are 10 WTA 1000s, 16 WTA 500s and 30 WTA 250s. But there are only 15 Challenger events. Where is 178 and where is 15? And this is because the ITF has its own events till the 125s. So, this is the time for everybody to come

together on a single platform.

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Ankita Bhambri: When there is a limited number of tournaments for women to play, it is very difficult to travel around the world. At present we have a few tournaments like Citi Open (Washington), Indian Wells and Miami where we see men and women competing together, other than at the Grand Slams. If we have more such tournaments, it will be beneficial not just for players, but for sponsors and the media too. We will probably see more people playing this sport. It will help in the growth of tennis from the bottom. Having one structure, one set of rules and one system will make it easy and sustainable.

Sunder Iyer: Earlier, at the start of the season, we had the Hopman Cup (in Australia). It had national teams with women. Everyone played together and all of them benefited from the experience. But the Hopman Cup is now gone and we have the ATP Cup for just the men. We in India were also affected because our tournament (Tata Open Maharashtra ATP 250) moved from being a preparatory event for the Australian Open and lost its sheen a little bit. If tennis has to win as a sport, it needs to unify. There will be a lot more revenue, and more countries will receive funding to develop their own tennis activities, like in Asia, Africa. In India we are really lucky that at least we are able to put on so much tennis. There are only 35-36 countries where the ATP has tournaments and maybe 30 for the WTA. But there are more than 100 countries which do not have any big activity. You can look at having combined events with smaller draws, probably 16 players for men and 16 for women. The WTA relied heavily on the Asian swing in China and now for two years not even one tournament has happened there because of COVID. They found a goldmine in China but now they cannot enter it. Such cases should not happen, because players are affected. Ultimately, aren't players the anchors of these associations?

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Ankita Bhambri: Imagine a scenario where a 16-year-old who started on the ITF circuit a couple of years ago and suddenly, post-pandemic, is lost because there are no tournaments. They would have lost two years of playing, improving their game, understanding what is required for the transition (to the senior circuit). So, a unified body will definitely play a huge role in enhancing support for everyone. At the bottom, for those ranked in the 700s, 800s, there should be a structure in every part of the world so that they get enough competitions to be able to move up. Likewise for those in the 200s to 500s, who are struggling because their tournaments come under the ITF and is very difficult to sustain (financially). Unification will make these transitions smoother.

Ankita Bhambri: How difficult is it for a young tennis player if the only time they have access to full-fledged matches is when they watch a Grand Slam or a WTA tournament if it happens in India? To have a role model to follow is so difficult for women's tennis players. If a unification can result in a single platform getting us the (broadcast) rights, it will make a huge impact. It will also increase the fan base and more children will want to play the sport. In the last 20 years, [the number of] players taking up the sport professionally has increased tremendously. We have had role models like Sania Mirza. And for that we need enough tournaments and also platforms that are showing the game other than just the Grand Slams. We have seen that with cricket and badminton. Tennis is played globally and not many sports are covered in as many countries. We need to capitalise on that and be able to grow it even more.

Sunder Iyer: Television is very important. Nowadays, OTT platforms (Internet streaming) are where the rights are sold. It is good because you can watch it on your phone. But it is also bad because in many countries the Internet is only now penetrating into smaller areas. So, it is

restricted to big cities. Badminton is becoming more popular because every tournament where Indians are participating is being shown on television. So, it is very important that matches are shown. Right now, the whole Arab world is glued to the television because of Ons Jabeur's performance at Wimbledon. These are countries that never had tennis coverage. Administrators at the highest levels have to get more matches on television. Only then will the common population think about sending their children to play the sport.

Sunder Iyer: I know what a combined event can do. Say there are multiple tournaments going on but Federer will only be able to play at one tournament. If there are combined events, the women's No.1 could play at another event, say in India during that week, which will give enough mileage to the tournament. So, there is an even spread of players which will really help television get a lot more eyeballs. And it will help the tournament raise more money.

Ankita Bhambri: Memory is short, because people have clearly forgotten that there was a thriving rivalry among the Williams sisters, Martina Hingis and others. Djokovic, Nadal and Federer have achieved far more for a longer period of time and deserve the attention. But we have had women's tennis players dominating, be it Hingis, Steffi Graf and more. These rivalries will keep coming and there is always a transition phase like the women's tennis scene now where we are seeing different winners emerging. Imagine a combined platform, with multiple rivalries at multiple levels and how accessible tennis will be. How inspiring will it be for not just one section, but for both men and women.

Sunder Iyer: The 2021 US Open final between Emma Raducanu and Leylah Fernandez was watched by 3.4 million viewers. It was close to 30% higher than men. So new stars are important, men or women. Experts use chess as an analogy for the women's game – lengthy rallies, interesting in-game tactics, changing plots, all of which makes the game exciting. Men's game is like checkers, where the mightier force comes out on top, because it involves more powerful strokes, high intensity and little time to think. It is time to see how to merge these two USPs of tennis and deliver them on a single plate. It should not be male or female, but one tennis player.

Ankita Bhambri is a former tennis player and most recently the coach of the Indian Fed Cup (now Billie Jean King Cup) team; Sunder Iyer is secretary of the Maharashtra Lawn Tennis Association, which has hosted both ATP and WTA tournaments

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