

## Sharapova story wrapped in mystery and sadness

March 13, 2016, By Daniel J. Bauer

Perhaps more than the average Joe (which is my middle name), I take a great interest in words. This may be partly due to a problem I've since largely overcome. As a child I stuttered rather badly at times when I spoke. To this day, I do not imitate stutterers to get a cheap laugh when story-telling. I am incredibly sympathetic to people who fight to get their words out because of this affliction. Anyone who laughs at a stutterer is a bully.

People who stutter become adept at avoiding the sounds that give them the most trouble. In my case, that meant avoiding all words that began with a "b." Other consonants also bedeviled me, but "b" was especially brutal.

Given my surname, and the fact I stuttered when I began to help my Dad around our family hardware store, that "b" problem was like a bomb waiting to explode. You cannot imagine the fright that flew up my spine when the telephone rang, and Dad was waiting on a customer or threading pipe in the back room. I was supposed to grab that phone and sweetly say, "Bauer's Hardware! How may I help you?" (The "may" was rough, too.)

Logic suggests that stuttering as a 12 year old was not necessary for me to develop a life-long interest in words. It'd have happened naturally enough because of my passionate love for reading. (Not a few of us who stutter as children seek consolation in the safe, silent (ha ha) world of books). A college instructor my adult years, and a priest ("shen-fu") to boot, guess who wound up using words most of his waking hours?

So, I was not much interested in how Maria Sharapova looked this week as she spoke about her use of the banned drug meldonium when she recently dueled against her long time rival, Serena Williams, in the Australian Open. My interest in Ms. Sharapova was not about her beauty, but about her words. I wanted so much to hear words I did not hear.

In the column-writing business, a news event can spin around faster than a well-flung boomerang and whap a guy like me in the throat. So, if by Sunday the story has changed, I will gladly say I was wrong. I so wish she'd have spoken clearly of fairness, honesty, and ethical wrong. Her lawyers probably wouldn't let her. She does not appear to admit she knew what she was doing.

Maria Sharapova rocketed to success in a relatively brief time. Practically only a teenager, she won the Wimbledon crown in 2004. It's been one big victory after the other ever since. Her accomplishments rival those of the iconic Old Testament hero Joseph, of Joseph and his Brothers fame (Gen. 37 and following). Sharapova has won 35 World Tennis Association (WTA) singles titles, and earned more than US 2 million dollars per year for the past 13 years. Until now, she has enjoyed lucrative contracts with Nike, Porsche, and the Swiss watch brand Tag Heuer.

Media have emphasized the performance-enhancing drug meldonium was only banned in the past year. Sharapova has been using it since 2006.

Reactions to the announcement typically included the words "surprised," and "shocked." Serena Williams commended her for courage "in taking responsibility for her failed drug test."

The words of the disgraced star are important. "I take great responsibility and professionalism in my job, and I made a huge mistake. I let my fans down. I let the sport down," Sharapova said.

But these were not the words we needed to hear. Sharapova is said to have been guilty of an "inadvertent violation." So, this was all a silly accident? Other world class athletes in a variety of events have been similarly punished this year for use of meldonium. How did she not know this?

The possibility of mere carelessness in missing the name of a newly banned substance in a computer link from tennis officialdom is present here. What we wish for in the athlete's words, however, we do not receive. What we get is no real attempt at an explanation, only a vague "I made a huge mistake."

These have been sad words to write. May I conclude on a decidedly positive note?

I referred above to my love affair with books, a passion I believe some of my Sunday readers share. Taipei American School offers its magnificent used book sale next Saturday, March 19. Proceeds help children in great need. I hope to see you there.

No one asked for this plug. I just couldn't resist the temptation. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## Talking points

1) You may not know the famous female tennis player, Maria Sharapova from Russia. She is the highest paid female athlete in the world. Ms. S. was caught about 2 weeks ago in a scandal for using a recently banned 'forbidden drug' for possible performance enhancement. Do you 'follow' sports in the news very much? Are athletes important in Taiwan life?

2) Maria Sharapova did not apologize for taking the banned drug. Thus, what she "did not say" becomes an important idea here. Is the word 'apology' important for you? Have you ever apologized for making a mistake? Why are apologies difficult?

3) This column opens with words about the author stuttering as a boy. Stuttering is a fairly common and embarrassing problem. How is "stuttering" related to Maria Sharapova? People who stutter often avoid saying certain words which are hard for them to say. Maria S. avoided the words, "I am guilty and I apologize." Some people feel that people who stutter easily feel compassion for other people because they themselves know the pain of a personal problem. Do you feel compassion for others? How do you show your compassion?

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