Why it may not be game, set and match for Maria Sharapova

By David Randles, University of Chester

‘Reckless beyond description.’

The words of former World Anti-Doping Agency president Dick Pound in light of Maria Sharapova’s shock announcement this week that she tested positive at the Australian Open for the banned substance meldonium.

Poignantly, Pound then added: "Running a $30m business depends on you staying eligible to play tennis."

This was a reference to Sharapova’s position as the most marketable female sports star on the planet.

The Russian tennis player has topped the Forbes rich list as the world’s highest paid female athlete for a remarkable 11 consecutive years.

Between June 2014 and June 2015 she banked a staggering $29.7m. That’s almost a quarter of the $124m accumulated through prize money and endorsements by the top 10 highest paid female athletes during the same period.

And this despite being some way off the pace of world number one, Serena Williams. Indeed, Sharapova will be ranked seventh in the world when the International Tennis Federation imposes a provisional suspension this weekend (March 12).

According to Forbes, only $6.7m of Sharapova’s earnings during that 12 month period came from winnings. The rest is from commercial deals.

And this is where Pound’s condemnation of the player’s failed drug test really starts to resonate.

No sooner had Sharapova took to the podium in a Los Angeles hotel to deliver a meticulously prepared speech revealing the error of her ways than several major sponsors decided to put some daylight between their brand and the five times grand slam winner.
Swiss luxury watchmaker Tag Heuer, who have enjoyed a reciprocally healthy relationship with Sharapova since she won Wimbledon as a 17-year-old in 2004, were quick to announce they were no longer in negotiations with her. Then there was Porsche, the German car manufacturer stating it was ‘postponing planned activities’ with the client who became its first female ambassador three years ago.

But perhaps the biggest blow came from Nike. Despite its 17-year relationship with Sharapova, the sportswear giant was quick to announce: “We have decided to suspend our relationship with Maria while the investigation continues.”

Added Nike: “We will continue to monitor the situation.”

Take special note of that last comment.

All of this was within 24-hours of Sharapova’s revelation. The swiftness of the response says much about the power commercial sponsors now exert over high profile athletes.

In return for their millions, they expect reputations to be squeaky clean.

Or do they?

Commenting on the speed at which brands now act in the face of negative publicity, independent sports consultant Nigel Currie said: “They are paranoid about their image, and the slightest risk to their image, they run to the hills.”

This is true in part but not absolute.

Naturally, there are those cut and dried cases where the punishment befits the crime.

Take Adidas’ quick and decisive action to drop Adam Johnson last month when the former Sunderland and Manchester City footballer pleaded guilty to child sex offences.

Also see Nike’s termination of its contract with eight-weight world boxing champion Manny Pacquiao in the wake of his ‘worse than animals’ comments about same-sex relationships late last year.
But there have been cases where sponsors, and Nike in particular, can be seen to operate on the basis of contradictory moral standards when it comes to sports stars.

Nike was one of several brands that stood by Tiger Woods when the married golfer was caught at the centre of a highly publicized sex scandal in 2009.

Contrary to Pacquiao, whose career was on the wane when Nike cut its ties, 14 times major winner Woods was at the peak of his powers seven years ago and, according to Nike, still good for the brand's image, despite the father-of-two's extra-marital misdemeanors.

Perhaps more salient for Sharapova is Nike's decision to renew its relationship with Justin Gatlin last year; the US sprinter twice banned for using performance enhancing drugs, including a four-year suspension between 2006-2010.

It was a commercial deal that was criticized beyond athletics but one that Sharapova may now cling to as she waits for a decision on her imminent ban.

This could be anywhere between two or four years, though the player’s legal team has suggested a negotiated reduction of less than a year based on precedents already set within tennis and the degree of innocence on Sharapova’s part.

Cynical or otherwise, the player’s pre-emptive strike to come clean before the world's media may have done little harm on that front.

However, with her 29th birthday in April, time may not be on Sharapova’s side.

But then Gatlin was in his early thirties when he posted the three fastest 100m times in the world in 2014, form that saw Nike come calling again regardless of his murky past.

The length of Sharapova’s ban is likely to determine whether she plays top-level tennis again. Should she make a successful return to the sport, don't be too surprised to see her climbing back toward the top of the Forbes rich list.

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