

Sponsors back away from Sharapova

BY EMMA THOMASSON
AND BEN KLAYMAN
REUTERS

Swiss watchmaker TAG Heuer cut ties with tennis star Maria Sharapova on Tuesday, the latest sponsor after Nike and Porsche to distance itself from the world's highest-paid female athlete following her failed drug test.



Sharapova

The swift response on the heels of Sharapova's announcement on Monday signaled a change in attitude among high-profile corporate backers following a series of doping and corruption scandals in the sports world.

"We're now entering a zero tolerance era for sponsors," said Rupert Pratt, co-founder of sports sponsorship agency Generate. "It is now seen as not acceptable to 'stand by your man' because of the amount of scrutiny corporates are now under."

Sharapova's failed drug test at January's Australian Open, one of four annual Grand Slam events, will

likely lead to a ban for the 28-year-old Russian. The International Tennis Federation's anti-doping program calls for a four-year suspension for a positive test. That ban can be reduced in various circumstances, such as if the player shows no significant fault or negligence.

Loss of sponsor income would be costly for Sharapova, a five-time Grand Slam winner who earned \$29.7 million last year, according to Forbes magazine, most of it from endorsements, appearances and royalties rather than victories on court.

Sharapova, who lit up women's tennis when she won Wimbledon in 2004 as a 17-year-old, is still ranked among the top players. She was the world's highest-paid female athlete last year for the 11th consecutive year, and Forbes put her off-court career earnings at more than \$200 million.

Fellow athletes had mixed reactions to Sharapova's announcement that she had tested positive for meldonium, a drug she said she had been taking for a decade to treat diabetes and low magnesium.

The substance, recently banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), boosts blood flow and can

enhance athletic performance. Sharapova, who lives in the United States, is at least the seventh athlete in a month to test positive for meldonium. It is widely available in Eastern Europe but not approved for use in the United States.

"She's ready to take full responsibility and I think that showed a lot of courage and a lot of heart," Serena Williams, the top-ranked player in women's tennis, told reporters at a briefing ahead of a game in New York on Tuesday.

Others were not so sympathetic. "I'm extremely angry and disappointed. I had to lose my career and never opted to cheat no matter what," tweeted former world No. 1 Jennifer Capriati, in a long series of posts attacking Sharapova.

Aries Merritt, a U.S. hurdler, said there was no excuse for Sharapova to be unaware that WADA added meldonium to its latest list of banned drugs effective Jan. 1, which it circulated to competitors.

"As an athlete it is your responsibility to always know what's being placed on the banned list. Period," said Merritt at the U.S. Olympic Committee summit in Los Angeles.

Former U.S. Olympic swimmer

Aaron Peirsol told Reuters there was some confusion over meldonium. "It wasn't even anything that was illegal until the beginning of this year," he said. "You have a bunch of people taking stuff that the athletes probably don't even know (is illegal)... it becomes gray."

Sharapova said she had not read an email informing her that meldonium was banned for use in sport.

She will be provisionally suspended from playing tennis from March 12 and could be prevented from competing for Russia at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics this year.

Sharapova's deal with Tag Heuer, owned by French luxury goods group LVMH, expired at the end of 2015, and the company said on Tuesday it had dropped renewal talks in view of her announcement.

Nike Inc, the world's biggest sportswear brand, and German luxury car maker Porsche, a unit of Volkswagen AG, have said they are suspending their relationship with Sharapova as they gather more information and wait for a decision on a ban.

A person close to Sharapova told Reuters her team was encour-

aged that none of the sponsors so far have said they were terminating contracts with the player, although they had the right to do so.

"Suspension means to put on hold," the source said, requesting anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the situation. "Under the circumstances we're very pleased that everybody is willing to stand by and see what facts come out instead of terminating."

Danone SA, the maker of Evian water, a longtime Sharapova sponsor, said on Tuesday it would monitor developments. Avon Products Inc, another sponsor, declined to comment on its endorsements.

Brian Socolow, an expert in sports law and a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, said Nike's quick suspension was no surprise after its long support for now-disgraced U.S. cyclist Lance Armstrong.

But he said Sharapova may yet win back sponsors. "She has the chance, like other athletes, to redeem herself and regain her leadership position as an endorser," said Socolow. "She will have to demonstrate that it was an honest mistake and there are no other improper reasons she took the drug."

Wood

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momentum brings you around to the spinning back fist, and without even thinking about it, they just flowed together," said Wood, a Fort Myers, Florida, native who moved to Bucksport as a seventh-grader and went on to graduate from Bucksport High School.

"I didn't even know what happened until I watched the video, this was just one of those situations where I didn't remember hitting him with a spinning back fist or anything," he said.

Plenty of people saw the finish unfold, among them Bellator color commentator Jimmy Smith, who in the immediate aftermath of the bout said of Wood, "I hope we seem him again."

The stoppage also has gained recognition on the popular MMA website tapology.com in its listing of the top knockouts of 2016.

"I wasn't nervous at all as far as having the big-stage jitters or anything like that. For me it was no different than any other fight," Wood said. "Everything's the same, you're just on a different platform. I went out there and executed my game plan and just stayed confident."

Wood wasn't in contact with Bellator officials immediately after the fight, but he believes he left a lasting impression with his effort.

"It was a good showing and great for my big-stage



RUSS DILLINGHAM | SUN JOURNAL FILE

Anthony Morrison hits Ray Wood on the jaw during an NEF XVI MMA fight last year at the Androscoggin Bank Colisee in Lewiston. Morrison beat Wood with a fifth-round submission. Wood recently scored a first-round knockout of Chris "Lionheart" Jones on the undercard of Bellator 151 in Thackerville, Oklahoma, improving his professional record to 7-1.

debut, but obviously I feel like there's more to come as long as I can continue performances like that," he said.

Wood hopes to return to action once before experiencing fatherhood for the first time, but in the interim, he'll return to Amarillo and resume training at Nick's Fight Club, which is home to a handful of fighters but is more a boxing club than an MMA gym.

"This gym has kind of

brought me back to my original basement days when you just had a couple of guys and you had to earn your respect and you had to train really hard because you don't have the luxury of 20 or 30 training partners," said Wood of his earliest MMA days training in the Brewer basement of Young's MMA co-owner Chris Young.

"You have to make it yourself," he said.

Former Dexter High standout wrestler to make MMA pro debut

BY ERNIE CLARK
BDN STAFF

One of the top amateur fighters in Maine will make his professional mixed martial arts debut in April.

Josh Harvey, the New England Fights amateur lightweight champion, is scheduled to step up to the pro ranks in a bout against Matt Denning of Lewiston on the NEF 22 boxing-MMA card set for April 23 in Lewiston.

The fight will be contested at a catchweight of 150 pounds.

Harvey, the top-ranked amateur lightweight in New England according to massmma.com, is riding a three-fight winning streak, including a second-round knockout of Ryan DiBartolomeo last Sept. 12 that was named 2015's "amateur KO of the year" at

the New England MMA Awards.

Harvey compiled a 5-1 amateur record.

"I'm feeling blessed to be a signed professional cage fighter," said Harvey, a former two-time 152-pound wrestling state champion at Dexter Regional High School who now trains at Young's MMA in Bangor.

"I'm one step closer to my goal and April 23 I'll take another. I've wanted a chance to fight [Denning] ever since I met him — he is just one of those guys. I'm thankful for the opportunity."

Denning (2-1) is coming off a loss last November to Jon Lemke, who recently lost a controversial split decision to NEF lightweight champion Bruce Boyington.

That loss ended a four-fight

win streak — all by submission — that dated back to Denning's amateur days.

There is some apparent bad blood between the fighters that stems, according to NEF officials, from a cageside confrontation at NEF 14 in late 2014.

"One thing is very clear in this matchup — Josh and Matt don't like each other," said NEF matchmaker and co-owner Matt Peterson. "There is some deep, pent-up frustration that has been percolating between these two for a long time and on April 23 the cork comes out."

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Boston

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Farrell talked about players needing to adjust to the game speed again after an offseason away. He was quick to say, though, that that's hardly an excuse for sloppy play.

"There's a menu of team fundamentals we go through, and then we go back and hit multiple of times where attention to detail is needed to be paid," Farrell said. "There's also time to build in for individual defense. That's the area where we're building in more."

The emphasis is clearly on the corners. Ramirez's work at first will continue to

be the main story of camp. He's looked comfortable fielding grounders and accurate throws. His footwork around the bag and his ability to dig throws in the durst remain a work in progress.

"He's been real receptive," said Butterfield, the man tasked with overseeing Ramirez's transition.

With Sandoval, Butterfield is concentrating on first-step quickness and the positioning of his glove.

"We always concentrate on getting low to the ground because it's a position at third where the ball gets on you quick. We talk a lot about presenting the glove, because if you have a lot of glove movement, the ball's by you before you can get the glove ready," Butterfield

said. "He's been pretty light on his feet. Sometimes the throws aren't there yet, but they will be."

Do not count Butterfield among those worried about Sandoval's glove.

"Part of our job and what we do in baseball is you've got to trust in track records. He's been a good player, and we feel like he's going to continue to be a good player," he said. "Our job isn't to panic when something goes wrong. Our job is to keep trying to refine it and maybe help them become a lot more consistent."

The Red Sox left their starting infield home on Tuesday; Sandoval is the only starting infielder scheduled to travel Wednesday to Bradenton to face the Pirates.

Baseball

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here and how I've been treated."

The 41-year-old Hinch replaced Bo Porter as manager after the 2014 season. He previously served as Arizona Diamondbacks manager for parts of two seasons and in the front office with the San Diego Padres.

In Hinch's first season with Houston, he guided the Astros to an 86-76 record and an American League wild-card berth in the playoffs.

Cubs' Arrieta, GM confirm contract talks

MESA, Arizona — Jake Arrieta confirmed Tuesday morning that he and the Chicago Cubs recently held discussions on a long-term contract but wasn't sure where those talks would lead.

"Financially, my family and I will be fine, regardless of signing a long-term deal," said Arrieta, 30, who will earn \$10.7 million this season and is eligible for free agency after 2017. "The money is not on my mind at all. If the front office want to talk, then I'm here. We can sit down again and try and work something out. It's got to be something worth signing. I think (President) Theo Epstein knows that. "That's why we haven't had a ton of conversations about that. I think they know where the ballpark (figure) needs to be. Whether it happens or not, we'll see. I think both sides don't want to deal with this much during the season. I know questions will be continued to be asked and that's fine. I'll answer them honestly. But as of now, we don't have much."

President Theo Epstein

concurred with Arrieta on the state of negotiations.

"There's no hard deadline, but there are no active talks," Epstein said. "Jake's priority at this time of year is helping the team come together as a unit and help prepare for a season. The last thing you want or we would want is to create any type of distraction."

"But it's certainly not something that is going on now or probably will as the season begins."

Arrieta's stock is at an all-time high. He posted a 22-6 record and a 1.77 ERA en route to the 2015 National League Cy Young Award, and his value was helped by last season's free-agent contracts awarded to Zack Greinke by the Arizona Diamondbacks (six years, \$206.5 million) and David Price by the Boston Red Sox (seven years, \$217 million) this winter.

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