Dear Fellow Swimmers,

You might be reading these words in the middle of the night or just before dawn. I am not sure when you find the time, but what I do know for sure is that from all of the elite athletes in the world, swimmers get up the earliest and go to bed the latest. This isn’t exactly by choice. Most of us have to live two lives. While we strive for greatness in the pool, we must also manage our lives outside the pool. While the Iron Lady is preparing for Worlds in Budapest, Katinka prepares for her life after swimming. Although the World sees us, swimmers, as one of the most hard working and determined professionals, our leaders seem to think our sport is amateur, therefore we are amateurs, and that is exactly the way they treat us.

If swimming is still not a professional sport, then that is a reflection of the work FINA has been doing for the past few decades, not a reflection on the sport that is one of the fundamentals of childhood athletic development. There is a reason why many children do not stick to competitive swimming; it is extremely challenging. If you want to be a swimmer in 2017, you can know one thing is for sure, if you are not in the top 5 in the World, you will invest more than you will make. Does it sound attractive? Not really. Could we make it more appealing? I am certain that we can, so long as FINA helps us, instead of holding the best athletes back.

First of all, they should reach out and listen to us, the swimmers. They should hear us out and not decide upon major rule changes without our input on the topic. If they would have asked for our opinion, we could have told them that the World Cup has huge potential, but the planned new rule changes are destructive and hypocritical.

Everyone thinks that the new World Cup rule changes are against Katinka Hosszu. That can be partially true, because they definitely screwed me over. Imagine, I’m like one of those students that got straight A’s in every class, plus took-on drawing and chorus as extra curricular activities. Then, the next year I’m told I cannot do extra curricular activities because my success was bothering the rest of the students. The real truth, however, was that it was only the teacher who was bothered.

I could view myself as a victim, but, on the other hand, I get advantages from FINA that I never requested. I don’t want to automatically advance to the finals of the World Cup competitions based on my previous results at international competitions. I want to race for the final spots with young talents, like Iwasakis or Egerszegis, and if they are better than me at the age of 14, let them show their talent. With the new World Cup rule changes they have to start from a disadvantage—they have to wait until the sport’s top athletes get old or finish their careers before they can have the advantage of automatic advancement to finals. This is just not fair.

According to the new rules of the competition, every event won’t be offered at every stop. Now, for example, a top German swimmer might not compete in his own country because his main event (or events) will only be offered in Moscow or Eindhoven, but not Berlin. Why does FINA make rules that are harmful for the athletes, the organizers of the competition, the World Cup itself and swimming as a whole? These rules are risking the future of our sport, which I am not willing to support with my silence.

How can a sport label rules “innovative” when they are actually destructive, limiting the participation of the sport’s top athletes? Will the NBA limit one of its biggest stars, LeBron James, in his eighth participation in the big final next year? Will the ATP try to remind Nadal and Federer that their time is over? As one of the current faces of swimming, I should be focused on preserving and extending my career by not taking on too many events and not having my image being overused. Instead, here I am fighting to be allowed to swim as much as I want and to continue to popularize my sport.

Please don’t think that the leaders of FINA don’t know all of this. They are desperate to keep the importance of the World Championships alive and thriving – an event in which the revenues and profits do not get shared with the athletes – by destroying the World Cup, an event that could be in the future a more lucrative opportunity financially for many swimmers. FINA clearly sees that they could loose their complete power over the sport if even a few of the athlete’s images were to grow bigger than FINA’s. My story is not about Katinka Hosszu but about all the professional swimmers who have already realized they have enough power to influence the sport’s future.

I strongly believe that swimming can be a real professional sport, but for that we need to break the sport’s previous decades long mentality, which is based on the idea: *everyone is equal, but among equals there should be more equals*. FINA’s leaders have already decided: they do not want to treat the swimmers as equal negotiating partners, and instead they created destructive rules which are specifically limiting our opportunities. Instead of representing the sport and the swimmers’ interests, they focus exclusively to please their own business interests while they operate as if it were 1989 rather than 2017.

6,8 billion. According to FINA this is how many times people switched to the TV broadcasts of the 2015 World Championships in Kazan, Russia. These same people, who are bragging about these amazing broadcasting numbers, dare to tell us that there is no money in swimming, making it an amateur sport. If this is in fact true, why can’t we see how much revenue was generated from the broadcasting rights? If all swimmers are blocked from wearing headphones from one of their own personal sponsors, since one of FINA’s sponsorship contracts specifically blocks this, then why can’t the swimmers see exactly how FINA is benefitting from this partnership? Why can’t the swimmers benefit from the sport’s most popular international events? This is not even mentioning logos on apparel.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that FINA is in chaos. There is the lack of transparency in the financials, the constantly changing rules, and leaders with no vision. At first it may seem a bit scary, but this is the time for us, the swimmers, to do something about the future of our sport. We wouldn’t need to be pioneers; there are so many inspiring examples from other sports before us.

Based on regulations in the NBA, the league has to give more than half of the yearly profit to the athletes; exactly 51% goes to the athletes as salary, not more, not less. Therefore both the league and the athletes have the same motives. This system is transparent and fair. Do you know why the league is set up this way? Not because the leadership of NBA was so generous and offered a percentage of the profit as a gift. It’s because the players recognized the power of being united and the NBA had to realize that without the players the league would be worth nothing.

In 1973, Nikola Pilic, the best Yugoslavian tennis player of his time, was banned by his federation because instead of playing for the national team for free, he participated in a Canadian prize money competition. When the organizers of Wimbledon told Pilic that because of his sanction he couldn’t compete, he was furious.

Tennis was on its rise at this time: businessmen, agents, and broadcasters were all waiting to come in for their cut of the big money that the players could make with their performances. The athletes knew that they had to be prepared for this change, so a year earlier they established ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals). Pilic told the president of the players association about his ban, who then convinced the 50 top tennis players to sign a petition which said, *If he won’t play, we won’t either*.

The international federation, the media and the public laughed at the athletes for their weak attempt unify and everyone was sure that when the biggest tournament was about to start the athletes will change their mind. On the day of the draw, out of all the biggest stars, there was only one English and four East-European players set to compete. (The English player was there for patriotic reasons and the other four players because of their communist country’s pressure.) The other 81 players left united. And what was the result? The most awkward sporting event of all time, where the 300,000 fans could watch amateur third class players compete. It became clear, even the biggest, most prestigious event is worthless without the best athletes.

The international federation was forced to realize, the power was in the player’s hands: they immediately cleared Pilic’s ban, gave the athletes the freedom to choose where and when they want to play and to let the athletes have a say on the most important decisions and rule changes of the sport’s future.

From that point on there was no stopping: in the next 10 years the prize money increased tenfold and tennis has become one of the most profitable sports of all time, and not just for the organizers or the players, but for everyone involved.

We must learn from the boycott of Wimbledon, because without them there wouldn’t be greats like Agassi, Federer, or Djokovic. Their message is crystal clear: we have to stand up for ourselves, we don’t have to let them decide without us, when and where we compete and for how much money. If the rules - which they create without asking for our opinion – are harmful, illogical and pointless, we have to stand up for what we believe in because that’s our responsibility!

I’m 28 years old. I’ve won 21 gold medals in the Olympics, World and European championships, and I’m sure I am already in the back half of my career. I could put my head in the sand, compete a little longer and then live comfortably for the rest of my life. Believe me, I am not writing these words for myself, but for the younger swimmers and those generations who come after them.

Isn’t it amazing when 8-year-old kids are running up to us with awe and asking for autographs? Isn’t it amazing when successful adults look at us as their role models? Aren’t you proud when you hear a grandpa tell his grandchild that we should be their heroes? For them and millions of people, we are the sport of swimming. This is why it is our responsibility how we change the future of swimming.

The opportunity has always been right in front of us. But it is up to us to take the chance. Just like in any performance, we all have to start this together, but instead of us competing against each other, this time we have to fight together as one.