

IMPORTANT BLACK AMERICANS IN **Sports**

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BLACK AMERICANS OF DISTINCTION

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CHAPTER THREE

Serena Williams: Professional Tennis Player

During the 2015 Wimbledon tennis championship in London, England, Serena Williams was in serious trouble. Her opponent, Victoria Azarenka of Belarus, had just sent a blistering forehand down the line to win the first set of their quarterfinals match. Azarenka always presented a unique challenge to Williams. She did not try to match Williams's power but instead used her skill as a counterpuncher to probe for openings and win long rallies. Williams was not at her best, missing her serves and sending routine shots wide. Yet she recovered to win the second set 6–2, setting the stage for a dramatic clincher. The third set featured epic rallies that called on both players to summon their best tennis. Finally, Williams's athleticism, pounding ground strokes, and lethal first serve earned her the victory.

She went on to defeat Russia's Maria Sharapova in the semifinals and a young Spaniard, Garbine Muguruza, in the finals to win her twenty-first major title. It was also the second time in her career she had won four Grand Slam events in a row, over two calendar years—the so-called Serena Slam. She had demonstrated once more not only her supreme skill but also her determination to be the best. "Serena Williams is your 2015 Wimbledon

champion, and that's a sentence that should surprise precisely no one," observed tennis writer Chris Tognotti. "At 33, an age when most tennis players are on a severe decline, Williams remains one of the most dominant individual athletes in the world."¹⁸

An Education on the Public Courts

On September 26, 1981, Serena Williams was born in Saginaw, Michigan, to Oracene Price and Richard Williams. She was the youngest of five girls: full sister Venus and half sisters Yetunde, Lyndrea, and Isha. Richard, whose father had picked cotton in the South, insisted on better lives for his family. He moved them to the Los Angeles suburb of Compton, California, where he ran a private security firm amid pockets of gang activity. He claimed to have planned his youngest children's tennis future even before they were born. Seeing on TV one day the huge prize money paid to the winner of the French Open tennis tournament, he decided then and there that he would teach his children the game. And he started by taking lessons himself so he could serve as their instructor.

At age four Serena, with her older sister Venus, began to play tennis at some public courts not far from the Williams's house. Richard coached his daughters for two hours a day, instilling in them a passion for the game. Early on, he set a goal for the girls: to become champion professional tennis players. When they reached school age, he decided to homeschool them and devoted after-school (or before-school) hours to practice sessions on the tennis court. Some workouts began at 6:00 a.m.

The Williams sisters learned early that life in Compton could be perilous. Occasionally, shots rang out near the park where they practiced. Serena thought she was hearing firecrackers but her father made sure she knew she was hearing gunshots not firecrackers. Serena was nine when her father moved the family away from Compton to West Palm Beach, Florida. There the girls entered Rick Macci's tennis academy to refine their game. Macci and Richard had their battles about certain things, but Macci

“There is nothing a human being cannot do if a human being believes in themselves.”¹⁹

—Richard Williams, Serena’s father and first tennis coach

could not help but admire how Richard looked out for his daughters. For example, he pulled them out of junior tournaments when he felt that tennis was interfering with their schoolwork and their ability to play with friends like normal kids.

But one day, when twelve-year-old Venus announced that she was going to win five Wimbledon tournaments—which she went on to do—Richard had to smile. He knew his girls had the competitive fire. His dream of Serena and Venus achieving pro careers was not just a fantasy. As he said later, “There is nothing a human being cannot do if a human being believes in themselves.”¹⁹

Meteoric Rise on the Pro Tour

In 1995 Serena became a professional tennis player at age fourteen. Venus had done the same the year before. The sisters created an immediate sensation on the pro tour. Both young women possessed uncanny athletic skills, including speed, strength, agility, and timing. Both employed a two-handed backhand per their father’s instruction. Yet the sisters were far from looking like twins on the court. Venus took after her father, with a lean body and long arms and legs. Serena, by contrast, looked more like her mother, with a thicker frame that helped her deliver blazing serves and powerful ground strokes.

Reporters emphasized the impact that the Williams sisters could have on the sport. When they began their careers, few African Americans were competing at the highest level in tennis. Serena and Venus, with their electric, hard-hitting style of play, promised to shake things up on the tour. Many stories focused on the sisters’ origins in Compton, compared to the country club background shared by many of their White opponents. Like Tiger Woods in professional golf, they seemed certain to inspire a new generation of Black players.

A Family Rivalry

One of the longest-running rivalries in tennis, dating back to 1998, is purely a family affair. Sisters Serena and Venus Williams have played each other thirty-one times in that span, with Serena holding a solid 19–12 advantage. Sixteen of their meetings have come in Grand Slam events. Early on, it looked as though Venus might be the more successful of the two. In their first match against each other, at the 1998 Australian Open, Venus won easily. She continued to hold the edge on her younger sister for several years. But when Serena fully developed her deadly first serve and overall power game, the rivalry shifted decisively in her favor.

The sisters' competitive fire ensures that each meeting is a treat for tennis fans. Their matches have featured some of the greatest athletic displays in women's tennis. Venus can take solace in the fact that she has defeated Serena more times than any other player. "The best part is (that) we bring out the best in each other," Serena told reporters at the 2018 US Open. "I know when I play her, I have to play some of my best tennis. She does, too."

Quoted in Nick McCarvel, "Venus and Serena's Decades-Long Rivalry: 5 Things to Know," Olympics, August 13, 2020. www.olympics.com.

After a brief learning period, Serena's rise in the rankings was meteoric. In January 1998 she won her first match in a Grand Slam event, beating the Romanian Irina Spirlea in the Australian Open. In February the Williams sisters won separate Women's Tennis Association tournaments on the same day, Serena in Paris and Venus in Oklahoma City. And on March 28 the two met in the finals of the Lipton Championships in Key Biscayne, Florida, with Venus winning 7–6, 6–1. Observers agreed that neither sister was at her best in the match. They said they preferred not to play each other, so that they could each root for the other's success. But by the end of the year, Serena and her sister had both cracked the

top ten in international tennis rankings. “I wasn’t expecting them so fast, you know?” said Spirlea. “Sometimes I’m in awe. They have something the others don’t have.”²⁰ Switzerland’s Martina Hingis, the world’s number one player, already was calling them the strongest opponents on tour.

An Historic Breakthrough at the US Open

Hingis was about to witness personally Serena Williams’s breakthrough to greatness. On September 11, 1999, Williams met the top-seeded Hingis in the finals of the US Open in Flushing Meadows, New York. Reporters marveled at the youth of the finalists, with the eighteen-year-old Hingis, already the winner of five major



Serena Williams, winner of twenty-three Grand Slam singles titles, has dominated women’s tennis. Her superb athleticism and her determination to excel in her sport have made her a role model for young women of color both in and out of tennis.

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