

VENUS

DOWN TO EARTH

Critics argue that **Venus Williams'** star has dimmed considerably. But she backhands any and all retirement talk, and says her game—and her passion for it—is as strong as ever

By *ERIC BUTTERMAN*

A CENTURY FROM NOW, when readers of *OT* are getting schooled on the highlights of early 21st-century sports, one standout will certainly be the first African American, male or female, to be ranked No. 1 in tennis. And while the holder of that title is Venus Williams, many might assume wrongly that it belongs to her sister, Serena.

And that's just fine with three-time Wimbledon champion Venus, believe it or not. When *OT* caught up with her recently, she had just exited the first round of the Australian Open—the only

play in," she quickly shoots back like her signature power forehand. "I'll still go out and try to win all the others. I'm incredibly competitive like that."

Venus sounds convincing enough, but there have been more than a few rumblings that other interests are the real competitor to her game, not the Sharapovas or Davenportes of the world. Bob Hansen, men's tennis coach for UC Santa Cruz, is one of those critics: "She doesn't seem to be training like she used to," he argues. "It will be hard for her to compete with other athletes who are single-

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time in 34 Grand Slam tournaments that the five-time major winner has lost in the first round—and she certainly didn't seem like someone who had time to worry about competing with her sister. The rest of the field wants to—and, in this case, did—beat her, too. But that doesn't bother Venus either. The media was talking about her possibly retiring—especially after losing to Bulgaria's 94th-ranked Tszvetana Pironkova. But she could care less. That's just the media being the media.

Now in the twilight of a phenomenal career, Venus, who turns 26 in June, wants the critics to know that no one in her corner is ready to throw in the towel just yet. What does trouble her, you ask? "If I don't play better next time," she laughs. "It's easy to be rusty, and I was. I had an off day. It happens." What? No complaining about already being out of a chance at the rare sweep of the Grand Slam? "I want to win every tournament I

mind in their focus. There are just many more well-toned and athletic players than there used to be, so they're raising their game. When your game is dropping, it's only a matter of time before the competition catches you."

Venus doesn't pretend not to have other interests. You can hear her unabashed enthusiasm as she talks about her Florida-based interior design firm, V Starr Interiors (www.vstarrinteriors.com), or the line of bags she designs for Wilson's Leather. But when she hears that people believe this takes away from her game, it makes her think they never really knew her to begin with. "I've always had a lot of things that I like to do, especially design," she explains. "I've even spent time in design school for a few years. I'm also very spiritual, spend a lot of time with my family...I just like to have fun. I've never thought it's healthy just to play tennis and have nothing else."



our name on every trophy. —VENUS

DESIGNING WOMAN
Venus has a certain
flair on the tennis court—
and clearly off it as well.



THE X FACTOR COVER STORY

INVINCIBLE

When Venus Williams is at her best (as she was in July 2005, right, beating Lindsay Davenport to win her third Wimbledon title), she's virtually unstoppable.

PHOTO BY NEIL LEIFER

Unfortunately, designing bags isn't the only kind of baggage she's had to deal with. There have been consistent rumors of the Williams sisters not getting along with other players on the tour. "All the talk of me and Serena having trouble with other players is just a '90s thing," she says matter-of-factly. "Old news and blown out of proportion to begin with." Then, of course, there's the talk about trouble between her and her sister....

In this together

When Venus refers to her great team, she's definitely not talking about the Davis Cup squad. That's why she's often associated with her close ties to her family, which she not only doesn't mind, but welcomes. And, yes, she realizes people have a fascination with her relationship with her sister. But that doesn't mean she understands why. "People talk about us like there's something mysterious or angry between us," says Venus. "Like there's something weird about us. The only thing that's unusual is that we're both good at tennis. We're just best friends, like a lot of sisters."

Part of the fascination, of course, is their back story. It began with the sisters learning to play tennis on courts peppered with broken glass and crack cocaine vials in the Compton, Calif., ghetto under the direction of a father who'd never played tennis himself. Richard Williams was—and still is—a mystery to the outside world. When the girls first hit the scene in the early '90s, he boldly predicted that his daughters would someday rule the tennis world. Crazy talk, people thought, especially since

no black person had dominated tennis since Arthur Ashe won Wimbledon in 1975, and certainly no black woman had won a major tournament since Althea Gibson won the U.S. championships and Wimbledon in 1957 and 1958.

Having his daughters win 33 singles tournaments and five Grand Slams—including three Wimbledon—Richard Williams has had more than the last laugh. Still, when sportswriters often depict him as outspoken, rude and smothering. Deserved or not, Venus knows him as Dad, and would also like to remind people that the sisters have a mother, too. "We're just like our parents. I'm both my mom and my dad. My mom [Oracene] taught us patience, and he's taught us confidence." Venus says when she feels down about her career, it's Richard who's there to pick her up. "You have to stay positive, but sometimes you come home from the road after an upsetting loss and it's tough," she says. "He just tells me, 'You're the best.' Confidence. That's what he gives me."

From the quiet inflection in her voice, you might infer that Richard recently said just this to Venus after her earliest Grand Slam exit in close to five years, an exit that has to lead to a question about her future. Asked this question, Venus briefly pauses, but then her enthusiasm picks up again. "Why move on to other things when there's tennis to play?" she asks. "There should be our name on every trophy."

Yes, she says "our" name. No matter what the critics say, the Williams sisters are in this together.



PHOTO BY NEIL LEFFER

Venus' Greatest Hits

Wimbledon

Singles: 2000, 2001, 2005
Doubles: 2000, 2002

U.S. Open

Singles: 2000, 2001
Doubles: 1999

French Open

Doubles: 1999

Australian Open

Doubles: 2001, 2003