

Grand Slam Winner  
**Venus Williams**

talks about tennis,  
family, and raising  
an athlete

BY ERIC BUTTERMAN

# child to champion

**Venus Williams** *knows* what it's like to be in the spotlight from an early age. Before she was even a teenager, Venus was featured with her sister Serena in a *People* magazine article praising their feats on the tennis court. The number of African-American tennis stars could be counted on one hand back then, and here were two budding under the same roof—a roof owned by Richard Williams, possibly the most famous sports father in history.

In 2002, Venus became the first African-



American to be ranked number one in her sport. She was just 21 at the time. Today, Venus balances her court pursuits with her business career as the owner of VStarr, an interior design firm. We recently caught up with the five-time Grand Slam singles winner and asked her to share her thoughts about what role tennis—and family—played in her life and about the positive influence sports can have on children's lives.

**What do you see as the legacy of your family in sports?**

I ponder this every single day. I want to be remembered as an athlete with incredible sportsmanship who competed hard every time. But also as a good role model outside of tennis. I want people to see my family as a close group that supports each other. Also how my parents brought spirituality into our lives and encouraged it.

**How were your parents able to make sports fun while also guiding you to success?**

You do have to train hard to succeed—there's no getting around that. Yet my parents made sure that we could do normal stuff. If we said we wanted to go to the park, we went. They made sure growing up was about more than tennis.

**What kinds of mistakes do you think parents make when it comes to getting their kids involved in sports?**

Taking it too seriously or just forgetting that they're kids. They need to have friends and have a supportive family behind them. You see some parents always pushing their children and it just makes things uncomfortable. . . . Parents should tell kids to focus on what they can control and not worry about losing. I always try to worry about what's going on on my side of the net. You also have to be positive with kids. I think I'm never out of matches because even when I'm down I don't believe the other person's going to beat me. That doesn't mean I always win, but I try.

**Tell us about your relationship with Serena. How were you able to stick together and not try to outdo each other?**

We have a very special relationship and our parents made sure we worked together. When my sister succeeds, I feel it's me succeeding and I know she feels the same way. We have a strong bond and have made a commitment to not let tennis get in the way of that.

**Your father drove you both to succeed on the court. Looking back now, how do you feel about his coaching—and parenting—style?**

I'm really proud of him and the fact that he doesn't try to pretend to be someone he's not. By being honest with me he's really taught me so much. He's always telling me those great sayings (one he likes: "A slow walker is a slow thinker"). He offers me something new all the time. Many people are big fans of his. They come up to him and encourage him to be outspoken, to keep doing what he's doing. He's somebody who's very passionate about life and has something to say. He cares so much about us and wants to protect us.

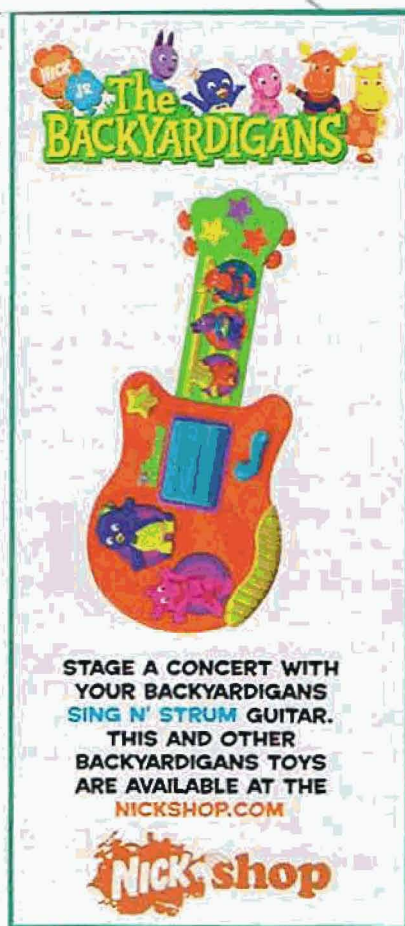
**Did you ever feel extra pressure to perform because you were representing African-American women in a sport that has so few? For example, Zena Garrison seemed to feel pressure at times.**

I don't think my experience is anything like Zena's. She went through a lot and in many ways paved the way for people like me and my sister to have an easier time of it. I just have tried to go out and represent myself well.

**What's the biggest challenge of being a professional tennis player?**

It's challenging to be on top of your game for 11 months out of the year—machines can't do what I have to do. You're struggling with the mental side as much as just feeling tired. But it's worth it in the end because tennis is so much fun for me.

Eric Butterman writes about sports, education, and \_\_\_\_\_



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