

FEATURES

Simply Serena

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Serena Williams didn't just beat Maria Sharapova. She crushed her.

On the way to her third Australian Open singles title, Williams picked off her opponents one by one, with the skill and precision of a sharpshooter at target practice and Sharapova became her latest, most satisfying, casualty. For those of us who never wavered in our belief in her skill, drive and passion – the sight of Williams jumping around the hard court like a kid on Christmas, cradling that enormous trophy in her arms, meant one thing: order had finally been restored to the tennis world.

So many people said the unseeded, 81st-ranked Williams couldn't do it. So many critics said she lacked the focus of her younger years. So many questioned whether her commitment to tennis was as strong as her desire to be a Hollywood A-lister. And to be honest, the "Can she still do it" whispers were understandable.

To a point.

Ever since Williams went under the knife to repair a partial tear in the quadriceps tendon of her left knee in 2003, she hasn't been the same. She withdrew from the Australian Open the following year to rehab the same knee and then lost to a 17-year-old Sharapova in the 2004 Wimbledon final. After several disappointing performances and competition withdrawals that year, Williams stormed back in 2005, beating top seeds Amelie Mauresmo, Sharapova and Lindsay Davenport en route to her second Australian Open title and seventh Grand Slam win.

But the hate kept coming after she lost in the third round at Wimbledon a few months later, pulled out of the 2005 French Open due to ankle and right knee problems and lost to Venus in straight sets in the fourth round of the U.S. Open. When Williams failed to make the finals in any of the four tournaments she competed in last year, she found herself out of the Top 100 rankings for the first time since 1997, before eventually climbing back to No. 95 by year-end.

Not even her amazing come-from-behind victory (1-6, 7-5, 6-3) over fifth-seeded Nadia Petrova in the third round of this year's Australian Open—her first win against a Top 10 player since she beat Mauresmo in the quarterfinals of the 2005 event—was enough to convince everyone that she was back.

Past doubts of Williams' ability still lingered in the minds of many. No longer was she able to register 100-mph serves consistently, they said. No longer were her Grizzly bear grunts and sheer presence on the court enough to make an opponent quiver in her Nikes. No longer were Serena and Venus the collective face of women's tennis.

So they said.

"It's always like, tell me 'No' and I'll show you that I can do it," Williams said after her recent Australian Open win. "I get the greatest satisfaction just holding up the Grand Slam trophy and proving everyone wrong."

To have believed that Williams' drop in the rankings was indicative of her eventual eclipse from the tennis spotlight would've been short-sighted and downright asinine. Come on, the girl's from Compton. She's been dodging obstacles (namely, bullets) and proving people wrong her entire life. When Serena and big sister Venus burst on the scene – beads, braids and all – the world was transfixed by their skill, athleticism and unique style of play. Year after year we anticipated the drama-filled sister showdowns come tournament time.

But then something changed. As the Williams sisters aged, so did their joints. They lost some of their quickness and agility, and in the process, their impenetrable armor began to show cracks. But for some inexplicable reason, the media expected more from them. It demanded that the sisters show the same explosiveness, the

same grit, the same determination and the same crushing defeats that we, the spectators, had grown accustomed to seeing.

Throughout the Australian Open, Williams claimed that although she wasn't 100 percent, her body was close to its pre-surgery form. But for some reason, people didn't buy it. Instead, the media scoffed at the extra weight she carried into the tournament and soon the paparazzi photos of Williams on the Hollywood social scene, along with her desire to become an actress and fashion designer, became the ammunition used to take shots at her character and her career. Although the "I was born to be a fashion designer" comment didn't help assuage the media's concerns—at the same time, can we fault Williams for having other interests?

For 15 years, she has competed in tournaments and won. Younger generations flocked to tennis because of her and Venus, and thanks in large part to the Williams sisters, the sport finally achieved the widespread appeal it, in my opinion, so desperately needed. So hasn't she earned the right to do something else with her life besides playing tennis? Has she not given enough of herself to the sport already?

Williams's Australian Open performance should, at the very least, be proof that she's just as committed to tennis as she is to the development and execution of her clothing line, Aneres (which is her name spelled backwards). For those of you who are expecting to see an Anna Kournikova-like bow out from tennis or Williams sprawled out on a public bathroom sink in a sequel to Enrique Iglesias' 2001 "Escape" video – it ain't gonna happen. Tennis was never, and will never be a means to another end for Williams. She's way too talented for that.

What we witnessed on Friday was an MJ-during-his-second-stint-with-the-Chicago-Bulls moment. She took time off to get her body and mind right, and frankly, I don't blame her. Imagine tearing up your knee, dealing with chronic pain years later, losing your eldest sister to senseless L.A. gang violence and still having to go about your business as if nothing was wrong because people wouldn't allow you to heal and grieve in your own time. It may have taken her longer than she would've liked, but Williams, who jumped 67 places to No. 14 after the title win, has finally proved the haters wrong. After her improbable victory over Sharapova in the Aussie final, she skillfully fielded questions about her commitment to tennis, as if she were still on the court, poised to break her opponent's serve.

"What are you going to do to make sure that you don't sort of go away the way you did after the '05 Australian Open final?" asked ESPN analyst Pam Shriver.

"Oh stop it, I'm here to stay," a playful Williams responded. "Like I said in the press conference, this is just the beginning. This isn't the end. I believe my best years are yet to come. Believe that."

To the critics who spent the past few months and years wondering if they'd ever see flashes of greatness from Serena Williams again, I think you just got your answer.

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