



Venus Williams modeling her own fashions (all photos)

EDITORS' NOTE Professional tennis player Venus Williams is a former World number one ranked player and is currently ranked World number six in singles. She was ranked World number one in singles by the Women's Tennis Association on three occasions for a total of 11 weeks. The first came in February 2002, making her the first black American woman to achieve this feat during the Open era. Her seven Grand Slam singles titles ties her twelfth on the all-time list, more than any other active female player except for her younger sister Serena Williams. She also has 14 Grand Slam titles in women's doubles and two in mixed doubles. Her five Wimbledon singles titles tie her with two other women for eighth place on the all-time list. Venus Williams is one of four women in the Open era to have won five or more Wimbledon singles titles. Between the 2000 Wimbledon Championships and the 2001 US Open, Williams won four of the six Grand Slam singles tournaments held. She is one of only five women in the Open era to win 200 or more main draw Grand Slam singles matches. Williams has won four Olympic gold medals, one in singles and three in women's doubles, along with a silver medal in mixed doubles. She and her sister Serena have won more Olympic gold medals than any other tennis players, male or female. At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Williams became only the second player to win Olympic gold medals in both singles and

Venus Williams: On and Off the Court

An Interview with Venus Williams

doubles at the same Olympic Games. With 49 singles titles, Williams is behind only her sister Serena among active players on the WTA Tour. Her 35-match winning streak from the 2000 Wimbledon Championships to the 2000 Generali Ladies Linz tournament final is the longest since January 1, 2000. She is also one of only three active WTA players to have made the finals of all four Grand Slams. Venus and Serena have also won 14 Grand Slam doubles titles playing as a team and are undefeated in Grand Slam finals. Williams is also the Creative Director and the vision behind the line EleVen, and she started VStarr 10 years ago with a goal to create timeless beautiful interiors. Williams earned her A.A. in Fashion Design from The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale and is working towards her B.A. in Business Administration from Indiana University.

You're known for your successes in tennis, but you have also taken to business and are an entrepreneur in your own right. Will you discuss your business ventures?

Growing up, my dad and my mom got us interested in sports and, of course, we played a lot of tennis, but it was really important for them that we got our education; as my dad said, "I'm not raising any dummies."

We had to get good grades in order to stay on the court or my dad would have pulled us out of the game. We would do things like learn about a foreclosure on the way to practice. We were only eight years old and listening to books on tape in the car about things like this.

We didn't understand it at that age, but it was about teaching us to think, about how to be entrepreneurs, and how to open our minds and be original.

Are the areas you focus on with your businesses primarily an extension of sports or are they looked at differently?

Do I look at things differently? No, I see them all as very connected. I recently wrote a book called *Come to Win* and it shows the correlation of how people play sports and become very successful later in life. They didn't necessarily play professional sports – two of them did that but the rest played in college and they went on to rule within different industries, or become political leaders. I do see them as very connected. Sports can really teach people lessons.

When you look at the clothing line, EleVen, who is your target market?

My line is targeted to a number of people. Although I'm looked at as a tennis player, I'm also an athlete and I move my body. This line is targeted towards tennis but also toward people who want to do positive things for their bodies off the court, as well as for those who want to push themselves past their limits to an EleVen.

You're known as a hands-on person. How deeply engaged do you get in regard to product development and design?

The product is my baby, and I'm very focused on the product itself and the marketing. I always travel with a sketch book to put my ideas down quickly before I forget them. I don't have a mind that retains things forever. I have to sketch ideas quickly. I follow the product until it's delivered, so that's a whole cycle that takes a year or more. In terms of other parts of the business, it's my job to be able to understand what is happening. I also always encourage my team to run with things and to be their best, and it makes me better.





At the same time, my job is to watch over everything and I agree with most of what is going on 99 percent of the time even. There is just that 1 percent where I might do it a different way and that's when I say something.

More than anything, I like to have people around me who are better than me because it makes me better.

How important has it been to build a team you trust and what do you look for when you hire people? Is it more about expertise and experience or more about how they will culturally fit into your organization?

It's all of that. One has to have the skills but also to walk the walk and talk the talk. We're a very entrepreneurial group. All of us work very hard but, at the same time, we're laid back because I have a low-key personality and I'm laid-back, while also being very much type A. Whoever we hire has to fit into that environment.

Do you look forward to creating additional companies or will you primarily focus on growing what you have already created?

It's interesting, as we grow and change and learn more, we see areas we can touch and be effective in within our own industry. I do like to invest in others as well. I see myself becoming more of a mentor going forward. I'm not really thinking about expanding my businesses but as I get older, I get wiser about things so who knows. In business, everyone says you have to spend the first 18 years with the pedal to the metal, but I've spent 36 years of my life like that. I'm extremely happy with what I have done on the court, and what I'm doing off the court. That's all I need.

Those who go pedal to the metal for long periods often experience burn-out or fatigue, but you talk about tennis today with the same passion as you did when you started. What makes it stay fresh for you?

I adore the game and that is the first part. Second, one has to love the challenge of playing other tennis players. It's a

tough sport because you're on your own. We play all year every year until we retire. It's all-consuming.

Players have to love the challenge and feel like they have something to give. I feel I have that, and that speaks to my longevity.

How challenging is it to learn the game of tennis?

Tennis is a difficult sport. One doesn't get good at it right away. When one starts playing, it's almost impossible to hit the ball. Anyone can pick up a basketball or a hockey stick and figure out a way to get a point but, in tennis, one is generally hitting the ball out for a long time if the person can hit it at all.

It's an intensely challenging and tough sport and there is no instant gratification.

For young people who pick this sport, they need to have something special.

What is it about your relationship with Serena that has been so special? There is such a respect and admiration between you two. What has made it work so well? How do you remain close through the competition?

We've always been like that and have never changed. It's the easiest explanation. We never let anything change us. Our relationship is more important than anything and it has been a lot of fun.

Do you ever think about slowing down?

No, I can't be happy going slow. I like to go fast. When I slow down in tennis, I will speed up in other areas. There are things I haven't had the chance to do in terms of charitable endeavors because I barely have time to even see my family. I would love to get more involved in giving back.

When your playing days are over, will it be important for you to remain tied to the game?

I don't know. I always talk to Serena about that. I won't be able to handle playing tournaments if I'm terrible.

I will always have fun hitting the ball around. I just don't know if I can ever play a champions or legends event because it would upset me too much. I will take a break from the game and you won't see me at tournaments for a while because I will be sad if I'm not out there playing at the highest level. Professional athletes always tend to have

the same mentality even if they are no longer playing at a high level.

As to the game itself, Serena and you have carried it to where U.S. women's tennis is getting much more attention. Do you see the next generation coming up within the U.S. to compete globally?

Yes, definitely. The U.S. is used to having champions. We've had them from the 1920s. We've had a bit of a lull, and I think it was our turn to not be in the winner's circle. We'll come around again.

You've had so much success in your tennis career and on the business side, but you're still always looking at improving and at what's next. Do you take moments to enjoy the process and reflect on the type of career you've had or is it always about the next challenge?

I'm grateful because I have been able to do what I love at a high level and continue to do it. There is a part of me that feels that way because I've been able to live my dreams and I'm happy for that. However, there is also the other part of me that feels it isn't enough to just be grateful. I have to make even more dreams come true. ●

