

Winner's

Circle

What does Serena Williams— tennis powerhouse, aspiring fashionista, occasional actor, and all-around formidable human being—do when she gets the flu? Does she fight her way through high fevers and boxes of tissues to come out swinging, shaking off chills and congestion faster than the rest of us nonathletic types?

“I just lie in bed. At some point I move to the couch. I watch lots and lots and lots of TV. Then around 6 [p.m.], I go back to bed. And I do it for days,” says Williams, who dropped out of several smaller tennis tournaments in February while suffering from the effects of a particularly nasty bug.

And this comeback kid—who despite her unseeded status defeated the 6-foot-blonde Russian transplant, No. 2-ranked Maria Sharapova, in January’s Australian Open—cites television as her elixir of choice, whether she’s sick or simply chilling out after a tough match. “I’m a cable freak,” she says. “The *Avatar* is my favorite show. It’s animation, which I love. And I’m addicted to *America’s Next Top Model*.”

by Senior Editor
Lauren Paige Kennedy



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Sidelined by the devastating loss of her sister, injuries, and a free fall in her world ranking from No. 1, tennis ace **Serena Williams** has done a 360 to find herself back at the top of her game



And you thought elite athletes spent all their time bench-pressing and panting through grueling practices.

But Williams, 25, is no ordinary athlete. Fans and foes alike know her as something of a warrior goddess, all chiseled muscle and broad-shouldered menace on court, dressed in flirty Day-Glo pink or skin-tight black leather. This is a woman who clearly refuses to color inside the lines, even if her laserlike shots usually fall within them.

Serena's Setbacks

From the start of her career, Williams has defied the odds. She rose from L.A.'s rough Compton neighborhood as a child player to become, in 1999, only the second black woman to win a Grand Slam. Althea Gibson's historic 1956 victory served as inspiration. Williams took home gold at the 2000 Sydney Olympics for women's doubles (sharing the honor with her sister, tennis champ Venus) and earned four straight Open titles (nicknamed the "Serena Slam") by early 2004.

But Williams watched her No. 1 ranking drop dramatically after a nagging knee injury (a tear to the quadriceps tendon) continued to plague her, despite an earlier surgery to repair it. She also suffered from a stress fracture to her right ankle, which added more pressure to her knee, in 2005; in 2006 her ranking fell from the top 100 for the first time in more than a decade.

While Williams struggled with both personal and professional setbacks during these years, she never planned to bow out quietly. "I hated it," she tells WebMD, referring to the tough times, when some tennis fans wondered if her glory days were behind her. "But I had injuries, and I had to let myself recover."

Rick Macci, who trained both Williams sisters in 1991–1995 at his Florida-based tennis academy (as well as some of the sport's other biggest names, Sharapova included), adds this: "Knee injuries affect movement—they are really tough for a player to overcome. Plus, whenever you have an injury that takes you off the court, it's mentally hard to come back. When Serena wants to be, she is one of the toughest players ever to play the game. But her mental state affects how she plays."

Macci believes that great players must have equal parts mental resolve and God-given talent. "Everybody thought Serena was ready to disappear. But she played Sharapova in Australia like she had nothing to lose. When Serena doesn't let the pressure get to her, she is the best player in the world."

Love—All

Her physical challenges may have been only part of the catalyst for Williams' respite from the pro circuit in 2004–2005 and her struggle to get back in the game. In September 2003, her older sister Yetunde Price was shot and killed in Compton as

she sat inside a friend's car. Her family was devastated. The murder made headlines around the world, and for the first time, the flamboyant tennis star may have felt the intrusive nature of her fame.

Williams, who claims to wear her celebrity status with ease and says that to "inspire young girls is my dream," admits that the prying press and sensational nature of the crime made her bereavement "a little more difficult, trying to deal with it all."

When asked if she needed a mental break as much as a physical one after Price's death, she answers quietly, "I think so ... yes."

This comes as no surprise to Kevin O'Brien, MA, EdD, a trauma therapist and the director of education and victims services at the National Center for Victims of Crime in Washington, D.C. "Violent crime touches every aspect of an individual—the spiritual, the emotional, and the social," O'Brien says. "Socially, there is a need to withdraw. Emotionally, there is the need for support. And spiritually, there are tough questions like, 'How could something so bad happen to someone so good?' The fact that Serena is also a public figure, with the details of the murder given to the public, would have made coping with her loss that much harder."

But a comeback was never far from her mind. "Tennis is a game I was born to play," Williams says now, despite court whisperings that her other interests—from fashion design (she has her own clothing



Knee Injuries 101

Professional athletes and weekend warriors alike are prone to knee problems, including sprains and tears to knee ligaments and tendons.

Serena Williams suffered a complete tear to the quadriceps tendon, a fairly rare injury, even for professional athletes. Consisting of four muscles, the quadriceps runs the length of the front thigh, and its tendon connects these muscles to the kneecap. A tear typically occurs after physical exertion or an injury or fall and can affect the knee's ability to fully extend, says Preston Phillips, MD, orthopedic surgeon at St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa, Okla.

More common knee problems include mild ligament sprains, cartilage damage, and meniscal tears, says David McAllister, MD, associate professor and chief of the Sports Medicine Service at the UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. **Ligament injuries** usually happen when the knee twists or hyperextends during high-risk sports. Repeated wear and tear from running, for example, or sudden, severe twisting of the knee can cause **cartilage damage**. **Meniscal tears** typically result from a combination of sudden pressure on the knee and twisting.

Treatment for all three depends on the type and severity of the injury, and can include RICE (rest, ice, compression, and elevation), bracing, physical therapy, and pain relievers, such as anti-inflammatory medicines.—Jennifer Dixon

Williams with her sister Yetunde, left, who was shot and killed in LA in 2003, and with Venus, right, at Wimbledon, a few months before the tragedy.



line, Aneres, which is "Serena" spelled backward), to the lights of Hollywood (she's dabbled in acting over the years, appearing on *ER*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, and *Law & Order: SVU*)—were distracting the top player from performing at her peak.

"I wish I could be like Martina Navratilova," says Williams, referring to her 50-year-old colleague as someone whose passion for the sport never wanes, despite a nearly nonstop playing schedule. "But I'm not like that. I need other things in my life. I need balance."

When asked if these other "things"—from business meetings with apparel executives to red-carpet movie premieres—help prevent feelings of burnout, she replies, "Yes. For me, they do. Absolutely."

For naysayers who questioned her commitment to tennis before her spectacular return in Australia a few months ago, for those who wrote that she wasn't training enough, wasn't conditioned enough, and had lost her desire to win, Williams offers

this: "I never stopped training. I trained all year—you have to. It was never an option to settle [for a lower ranking]."

So, WebMD asks, which is more difficult emotionally: maintaining a No. 1 position with your competitors gunning to take you down, or climbing back as the underdog? "I don't know which one is harder," Williams says. "There are ups and downs. When you're down—feeling truly low—fighting your way back can be fun. But when you're No. 1, it's the best. Nothing's better ..."

"But I never feel pressure," she continues, challenging Macci's earlier assessment. "I just stay focused on my own game. That's what works for me."

Does she believe her presence—all 5 feet, 10 inches of cut biceps, iron-strong legs, fierce gaze, and determined focus—intimidates her adversaries? "I really don't know," she says. "I try not to think about anyone else out there. I think about me."

When Williams took on Sharapova in Melbourne, she was thinking about some-

one else—but it wasn't her opponent on the other side of the net. After winning the match with a forceful backhand—and securing her eighth Grand Slam title—Williams told the crowd in an emotional voice, "Most of all, I would like to dedicate this win to my sister, who's not here. Her name is Yetunde. I just love her so much. I'll try not to get teary-eyed, but I said a couple of days ago, if I win this, it's going to be for her. So thanks, Tunde."

Sharapova later remarked: "You can never underestimate [Williams] as a performer. ... I know what she's capable of, and she showed that today. She has shown it many, many times."

Built to Win

Compared with some of her will-o'-the-wisp rivals, including her 125-pound archnemesis, Belgian player Justine Henin, Williams is physically, well, impressive. But does she get tired of having her fitness level questioned simply because she has curves, strength, and

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Balancing Burnout

Keeping your eyes on only the prize—in Serena Williams' case, winning the next Grand Slam or upping her ever-fluctuating rank—leads to imbalance and anxiety, says David Simon, MD, co-founder of the Chopra Center for Well-Being. Which is why the tennis star's choice to pursue other passions beyond tennis is a healthy idea.

"Sometimes disengaging from the game is a good thing," he says of Williams' healthy indulgence of pursuits off the court. Particularly when grieving over the loss of a loved one, as Williams did after her sister's murder.

"It's important that people recognize that everything in nature alternates—day and night, sun and moon, rest and activity," he says. "We have to realize that if we don't take time to get centered, we'll be exhausted."

Not only that, what Simon calls "activating a stress response" in the body can hamper health in numerous ways, including increased blood pressure and heart rate, a weakened immune system, stomach upset, back pain, and trouble sleeping.



Williams makes the scene on *Law & Order: SVU*.

Simon offers these tips for coping with life's stresses:

- **Stay centered.** Performing a few rituals, preferably before bed, can lessen sleep deprivation and induce balance. Take a warm bath; listen to soothing music; read inspirational literature; write down anxieties in a journal; practice deep breathing; and make quiet time a priority.

- **Go away.** Plan a vacation so that you'll have something to look forward to. A break makes a stressful situation less overwhelming.

- **Speak up.** If you're agitated or upset, don't put on a brave face. Converse with friends, family members, and professionals so that you can talk through the pain rather than keep it bottled up.

—Jennifer Dixon



Williams' fashion flair holds center court.



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mass? Does she suffer from weight issues and insecurities like so many other American women? Or does Williams view her body as a machine, something to be nourished and trained for maximum performance?

"Both," she answers. "I think everyone wants to look fitter. You always want what you don't have." (This is the same woman who was once quoted as saying that no matter what her weight, she'd have a large bosom and backside—although admittedly, she described her backside with a less printable word.)

"It's frustrating," she says. "A lot of people don't understand that I am both [shapely and fit]. But as long as I'm winning, that's OK! That's all that matters."

"Serena is large, with muscular buttocks, hips, and thighs," echoes San Diego-based Cedric Bryant, PhD, chief science officer of the American Council on Exercise. "In regard to tennis, she is perfectly built to excel. Her power allows her great court coverage, enables her to be explosive. She has the classic mesomorphic body type, which is a muscular, athletic body that is best suited for power, speed, and agility."

As for weight, Bryant says that BMI—body mass index—is not necessarily a good indicator of fitness levels among elite athletes. "BMI measures body weight in relation to height. In Serena's case, it gives the wrong conclusion, because it doesn't take into account the composition of that weight—lean versus fat tissue. Extra weight in the form of lean muscle mass, which is what Serena likely possesses, is a positive for a top athlete."

Sister Act

And how does her sister Venus—who, while less curvy, is, at 6 feet, no less physically imposing—view Serena's triumphant return to the upper echelons of the sport? "I take it as inspiration," the former No. 1 was quoted as saying about Serena's Australian Open win. The elder Williams, also struggling with a painful sports injury of late, has competed only twice since last July because of a sprained left wrist; her World Tennis Association ranking as of press time was 29.

"Venus is the No. 1 Serena fan!" her younger sister tells WebMD with obvious appreciation.

But what about sibling rivalry? How can two sisters compete on such a grand scale without hurt feelings, disappointment, or resentment?

"We talk about it sometimes," Williams admits. "Honestly, I really, really want to win—of course I do. But if I can't win, then I want Venus to win."

"They aren't quite as competitive with each other," opines Macci, who recalls the first match the two sisters played as rivals, when they were teenagers. "It's probably not conscious. But if you follow tennis, you notice that [when they play each other], they don't have that intense desire to destroy the other person, the competitive rage you need to win—the same fire Serena had when she recently blew Sharapova off the court." Williams sums it up differently: "We truly want the best for each other."

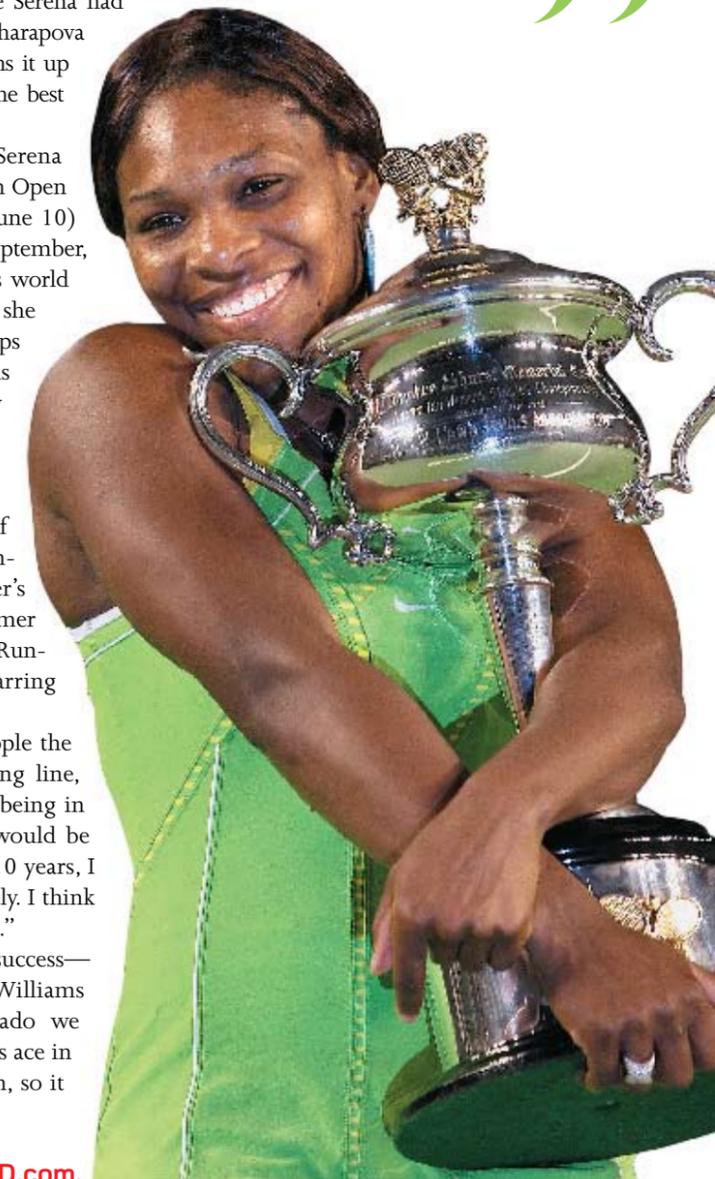
So what's next for Serena Williams, besides the French Open later this month (May 27–June 10) and the U.S. Open in September, when the eyes of the tennis world will be on her to see if she takes her ninth—and perhaps 10th—Slam, and maintains her comeback status? "I stay in the present, I think about today," she says simply.

And a decade from now? Does Williams see herself still competing? Commentating from an announcer's box like her colleague, former champion Tracy Austin? Running a fashion empire? Starring in Hollywood films?

"I just met with my people the other day about the clothing line, so that's in the works. And being in a movie—well, well, that would be a dream come true. But in 10 years, I want to be a mom. Definitely. I think I want to have at least three."

As for her philosophy for success—on court and in life—Williams serves up a kind of bravado we haven't seen from this tennis ace in years: "Someone's gotta win, so it might as well be me." ●

“When you're down—feeling truly low—fighting your way back can be fun. But when you're No. 1, it's the best. Nothing's better.”



For more burnout-bounce-back tips, go to www.WebMD.com.