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## Serena and Venus Williams

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Every now and then the Sport of the Seventies can still rear up and produce intense excitement. At the U.S. Open this past weekend several of those moments jumped off the TV screen and into our living rooms.

Richard Williams, one of the most interesting characters in a sport that produces more interesting fathers per player than any sport other than acting, predicted at that his daughters would face each other in the finals. The scoffers were everywhere, as many laughed and others were just irritated. It was after all Richard Williams blowing smoke. Again.

Were it not for leg cramps attacking Venus in the semi-finals the Richard Williams would have been a prophet.

On Friday night Serena Williams, the youngest of the Williams wunderkind, beat the defending champion Lindsay Davenport by simply overpowering her. Known for her power game, Davenport was overmatched most of the night. In the end she could not stay with the 17-year-old of the big shoulders, strong arms, powerful legs and feline quickness.

That same night Venus Williams and Martina Hingis, the current number one player in the world, played a fabulous three set match that looked to belong to Venus late in the third set. Hingis was nearing exhaustion and gasping for breath. Then leg cramps struck Venus and two games later Hingis claimed victory. This set up the championship on Saturday between Hingis and the "other sister."

This time it would be a two-set match with Serena dominating play, and Hingis looking desperately for an answer to the power and speed of the "other sister." Only Serena's nerves and loose play extended the match to a second set tiebreaker.

Serena Williams took the U.S. Open Championship at age seventeen. The young girl whom Richard Williams had once described as "the better, badder, meaner," of two sisters, became the lowest seed in the women's tournament in the open era to win a championship. She became the first African-American woman to win a Grand Slam event since Althea Gibson won the Open in 1957 and '58.

Watching all of this was a great treat. It is clear now that the woman's game is far superior to the men's in style, and that at this point in time it has many more interesting players and personalities than the men's game.

There were several aspects of the Serena Slam that were attractive. First, her style of play is loose, powerful and exciting. Second, her smile and general demeanor display the joy of sport, a trait she will have difficulty retaining when she figures out what she has done and how much history she must carry on her shoulders. Third, there was the backdrop of the "feud" between Hingis and the Williams sisters. Or was it Richard Williams whom Hingis described as a "big mouth?"

One could not help but wonder about the nature of sibling rivalry between Venus and Serena. No doubt Venus was disappointed that she didn't get to the final, and did not win the Open. Certainly Venus knew she had contributed to Serena's victory by extending Hingis the previous night. Yet it was Serena, the younger sister, the baby of the family, who won the first grand slam by a Williams as Venus watched from "the Friends Box." No doubt this scenario was not the one that Venus played out in her tennis daydreams.

And if Venus understood, as her parents do, that Serena was going to be the better player of the two, did that make it any easier to watch while the youngest Williams held the trophy over her head and smiled while the cameras exploded around her. The shots of Venus the spectator on Saturday afternoon showed a grim young woman not really savoring the moment. How deep this runs or how big an impact it may all have on Venus remains to be seen.

One would hope that the impact would be minimal and that Venus and Serena would continue to display their exceptional talents, which will allow them to dominate the woman's game for many years to come.

As for papa, King Richard, he is no doubt enjoying all of this immensely. Considered a kook by some, a problem by others, a blowhard by yet others, and an intruder by the tennis establishment, Richard Williams was vindicated this weekend. His unorthodox training methods, his holding the girls out of junior tennis, his care for their education, have all been criticized and ridiculed over the years. After all he had never played the game, he knew nothing about it, he was an outsider in both the world of tennis and in the mainstream of Middle America.

Yet somehow it has all worked. Or it has worked so far. The girls seem balanced and mature for their age. They know what to say and when to say it. They have built a protective shield around themselves to ward off the racism of both the tennis and wider worlds.

Many young tennis players' crash and burn even those who succeed. Let us hope that for the good of tennis, Venus and Serena Williams will stay the course, and that they will develop a tennis rivalry with Hingis, Davenport, and each other.

I found myself on Saturday doing something I haven't done in some time: sitting in my living room and cheering for someone to win a tennis match. I also watched as the game was taken to another level.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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