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The Williams Sisters Dominate and Redefine Tennis

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Last weekend at Wimbledon the traditional fortnight at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club ended with a victory by Serena Williams in yet another all Williams Ladies Final. This was the third Williams sister meeting in a Grand Slam final, and the second win in a row for Serena who defeated her older sister just a few weeks earlier in the French Open final. Venus won the first of Grand Slam sister events at the U.S. Open in 2001.

Venus Williams won the previous two Wimbledon Ladies Championships and her loss to her younger sister was her first loss after twenty straight wins on the grass at Wimbledon. For some frosting on the cake the sisters walked off with the Ladies' Doubles Championship as well.

The two sisters have been ranked numbers one and two in the world for some time now, and after Wimbledon those rankings reversed with Serena replacing Venus in the number one position. Serena is clearly the better and stronger player at this time. Having broken through both on the court and psychologically at the French I think it likely that Serena will not look back. It will take a major effort for Venus to raise her game above that of her little sister.

Serena Williams took the U.S. Open Championship at age seventeen. Richard Williams had once described Serena as "the better, badder, meaner," of his daughters, and now at age twenty with three of the Grand Slam Championships already in her possession there is little doubt about this assessment.

It is not only Venus who faces the challenge to lift her game to compete with her sister, but the entire women's tour now must raise their game to be able to compete with the Williams sisters. For someone like Jennifer Capriati who has remained quite competitive with both Serena and Venus this is likely. For a healthy Martina Hingis raising her game another notch is feasible. Whether either of them will, and whether any other women will make the effort to raise their games to this new level remains to be seen.

What the Williams sisters have done is taken women's tennis to a new level. The match played on centre court last Saturday was an eye-opener. The strength of the serves, the

power and accuracy of the ground strokes, the speed of these two players was really quite extraordinary. The television ratings were also taken to a new level, up some twenty-eight percent for the Ladies final and way up for the Ladies Doubles final where audiences are usually measured in fractions rather than full ratings points.

Chris Evert while serving as a commentator for NBC made a number of interesting observations during the Ladies Final. She made the point that perhaps these two did not always play their best games against each other, because when they faced each other they were facing their most difficult opponent. They could not be expected to play the perfect game against such high level competition.

The other observation was about the future for these two stellar stars. How much longer will they continue to be sisters who live together, practice together, and love one another to the point that it makes it difficult, especially for Venus, to defeat the other on the court? When will they have a parting of the ways, establish separate residences, and get different coaches? When and if they do, this could make the world of women's tennis even more interesting than it is now and make the Williams sister showdowns even more exciting than they are now.

King Richard 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 has been vindicated yet again. 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 the WASP world.

Yet somehow it all worked. The girls are balanced and mature for their age. They know what to say and when to say it. They do not criticize others even when others criticize them. Their success does not mean that tennis is now an equal opportunity sport, anymore than Tiger Woods' success indicates any sea change in golf.

They have built a protective shield around themselves to ward off the racism of both the tennis and wider world. How much longer the shield will protect them, especially from

the growing jealousy and elements of racism in this white world of tennis remains to be seen. How much longer they continue to live in sisterly harmony also remains to be seen.

One hopes that Venus will not become discouraged and brood but will rise to Serena's challenge and lift her game. One hopes that those on the tour and those young players on the horizon will also meet the challenge as young players did when Martina Navratilova took the women's game up a notch.

We are living in a great time for both tennis and golf as the Williams sisters and Tiger Woods have redefined both games. This is not something new to the world of sport and has happened before and will happen again. The pursuit of excellence is an essential part of the essence of sport. It is why we watch and why we care. When excellence is put on display neither the venue nor the sport matters as it is simply wonderful to behold.

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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