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Serena Williams , Daniel Paisner (Contributor)

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One of the biggest stars in tennis, Serena Williams has captured every major title. Her 2009 Australia Open championship earned her the #1 world ranking for the third time in her illustrious career - and marked only the latest exclamation point on a life well and purposefully lived. As a young girl, Serena began training with an adult-sized racquet that was almost as big as her. Rather than dropping the racquet, Serena saw it as a challenge to overcome-and she has confronted every obstacle on her path to success with the same unflagging spirit. From growing up in the tough, hardscrabble neighborhood of Compton, California, to being trained by her father on public tennis courts littered with broken glass and drug paraphernalia, to becoming the top women's player in the world, Serena has proven to be an inspiration to her legions of fans both young and old. Her accomplishments have not been without struggle: being derailed by injury, devastated by the tragic shooting of her older sister, and criticized for her unorthodox approach to tennis. Yet somehow, Serena always manages to prevail. Both on the court and off, she's applied the strength and determination that helped her to become a champion to successful pursuits in philanthropy, fashion, television and film. In this compelling and poignant memoir, Serena takes an empowering look at her extraordinary life and what is still to come.

On the Line Details

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Ed says

As a huge tennis fan, I figured I would read Serena Williams' "On The Line" at some point, but after her meltdown at this year's US Open, the book quickly went up my to-be-read list. I always find it a bit odd when tennis players release memoirs mid-career, but the Serena certainly had enough material, even if she is still a few more years to go until retirement.

In general, the Williams Sisters have not been terribly forthcoming about their personal lives, generally letting their tennis do all the talking, so it was interesting to read Serena's perspective on things from her humble past, to her controversial father (who she quite lovingly refers to as "Daddy" throughout the book), being a Jehovah's Witness, to some of her most (in)famous on-court moments. Granted the book was released just before the mother of all her on-court moments (this year's (2009) US Open outburst), so some of the recollections are unintentionally funny and/or ironic in that she talks about maintaining good on-court behavior or, if not, learning lessons and hoping not to behave so badly again... ha!

Serena comes across as a spoiled brat, though "diva" would be a word she would more happily embrace. She typically gets what she wants even if it takes some guile or foot-stomping to. This will come as no surprise to tennis fans, but the reason behind it might be a bit more surprising as I found she seems to suffer from a healthy dose of insecurity and self-esteem issues, not something one would expect from such a bold personality and/or someone who has risen to the very top spot in her sport. Throughout the book, she asks the reader if some action or emotion is valid with a... "don't you think?" tacked on to the end of the statement. This need for validation was again a bit surprising. Then again, she is human so perhaps just something that one tends to forget when it comes to athletes or celebrities.

That said, Serena is still very selective with what she is willing to share, granted that is her prerogative, but found it a bit frustrating when she put on the brakes. I was stunned that her most successful run in her career was fueled by a romantic break-up. Obviously, Serena viewed it as a very serious and important relationship to her, but for me she didn't explain the reasons why. For me she ends up sounding a tad wacko, even if it was the impetus to one of the great runs in tennis history.

Additionally, the book is a tad tossed together. While I recall most of these events, the non-sequential unfolding of the story might throw some tennis fans (i.e. a chapter about her ultimate boycott of the Indian Wells tournament, followed by later stories of her competing there, though earlier in her career). Also, I thought there were some glaring omissions. All of sudden she seems to have Grand Slam titles or Olympic medals under her belt or I her speaking of how she repeatedly wrote her murdered sister's name in a notebook as inspiration during her comeback Grand Slam win, so odd since she does speak fairly openly of this family tragedy, but does not write this particular notebook story, which at the time (watching it on TV) I found to be very emotional. Finally, I have yet to see a tennis memoir effectively recall the details of a match. The book opens with a mind-numbing, seemingly point-by-point, recount of her 2008 US Open quarterfinal vs. Venus that had me initially worried about the rest of the book.

Overall, an interesting and pretty harmless book that will give you a bit insight into the mind and heart of a champion.

Hallie Koslowski says

On the Line is an autobiography written by the famous tennis player, Serena Williams. She described in detail how she grew up on the outskirts of Los Angeles in Compton, to becoming the number one tennis player in the world. She wrote about her deep struggles in a small house with a mother, father and four other sisters in a crime-filled town. Serena talked about obstacles in her life and how she was eventually able to take control of them. She also included how she wrote a “match entry” in her journal the night or day of the matches, to keep her motivated before she played. Serena spoke about how much religion, family and philanthropy meant to her. For example, she opened a school in Africa so kids could have the ability to have an education. Serena Williams purpose was to not only inform the reader about her life and what her tennis career is like, but to inspire. She discussed the media several times in this book, talking about how they criticized her and her family relating to manipulation of the game and their color. It is truly inspiring how she overcame struggles and incredible odds to get where she is today.

“What would you do if you were not afraid?”

There were several themes in this book. However, the one that stood out to me is when you are going through life, there are going to be a lot of challenges and that we have to face them head-on, in order to get past them. Every chapter described an obstacle that Serena Williams had to face. By the end of the book, she figured out how to overcome these challenges and step forward with bravery.

The title of this book, On the Line, is suitable to such a theme. Serena specifically talked about a match where she thought the line caller made horrible calls. The line caller would declare a ball to be out when it was a foot inside the court. She got so frustrated, and this was an obstacle to her, letting line calls affect her entire game. So I believe she named her book, On the Line, because of that incident.

“Believe it. Act it. Become it.”

In the book, there were many scenes in the book written very well. One scene that I thought was written very well was how she wrote about her depression caused by pressure and a death of a close one. She intensely wrote about her experience in that period of time and how it was nearly impossible to overcome that. It made me feel like I was right there with her, experiencing the same feelings that she did. Despite all odds, she believed she would become a great tennis player, she worked hard and she became one of the best in the history of tennis.

“That’s life right? We get disappointed from time to time. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t look forward to anything.”

I don’t have a lot of issues with the book, but if I had to pick one thing, it would be to add more pictures throughout her story. Also, the book jacket and artwork were a little plain. There was a picture of Serena Williams smiling on the front and her serving up a point from a tournament on the back. These are great pictures but it represents what we already know of her as a world class athlete. Her heart, drive and incredible spirit came from her journey to that point. It would have been more interesting and relatable to see photos starting from childhood. Regardless, her story was amazing with or without pictures.

In the summary, they listed some hard times Serena had to go through, including a death and criticism of the media attacking her. Before reading this book, I never thought that Serena had a lot of hard times in her life, I assumed that she had an easy life and all she did was play tennis and get recognized. She appeared to be egotistical and uncaring. It just proves that we never really know the true story and shouldn't judge anyone. I was undoubtedly mistaken. I now realize the struggles and difficulties in her life didn't stop her from achieving her goals. It made me admire her and feel her story is a lesson for everyone to not give up on their dreams.

From the viewpoint of a tennis player, I found this book greatly inspiring. I found it amazing to see how intently she plays her game. I was able to relate to her and her game techniques. It was moving to see her start in Compton, California and then eventually become the number one tennis player in the world. I would highly recommend this book to people who are afraid to go for their dreams. Serena clearly intended this book for anyone who needs to be inspired. Only she could tell her story and she did it well. I also recommend this book to tennis players, so we don't give up!

“Go forth with an abundance of courage and the confidence that you can do anything you set your mind to.”

David Hankerson says

This book would definitely be appreciated by the true tennis fan and sports junkies. It is a great insight into how a champion's mind works--the killer instinct, the mental focus and single-minded devotion to the sport and winning at the cost of everything else.

This is also a great insight into Venus and Richard Williams. I have a new respect for both. And of course it is great insider's view of what happened at the infamous Indian Wells tournament that led to the Williams sisters boycott of the tournament.

Bill says

I am a life-long tennis player and fan. I have admired both Venus and Serena since they came on the tennis scene. Unfortunately the book arrived the Monday following Serena's embarrassing verbal--and almost physical--attack on a lineswoman at the U.S. Open semifinal match. As I read the book I wondered which was the real Serena--the one who seemed to have successfully escaped a very difficult life to become a superstar admired by people around the world or the selfish, vindictive, foul-mouthed tennis player blaming everyone but herself for her poor performance in the semifinal match. Regardless, the book is an interesting read, well written, and clearly brings out Serena's personality and unrelenting competitiveness. It is worth reading.

Rebecca says

I don't know much about tennis but I love reading people's biographies. I love to see where they came from

and what it took to get there.

I wasn't aware of Serena's background and how her parents taught all 5 girls to play tennis. Her family is her greatest support.

She is still young so she will have a lot more experiences to write about but I found it very interesting.

Sylvie says

Well to tell you the truth I was curious when I entered the contest to get this book and I ended up surprised when I read it.

She is not at all what I expected and this book was a really good way to discover someone... not through the lens of a cameras from being in the public eye.

Great read!

Alina Maria Ciobanu says

Serena Williams is a warrior, there's no doubt about it. I learned quite a lot of new things about her life and career. I think I appreciate her more after gaining a little bit of insight into her life and her thoughts. The Romanian translation of the book was not great, though.

Veronica says

I love everything about the U.S. Open except the line calls. ~ Serena Williams

I experienced this past U.S. Open upset of Serena Williams with a different perspective than if I hadn't read her memoir "On the Line." The book is written in Serena's voice. It's personal, it's conversational, and that's why I like it. I enjoyed her reflection on her life thus far.

I have to say that Serena is a spoiled brat, but that observation comes from her directly. She tells stories that curled this big sister's toes of scheming to get her way, cheating, and destroying her sisters' property. In looking back at all that peeking thru her fingers, I respect Serena for her honesty and self-criticism, and I agree with her judgment that she was a horrible little sister!

Serena spends a lot of time defending her father from the criticism he still receives about his coaching style. While her mom was pregnant with Venus, Serena admits her father decided that they would raise two tennis champions, and well, they did. He and Serena's mom taught themselves the game by playing and watching videos then he taught his daughters while they were living in Compton by playing on public courts. Even if the man is a controlling jerk, as some said early in the Williams Sisters career, you have to admit there's no country club pedigree here!

Serena digs deep to tackle the class and racial privilege they smacked into when Venus hit the tennis scene in

a chapter on the 2001 Indian Wells tournament. Clearly, the girls were raised with a keen sense of history, especially civil rights history, and I've always admired Venus and Serena both for the way they play and for their tip of the hat to those who came before them.

Serena has a clear sense of racial and gender justice. Not only does Serena spend time discussing race and class, but she addresses all the fat comments she has received over the years. Positive body image is big with her. She understands that, as an internationally known tennis player and someone with more money than most of us will ever know, she has a responsibility to others on many fronts. I didn't follow all the Oprah criticism when the star built a school in Africa, but Serena gives the best response to that criticism I've ever seen by wrapping her justification around a touching story of visiting difference countries in Africa and wanting to do something.

She also lets us in on how much fashion has always played a key part of her and Venus' game. They weren't strong women athletes who "discovered" fashion as a way to sell themselves to the media or fans. They are savvy business women who aren't afraid of taking chances. Along with her sister, Serena will continue to blaze a path for herself and for others.

Even if you aren't a tennis fan or even someone who follows the players closely, we all know that there are some players who make a splash and then disappear or even worse, publicly self-destruct. Pressure and age are often pointed to as the factors as well as pushy parents. It's clear from this memoir that Serena and Venus couldn't have been "The Williams Sisters" without each other. Serena Williams has it all and survives. She did it despite a battle with depression, which she outlines with grace.

Serena haters won't like this book at all, but if you are truly interested in finding out what makes this powerful woman tick, pick up this memoir. It reminds me that Serena's been counted out far too many times and has always come back. She dug herself a hole, but I have faith that she'll redeem herself and silence the critics... again.

Kacey says

I say she should stick with tennis. It was interesting to learn a few things about her but I didn't get much out of the book. She was pretty repetitive, if I heard how she wanted what Venus has one more time, I was going to scream!

Andrea says

Picked up this book this weekend at Myrtle Beach. It's not philosophically well-written but it's definitely written from the heart. I didn't follow her career that closely so it's interesting to read her points of view about Indian Wells, the shooting of her sister in Compton, Sept. 11 and her ex-boyfriend, whom she refers to as So-And-So. I just finished the chapter about her trip to Africa and her funding two schools there. I'd recommend this book to folks who won't mind reading raw emotions from an admirable young lady.

Brina says

One week ago, Serena Williams won the Australian Open to capture her twenty third Grand Slam title, only needing one more title to set a modern record. Eight years ago, after coming back from injuries and winning the U.S. Open, she penned her memoirs with collaborator Daniel Paisner. Although it does not have encompass her entire career or set marks for literary canon, *On the Line* is a fun read and appropriate for African American History Month.

In the 1970s, Richard Williams watched a lot of women's tennis on television. One day, so the story goes, it dawned on him that women could earn \$40,000 for winning a tennis tournament. Already the father to three girls, he told his wife that they should have two more daughters who they raise from birth to be tennis champions. So goes the legend of both Venus and Serena Williams. Richard Williams trained both daughters himself until they were old enough to enter tournaments and find footing on their own. When they finally could join the professional ranks, both sisters shot up the charts and are there to this day.

It would be easy to say that both sisters became instant champions. They faced their share of hardships growing up in Compton, California. The only two African American girls on local tennis circuits, they had to practice on local, beat up courts, where they often heard gun shots from a distance. The country clubs did not want to consider the Williams family in their inner circles because of their race, so they had to work extra hard to not only establish themselves, but to be champions. Along the way, they met the few women of color who had played before them and have become role models for young girls of color who are looking to dream big.

Even after earning a place on the Women's Tennis Association, Serena saw race rear its ugly head at the Indian Wells tournament. Being called n- by tournament attendees and treated poorly by officials, both Williams sisters vowed to never play at this event again. For a younger generation athlete, Serena Williams understands the hardships those before her had to go through in order that she can play tennis professionally today. In addition to giving clinics in inner cities, she has leant her name to two schools in Africa so that children there should be allowed to have a chance in life.

One win away from being officially called the greatest tennis player of all time, Serena Williams is also an accomplished clothing designer and aspiring actress. By penning memoirs in the middle of her career, Williams offers her fans a glimpse into her life that has seen its share of both triumphs and set backs. I give both Williams parents credit for raising their five daughters to play a sport where few people of color have succeeded. Their participation became a family affair and the girls have achieved beyond perhaps even their father's wildest dreams.

In terms of athlete's memoirs, *On the Line* is on par with the majority of them. It is not going to win awards for literary fiction but does offer a glimpse into the life of a super star athlete. An easy read and one I can add to an African American History Month challenge, *On The Line* averages out to three shining stars.

Raymon says

I enjoyed this book because it is TENNIS and SERENA. However, the writing was hard to read. Serena isn't a professional writer, yet, and the writing wasn't organized or cohesive. I loved learning about her life and especially her familial relationships. Can't wait to read more about her in the future.

Would love to see a biography on Venus! Would love to write it!!!

Bobette says

A taste of what day-to-day life is like for an athletic champion in a unique position to play (professionally) with and sometimes against her equally talented sister! I think the co-author (Paisner) let Ms. Williams do her own thing in this autobiography without a lot of screening, which was refreshing. I did catch that Serena says in the book that the quote that "her hometown courts were in such bad areas/condition that there was sometimes drug paraphenalia on them" was a stretch and yet that is written on the inside of the jacket cover. I wonder if Paisner got Ms. Williams ok for that to be worded in that way. She was brave to expose herself in this biography and really let you into her head. What I took from this book is that this is a competitive, confident, fiercely loyal, honest & caring person who also happens to be a disciplined athlete. Serena also doesn't claim to have all the answers, be perfect, or give advice. She makes being a champion seem inspirational yet obtainable. She shares with her readers her impressive faith.

This book made me want to know more about her father too! Her Dad seemed ahead of his time in exposing his family to positive affirmations and encouraging them to write their goals for the week. He taught his kids skills and discipline, but made it fun quality time together. I think Serena & Venus's father was a prophet. In the dictionary the definition of "Prophet" is "prediction of the future under divine inspiration." These women grew up knowing they would be champions. Because of their father they practically ate, drank and breathed "champion"! Her book was dedicated to her father.

I liked that Serena says this book is not a memoir. She says her life so far has been a spring board for many new realms to come. I can't wait to see what she does next!

Tensy says

I have been an admirer of the Williams sisters since they first sprang onto the women's tennis circuit in the late 1990s. This autobiography by Serena Williams describes her upbringing and family dynamics, although she avoids going into much detail about the difficult moments, like her parents divorce and sister's murder. I would almost classify this as a young adult book, primarily because she spends a great part of the book reflecting on her motivation on the tennis court and her championship spirit. I have a daughter who has played on the junior tennis circuit and I am amazed at how she was able to succeed with only her father as her initial coach.

His unorthodox training style (garnered from watching professional matches on television) included throwing footballs to help with their serves, daily practices on public courts in very rough neighborhoods in Lynwood, CA and choosing to avoid participating in the junior circuit. He also encouraged them to keep daily journals with motivational quotes, match analysis and notes on their opponents. Interestingly, my daughter's coach also required his kids to do the same. Excerpts from these journals begin each chapter of the book and give us insight into her competitive mindset. One of the pictures in the book shows post-it-notes on her tennis bag.

Here are a few of the things I enjoyed reading about Serena:

--She is the youngest of five sisters and until her late teens was quite small.

--A glimpse into what makes a champion, "You need a wild streak if you hope to be a serious competitor.

You need a kind of irrational killer instinct. You need to put it out there that you're reckless and unpredictable." Unfortunately, this mind set has led her to some major blowups on the court, as witnessed at the recent 2009 US Open. The book ends with the 2008 US Open.

--She is a Jehovah's Witness and her faith has pulled her through some very emotional moments in her life, including the death of her older sister, Tunde.

--She chose not to put a tennis court in her home because she and Venus decided that they needed to build some distance in their lives between home and tennis.

--Serena likes to make a fashion statement on the courts. Her philosophy is "if you carry a positive picture of yourself you'll present a positive picture to everyone else...I always felt that when there was an edge to how I looked, there was an edge to my game." Who could forget the infamous catsuit or biker outfit?

And most importantly, that bond she has with her sister, Venus, is absolutely genuine. At the end of the book Serena tells us that she is still a work in progress. I look forward to seeing the next chapters in her life.

Jenni says

The best parts of this book were the stories about Serena and her family. I enjoyed learning about all of her family, not just the members in the public eye (i.e., Venus and her father). Also, it was interesting to learn just how misunderstood Serena's father is and how he "pressured" the girls to do their best ... isn't this what all fathers do? A great insight into Serena's family.

The downsides? Well, let's just say Ms. Williams should keep her day job of playing tennis. I don't think writing is her strong suit. And Daniel Paisner wasn't a great help either. The book has serious typos and grammar issues that are elementary. So ... yeah ... it probably shouldn't have come as a shocker that Ms. Williams is not a writer.
