





# PHOENIX RISING

Presently ranked # 1 in the world, Serena Williams' career is anything but average. Grand Slam titles...got them! Olympic medals...done! Add to the roster a foundation that builds schools in Africa, a clothing line and a book and you realize why she gives the term *athlete* a shiny new prospective. Now she's back in Key Biscayne to take on the Sony Open with the grace, power, and champion attitude that has come to define her.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF IMG WORLD

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Serena Williams' dominating run at the majors might have come to a halt in Australia as nagging back issues and an aggravated ankle debilitated her performance, but she's visited this pause before. And that's partly what has endeared her all these years to sports aficionados and regular folks alike.

Born in Michigan, Serena is the baby of 5 sisters, one of them being Venus, also revered in the world of tennis. The sisters were raised in Compton, California, where they had racket in hand demonstrating prodigious potential by the age most kids are clumsily stumbling into kindergarten. At 9, her parents Richard & Oracene Williams picked up shop and moved the family to sunny West Palm Beach so the younger girls could pursue their love of tennis as well as to escape the violence of Compton; violence that in 2003 claimed the life of eldest sister Yetunde.

Serena Williams is no stranger to winning, and so she arrives in Key Biscayne confident she will leave the Sony Open victorious.

With the guidance and coaching of her parents, by 1995 both Serena & Venus had turned pro and enjoyed a steady stream of victories. With a legendary serve touted as the best of all time in tennis (recently recorded in Brisbane at 124 mph) Serena is also the 2nd African-American woman to win a Grand Slam singles tournament in U.S. history, the first being Althea Gibson in 1958. She and Venus are also the first sisters to play head-to-head for a total of 8 Grand Slam Finals...a rivalry that does not run deeper than their intense sibling bond.

Serena's fortuitous career has been marked with a rollercoaster of highs and vexatious plateaus, including knee surgery in 2003 that seemed to put a dent in her sporting









career with ongoing ailments and circulating rumors from the tennis world that she had lost her passion for the game. It was that same year that, while recuperating from surgery and the loss of a sibling, Williams began her meteoric comeback defeating Maria Sharapova at the Sony Open.

Key Biscayne is symbolic in many ways for her, aside from being the place where she returned to stand in good stead with the tennis muses. Arriving once more to this part of Florida and this tournament is a homecoming of sorts. When asked what she looks forward to the most each year at the Sony Open, she pauses and with a cool exhale that denotes she's arrived at the familiar, explains: "This is home," she says. "I look forward to stepping on center court. I love that court. I grew up watching that tournament and playing here... so I love it." Playing at the Sony Open means reconnecting to a happier time, it's about revisiting some of the sweetest

In spite of having multiple setbacks in the past, Serena Williams is once again on top and ready to take on every challenge that comes her way.

memories of her childhood – quite literally. "The thing I most remember, and this might sound weird...is the ice-lemonade," she says. "We weren't really rich and I just remember looking forward to that the most, because I had never had anything like that before."

Enjoying Key Biscayne and the Sony Open for the first time as a spectator is a special memory for Williams. "Well, I hate to say this because it dates me, but it was a match with Gabriela Sabatini," she says. "The stadium was on the other side, different from how it is now. I thought it was so cool. I wanted to be there and I new one day I'd make it."

And make it she most certainly did, which brings us to the fact that anything other than 1st isn't a spot suited for









Williams, she's known victory well, and any spot behind #1 is no place for this force of nature to pleasantly remain in. The Women's Tennis Association has ranked her World #1 on multiple occasions, acquiring the title for the first time in 2002. At 31, she's breaking records by remaining at the top of the women's ranking and although Williams' mighty body has betrayed her in the past, it's that stealth determination that always seems to bring her back to the head of the line.

So...is it tricky playing so close to home with so many friends and family watching? "It makes it easier and better for me," she says. "I'm more motivated to win in front of my friends." She goes on to say that the best advice she's ever been given is to never give up.

And *never giving up* requires not only discipline but the ability to cope with extraordinary amounts of stress. "I think I put a lot of pressure on myself – that's just me," she says. "I don't think anyone else puts pressure on me."

When it comes to activities other than tennis, there's plenty she does to release the tension associated with being such a dedicated athlete...dancing and music are chief among them. "I love to dance," she says. "My playlist right now has lots of '80s music...like Irene Cara stuff. You know, the movies and the music of that era was a lot about getting pumped up – that's how I like to prepare for a match."

And so as she leaves memories of Australia in the dust, she knows what spot truly corresponds to her at the Sony Open. Besides, a Key Biscayne ice-lemonade awaits her, and what could be more motivating than that? **KB**