



IS VENUS INTO A SLOW FADE?

What now for 29-year-old Venus Williams after another disappointing Grand Slam performance? Is she, like so many other great players before her, slipping into a slow fade from greatness as she approaches 30?

She hasn't played consistently great tennis in a big tournament since Wimbledon last July, where she lost in the final to her sister, Serena. She hasn't won a title now in nearly a year, at Acapulco, Mexico, in February of 2009.

Venus went into that benchmark loss to Serena at the All England Club with a 27-6 record for 2009, and she was playing -- no question -- the best tennis in the tournament. For the rest of the season, she won only 11 of 21 matches, and when she lost in the quarterfinals of the Australian Open earlier this week, to the pugnacious little Chinese player Li Na, it was not a surprise for me.

I had predicted this "upset" on a site for which I periodically write (covers.com) and I know, as many do, that the name Venus Williams no longer sends shivers through opponents as they trundle out onto court.

If Venus is indeed now on that road out of the elite stars, you can trace it to her loss to Serena at Wimbledon.

This is her eighth tournament since that Slam and she's just 4-4 vs. top-10 players, and that doesn't count a loss at the U.S. Open to Kim Clijsters, who would unquestionably have been top-10 if she hadn't only recently returned from retirement and still working on getting the required ranking points to reach No. 10 or better. Perhaps even more telling is Williams' 5-5 record against top 20s -- 5-6 if you care to include the Clijsters.

It seems unnecessary for me to point out that all this does not mean that Williams is no longer a threat on the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour, except that there always seem to be a certain number of readers who have difficulty processing the full details of her diminished play.

Of course she's still a threat. Of course a player such as Li Na goes into a Grand Slam match with her with a certain amount of high respect. But she's not the player she once was and we may have to wait until the next Wimbledon, where she's on her favorite surface, to find out if she will ever be a threat to win another major.

She was fine at the Aussie Open through the first three rounds, whipping through Lucie Safarova, Sybille Bammer and Casey Dellacqua with a very acceptable ratio of winners to unforced errors -- 18/18 vs. Safarova, 32/25 vs. Bammer and 31/36 vs. Dellacqua. Not surprisingly, things got a lot tougher in the second week. She beat No. 18 Francesca

Schiavone but needed three sets, hitting only 24 winners (29 unforced errors) and, for the first time that I can remember, didn't have an ace in a three-set match.

Against Li, her ratio was a very telling 27/53 with five aces, 11 double faults and she was constantly in trouble on her serve. Li had 15 break-point opportunities and converted eight.

She came to Australia without a lead-up tournament and that, she said, isn't the problem. "I just am not going to do that. I won't play the week before any Grand Slam."

You can't fault that reasoning before the French, Wimbledon or U.S. Open, where you're trying to balance the need for sharpness against the need for fresh legs. But at Melbourne, she's just finished an off-season. She should be well rested. Timing and synchronicity are the main things at the Oz.

Maybe she feels that at 29 (she turns 30 on June 17), she's played long enough that she can just use the first few rounds to get the stroke sharpness she needs. It's also possible that, at 29, certain fitness issues are beginning to slowly desert her.

She's had a fabulous career with 41 titles and seven Slam championships and I'd rather celebrate that than her declining years. But you can't ignore the current reality, either.

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