Name: _____ Date: _____

How Coco Gauff Became a Grand Slam Champion

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1196 words

How did Coco Gauff become a Grand Slam champion? Look at three finals. In 2022 she lost one at Roland Garros, the French Open. In 2023 she won the US Open from a set down. In 2025 she won Roland Garros from a set down, against the player ranked number one in the world. Through November 2026, the WTA's player page lists those two Grand Slam singles titles. The story is not one lucky day. It is a ladder, and each step has a reason.

A Grand Slam is one of four tournaments: the Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the US Open. Coco first played a Grand Slam main draw at fifteen. In July 2019 the club that runs Wimbledon gave her a wild card, an invitation to enter qualifying, a set of matches for players who are not yet in the main draw. She came through them without dropping a set, and the WTA called her the youngest player ever to qualify there in the Open Era.

Her first main-draw match was against Venus Williams, a five-time Wimbledon champion. Coco won 6-4, 6-4. She broke Venus's serve at 3-2 in the first set and took the set in 35 minutes. At the end she had three match points that she did not win before she won the fourth. Afterward she said: "My dream was to win. That's what happened." She then won two more rounds, one from two match points down, before losing in the round of 16.

Rankings decide who gets into a tournament and how players are seeded, which means placed in the draw. The WTA's system is a rolling 52-week count. Points depend on the level of the tournament and the round a player reaches, so a good week adds points and, a year later, they drop off. Coco climbed that list. In 2022 she reached the French Open final as the number 18 seed, ranked 23rd in the world.

That 2022 final went to Iga Swiatek, 6-1, 6-3, and Coco had no Grand Slam title yet. Swiatek was seeded first, and Coco was seeded 18th. She was ranked 23rd in the world that day. Soon after, on 12 September 2022, she entered the top 10 for the first time. Three years later, in 2025, she would play for the same trophy again and end the day differently. Between those two finals came her first Grand Slam title, at the US Open.

To follow a final you need the count. A game goes love, 15, 30, 40. At three points each it is deuce, and a player needs two points in a row. The first to win six games takes a set, if she is two ahead. At six games all, a tie-break is played to seven points, again by two. In a deciding third set at the Grand Slams, the tie-break goes to ten points instead. The first to win two sets wins. In the 2023 US Open final, Coco and Aryna Sabalenka needed three sets.

Sabalenka won the first set 6-2. A reporter for the WTA counted Coco's first set as three winners and 10 unforced errors. A winner is a shot the other player cannot return. An unforced error is a miss that the other player did not force, like a ball hit into the net. Seven of Coco's

ten errors in that set came on the forehand. A player who gives away points like that is in trouble, and the first set showed it.

In the second set Coco changed her swing. Tennis Majors wrote that she began shortening her backswing and playing slightly less defensively. The WTA counted just three errors off the ground from her in that set, against nine off the ground in the first, and wrote that the "cumulative defensive pressure" from Coco was paying off. Defense here means getting the ball back until the other player misses. About an hour into the match she led the second set 3-1. She won it 6-3 and then took the third 6-2. The final lasted 2 hours and 6 minutes.

She was nineteen. At the time the WTA called her the youngest American US Open champion since Serena Williams. Reports at the time called her the first teenager to win the US Open since Serena Williams in 1999. Those words describe 2023, and a record can change later. After the win she said: "I am burning so bright right now." The WTA's records show the score as 2-6, 6-3, 6-2, and show that she was the number 6 seed beating the number 2 seed.

In June 2024, her ranking reached No. 2, her career high through November 2026. In November 2024 she won the WTA Finals in Riyadh, 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (2), beating Zheng Qinwen in a three-hour final. She was twenty, and the AP wrote that she was the first American to win the Finals since Serena Williams in 2014. Once again she lost the first set. A ranking is not a trophy. It is a running total of results, and the WTA says it counts results at no more than 18 tournaments in singles, plus the WTA Finals as an extra one.

On 7 June 2025 she played the Roland Garros final on Court Philippe Chatrier, seeded second. Across the net stood the No. 1 seed, Aryna Sabalenka. The first set lasted 77 minutes, and Sabalenka won it in a tie-break. By our reading of the score, 6-7(5), the tie-break ended 7-5, because the number in brackets is the loser's points. Sabalenka had led 4-1 in that set before Coco caught up to 4-4. Coco lost the set.

Coco tried something different. She said later: "I was trying to be more aggressive in the second set, which, it worked." She won it 6-2. In the end the numbers tell the story. She had seven fewer winners than Sabalenka but 40 fewer unforced errors. One report counted 100 unforced errors for the two players, 70 of them Sabalenka's. By our arithmetic, that leaves 30 for Coco. By our reading, those numbers say she missed less, not that she hit harder. The final took 2 hours and 38 minutes.

The third set went to Coco 6-4. Sabalenka saved one championship point, which is the match point in a final, and Coco won on her second. She lifted the Suzanne Lenglen Cup, and the WTA called her the first American in a decade to win in Paris. Coco said of the final: "It wasn't pretty, but it got the job done, and that's all that matters." She was the No. 2 seed, and she had beaten No. 1.

So how did Coco Gauff become a Grand Slam champion? She earned entry at fifteen with a wild card and a run through qualifying. She lost a final in 2022. Then, in 2023 and 2025, she

lost the first set of a final and tried something different: a shorter backswing, then a bolder second set. She won the next two sets both times, and both finals ended with her holding the trophy. The count changes with every tournament, so any total here is true through November 2026 only.

Questions

1. What did the club that runs Wimbledon give Coco Gauff in 2019?

A. A wild card
B. A seed
C. A trophy

2. Why was the first set of the 2023 final a problem for Coco?

A. She had too many aces
B. She made many unforced errors
C. The match was only one set long

3. In the story, what does unforced mean?

A. Not caused by the opponent's good shot
B. Hit very hard
C. Played on grass

4. What did Coco change in the second set of the 2025 final?

A. Her racket
B. She became more aggressive
C. The side of the court

5. What did the numbers in the 2025 final show about how Coco won?

A. She hit more winners
B. She hit the fastest serve
C. She made far fewer unforced errors

Words to know

qualifying: matches to enter
seeded: kept apart
winner: unreturnable shot
unforced: not caused
aggressive: attacking, bold

Answer key: How Coco Gauff Became a Grand Slam Champion

1. A. A wild card
2. B. She made many unforced errors
3. A. Not caused by the opponent's good shot
4. B. She became more aggressive
5. C. She made far fewer unforced errors