Name: _____ Date: _____

How Did Venus Williams Become a Champion?

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1250 words

How does someone become a champion? For Venus Williams, it began on October 31, 1994, in Oakland, California. She was 14, and she had no ranking. The event gave her a wild card. That is an entry the organizers can offer to a player who would not get in on ranking. Her coach said she looked better in practice than she ever had. Her first opponent was ranked near 60th in the world. She had never played a pro tournament before.

She won in two sets. One report said she was already serving 115 miles per hour. The same report said she still had habits to learn. On the changeovers, the short breaks when players switch sides, she stood and bounced on the sideline. She did not know she was supposed to sit in the chair. In her next match she led one of the world's top players, then lost the last nine games. A tennis magazine marking its 50th year later put her debut on a list of 50 moments that shaped the sport.

Rankings decide who gets in. The WTA rankings have run by computer since 1975. They use a rolling 52-week count, so points from a result drop off after a year. A Grand Slam win is worth 2,000 points. Venus had none of them in 1994. By the 1997 US Open she had climbed to 66th, and it was only the third time she had played the main draw of a Grand Slam, one of the four biggest tournaments of the year.

At that US Open she was 17 and unseeded. A seed is a player the tournament places in the draw so the top players do not meet early. Unseeded players take the draw as it comes. In the semifinal she faced a double match point, two chances for her opponent to end it with one more point. She saved both and won the tiebreak, 9-7, then the match. The score of the third set was 7-6.

After the semifinal she said, "I get to play on Day 14." She was the first unseeded woman to reach the US Open final in the Open era, the years since 1968, when the major tournaments first let pros play. The final was on September 7, 1997. She lost it, 6-0, 6-4. In the Open era, no Grand Slam final had had two players as young as the finalists that day, who were 17 and 16. Her semifinal opponent was ranked 11th.

In 2000 it came together. At Wimbledon she beat the defending champion in the final, 6-3, 7-6. The second set ended in a tiebreak, a short game played when a set is tied at six games each. The first player to seven points wins it, by two. That was her first Grand Slam singles title, and it was the first of five at Wimbledon. She was seeded fifth, so the draw had put four players above her.

That year she also won the US Open, beating the same player in the final. In September 2000, she went to the Olympics in Sydney. There she won the singles gold medal, and the

next day she won doubles gold with her partner, Serena Williams. No woman had won both at one Olympics since 1924. Her gold medal came in the middle of a 35-match winning streak. It began after a loss at the French Open and ran into October.

Doubles is played by two players on each side, on a court 36 feet wide instead of 27. Venus and Serena Williams won 14 Grand Slam doubles titles together. They also won Olympic doubles gold in 2000, 2008 and 2012. Venus added a silver medal in mixed doubles in 2016, playing with a partner. As of November 2026, her Olympic total is four golds and one silver, and she has also won two mixed doubles titles at Grand Slams.

She reached the top 10 in March 1998 and No. 3 in August 1999. On February 25, 2002, Venus became No. 1 in the WTA singles rankings. Over her career she spent 11 weeks there. Seeds come from the rankings. Today a Grand Slam draw has 128 players, and 32 of them are seeded. Seven rounds are needed to find a winner, because each round cuts the field in half, from 128 to 64, then 32, and on down to 2. A champion wins seven matches in a row.

In 2005, she came to Wimbledon seeded 14th. She beat the defending champion in the semifinal and the top seed, the world No. 1, in the final. In the third set the top seed had a championship point. Venus hit a backhand winner down the line and saved it. With no tiebreak in the last set, she had to win by two games, and she won it 9-7. The final lasted two hours and 45 minutes, the longest women's final at Wimbledon by time.

In 2007 she was seeded 23rd and ranked 31st, and she won the title again, 6-4, 6-1 in the final. It was her fourth Wimbledon title. Her opponent, a French player, had beaten the world No. 1 in the semifinal. No woman ranked that low had won Wimbledon since the WTA rankings began in 1975. In 2023, a woman ranked 42nd, with no seed at all, won the title and passed that mark. Between 2003 and 2006, Venus had won just one major.

That year the rules of the prize list changed. On February 22, 2007, the All England Club's chairman, Tim Phillips, announced that women and men would be paid the same prize money in every round. Reports said the club was falling into line with other Grand Slam events. The US Open had paid equally since 1973. Venus said, "I applaud today's decision by Wimbledon, which recognises the value of women's tennis." That summer she became the first Wimbledon women's champion paid the same as the men's champion.

In 2008 she won a fifth Wimbledon title. Speed is part of tennis, and she held a record for it. At the 2007 US Open she served 129 miles per hour, then the fastest serve recorded on the WTA tour. A ball at that speed would cover the 60 feet from the baseline to the far service line in about a third of a second, if it never slowed. In July 2014, another player served 131 miles per hour, and that is the WTA tour record through November 2026.

She kept going. In 2017 she reached two Grand Slam finals, at the Australian Open and Wimbledon. She also ended that season as runner-up at the WTA Finals. Her first Wimbledon final and her last were 17 years apart. In July 2025, at 45, she won a match in Washington,

her first singles match in 16 months. In January 2026 she became the oldest woman to play in an Australian Open singles main draw, passing a mark set at 44 in 2015.

On August 31, 2026, at 46, Venus played her 26th US Open singles tournament, nearly 32 years after Oakland and more than 24 years after she first became No. 1. An earlier match ran four hours and 36 minutes, so hers started at 12:13 a.m. It ended at 2:01 a.m., the latest finish for a first-round match in US Open history. Through that August, she had won 49 singles titles, with seven of them at the majors, and 14 Grand Slam doubles titles with her partner.

Questions

1. Why did Venus Williams get a wild card in Oakland in 1994?

A. She won a qualifying match
B. She had no ranking, and the organizers invited her
C. She was the defending champion

2. What does "unseeded" mean for a player at a Grand Slam?

A. She was not placed among the top players in the draw
B. She cannot serve
C. She must play doubles

3. In the 2005 final, why did the third set end 9-7?

A. A tiebreak was played
B. The umpire stopped it
C. A player had to win by two games

4. How many players are in a Grand Slam draw, and how many rounds are needed to find a winner?

A. 64 players and 6 rounds
B. 128 players and 7 rounds
C. 32 players and 5 rounds

5. What did the All England Club announce on February 22, 2007?

A. Equal prize money for women and men in every round
B. A new roof for Centre Court
C. A rule that sets must be won by two games

6. Why does the book call the Sydney Olympics part of a winning streak?

A. She lost in the first round of singles
B. She won only one match at the Games
C. She won gold in the middle of 35 straight wins

Words to know

draw: the bracket
seeded: placed high
tiebreak: short deciding game
doubles: two-player teams

Answer key: How Did Venus Williams Become a Champion?

1. B. She had no ranking, and the organizers invited her
2. A. She was not placed among the top players in the draw
3. C. A player had to win by two games
4. B. 128 players and 7 rounds
5. A. Equal prize money for women and men in every round
6. C. She won gold in the middle of 35 straight wins