Name: _____ Date: _____

How Tennis Scoring Works

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 795 words

On a June day in 2026, a sellout crowd at Queen's Club in London watched a woman toss a ball high and swing. Some of her serves flew at up to 120 miles an hour, faster than cars on a highway. The last serve was an ace. The player on the other side could not touch it, and it won the match. The woman was Serena Williams.

Serena grew up in Compton, California. Her father taught her to play on the public courts there. She began entering tournaments as a small child. Later she trained at a tennis academy in Florida, and she turned professional at fourteen. That means she began to play for prize money.

At seventeen, Serena won her first Grand Slam title. The Grand Slams are the biggest tournaments in tennis: the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open. She won at the US Open in 1999. In the final, she beat Martina Hingis, who was then the best player in the world.

In all, Serena won 23 Grand Slam singles titles. Singles means one player against one player. No other woman has won more since professionals were first allowed into the Grand Slams, in 1968. That was still true in 2026. Her last title came in 2017. To see what a win looks like, you need to know the score.

Every match Serena played counted points in an odd way. A player with no points has love, which means zero. The first point is called 15. The second is 30. The third is 40. The fourth point wins the game, as long as the player is two points ahead. The server's score is always said first.

What if both players reach three points? Then the score is deuce. One more point is not enough now. The player who wins the next point has the advantage. If she wins the point after that, she wins the game. If she loses it, the score goes back to deuce. Some games go back and forth many times.

Games add up to a set. The first player to win six games wins the set, but she must be ahead by two games. Six games to four wins. Six games to five does not, so play goes on. At six games each, the players use a special game called a tie-break. The first set of the London match ended 7-6.

A tie-break counts in plain numbers: 1, 2, 3 and so on. The first player to reach seven points wins it, and she must be ahead by two. Whoever wins the tie-break wins the set. It was added so that a long set could come to an end. In 2022 the Grand Slams agreed to try a longer one, to ten points, for a last set.

Sets add up to a match. At the Grand Slams, women play the best of three sets, so the first to win two sets wins the match. Men play the best of five sets. That was still the rule in 2026, though in March people were debating a change. Serena's Wimbledon match that summer went to three sets.

Every point starts with a serve. The server stands behind the back line, tosses the ball up and hits it before it bounces. The ball must go over the net and land in the box on the far side, the one across at a slant. If the first serve misses, there is one more try. Two misses lose the point.

Researchers filmed Serena's serves at one tournament in 2014. On average she tossed the ball about ten feet high, and she hit it at about eight and a half feet. That is far above her head. Reaching that high gives the ball a better path over the net and into the box.

At the 2013 Australian Open, Serena hit a serve at 128.6 miles an hour, and then another at the same speed. She said it was her fastest serve that landed in the box. She had hit even harder ones, she said, that flew out. A serve has to be fast, but it also has to land in the box.

In 2022 Serena wrote that she was evolving away from tennis, and her last match was that September at the US Open. In 2026 she came back to play doubles, a game with two players on each side. Later that summer she said she would probably play singles again.

Now look back at the London match, which ended 7-6, 6-2. Her side won the first set in a tie-break, and the second set six games to two. You can read that score now. Next time you watch a game, say the score out loud: love, 15, 30, 40.

Questions

1. What does love mean in tennis scoring?

A. Zero points
B. One point
C. A winning point

2. What happens when both players have three points in a game?

A. The game ends
B. The score is deuce
C. The server wins

3. In a tie-break, how many points must a player reach, and by how much must she lead?

A. Five points, by one
B. Six points, by two
C. Seven points, by two

4. Why can a serve that is very fast still lose the point?

A. Fast serves are not allowed

B. It must also land in the right box

C. The net is too high

5. In the sentence 'The last serve was an ace,' what is an ace?

A. A serve the other player cannot touch

B. A serve that hits the net

C. A very slow serve

Words to know

serve: starting shot

deuce: tied at 40

professional: plays for pay

tournament: set of matches

advantage: point ahead

Answer key: How Tennis Scoring Works

1. A. Zero points
2. B. The score is deuce
3. C. Seven points, by two
4. B. It must also land in the right box
5. A. A serve the other player cannot touch