Name: _____ Date: _____

Serena Williams and the Serve

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1175 words

Who is Serena Williams? Ask a tennis fan and you may hear a number: twenty-three. That is how many Grand Slam singles titles she won. It is the most of any woman since 1968, when professionals were allowed into the biggest tournaments. Those years are called the Open Era. The record was still hers in 2026. A Grand Slam is one of four events: the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open. Fans also know her for her serve. This book asks how both were made. It also asks why a second number, twenty-four, is not hers.

Serena was born in Saginaw, Michigan, in 1981 and grew up in Compton, California. Her father taught her on the public courts there, and she began entering tournaments as a small child. She later trained at a tennis academy in Florida. In October 1995, at fourteen, she turned professional, which means she began playing for prize money. The WTA says her first professional match was in qualifying at Quebec City. Her first main-draw event, in Moscow, came in 1997.

In late 1997 Serena was ranked 304th in the world. At a tournament in Chicago she beat two top-ten players, Mary Pierce and Monica Seles. She lost in the semifinals to Lindsay Davenport. Two years later, at seventeen, she won the US Open. In the final she beat Martina Hingis, then ranked number one in the world. It was her first Grand Slam singles title. In 2002 she became the world number one herself.

Start with the body, because a serve is not just an arm swing. Biomechanists call it a kinetic chain. The legs push against the ground. The hips and trunk turn. Then the shoulder, elbow and wrist each add speed, like the crack of a whip, until the racket meets the ball. One review of the research says the legs and trunk supply about half of the energy that reaches the hand. The figure is 51 to 55 percent. That is why a good serve starts at the ground and not at the shoulder.

One published study measured Serena's serve. At the 2014 China Open, a team in China filmed her first serves with two video cameras. She tossed the ball an average of about ten feet high. She hit it at about eight and a half feet, roughly one and a half times her own height. A high contact point gives the ball more room to clear the net and still drop into the service box. It was a small study of one tournament, described in a short conference paper. It is a snapshot, not a rule about every serve she hit.

The strike itself is over almost before it starts. On a 120-mile-an-hour serve, the ball stays on the strings for about five milliseconds. A millisecond is a thousandth of a second. In that time the ball slides across the strings and the strings stretch. The ball is light, about two ounces, so the speed comes from a very short, very hard push. There is almost no time to fix a mistake.

How fast is fast? At the 2013 Australian Open, Serena hit a serve at 128.6 miles an hour. She hit another at the same speed in a later match. She told reporters it was her fastest serve that went in. She said she had hit harder ones that sailed far out. The number on a scoreboard also flatters the serve. It is taken as the ball leaves the racket. One analyst found that a 120-mile-an-hour serve slows to about 55 miles an hour by the time it reaches the other player.

The Grand Slams are played on three kinds of court. Wimbledon is grass, cut to 8 millimeters, a little less than a third of an inch. Roland-Garros is red clay. It is really a thin layer of crushed red brick on top of a slab of limestone. The Australian Open and the US Open are played on hard courts. The tennis federation rates how fast a court plays. Most clay courts rate slow. Most grass courts rate fast. So the same serve behaves differently on each. Serena won Wimbledon seven times.

Scoring is odd too, and nobody is sure why. Points go love, 15, 30 and 40. If both players reach three points, the score is deuce, and one of them must win two in a row. People tell several stories about why zero is called love, and none has been proved. The clock-face story for 15, 30 and 40 is only a theory too. The tie-break is newer: the US Open was the first Grand Slam to use one, in 1970. In 2022 the four Slams agreed to try a tie-break to ten points to settle a deciding set.

Twenty-three is not the biggest number in women's Grand Slam history. Margaret Court of Australia won 24 singles titles. The difference is in the counting. Serena's 23 is the record for the Open Era, which began in 1968. Court's 24 is the record for all time. Thirteen of hers came before 1968, when professionals were banned from the Grand Slams. Eleven of her titles came at the Australian Open. In the amateur years it had a small field of mostly Australian women. Fans and analysts argue about how much that matters.

There is a smaller feat that Serena did twice. A calendar-year Grand Slam means winning all four majors in one year. Only three women have done it: Maureen Connolly in 1953, Margaret Court in 1970 and Steffi Graf in 1988. Serena twice held all four titles at once without doing it in a single year. The first run went from the 2002 French Open to the 2003 Australian Open. She beat her sister Venus in all four finals. The second went from the 2014 US Open to the 2015 Wimbledon. These runs are known as the Serena Slam.

On August 9, 2022, Serena wrote in Vogue that she was "evolving away from tennis, toward other things that are important to me." Her last match was on September 2, 2022. It was a third-round loss to Ajla Tomljanovic at the US Open. She finished with 73 singles titles. A major is another name for a Grand Slam event. The WTA also says she is the only player, woman or man, to win singles and doubles at all four majors. She also won Olympic gold.

On June 1, 2026, nearly four years after her last match, Serena was given a wild card to play doubles in London. Then, on June 9, after 1,375 days away, she and 19-year-old Victoria

Mboko won at Queen's Club, 7-6, 6-2. At Wimbledon on June 30 she lost her first singles match back, in three sets. She hurt her knee during it. On August 31 she said she would probably play singles again, though not for good. On September 4 she and her sister lost at the US Open after leading 5-0 in the last tie-break. What comes next has not been played yet.

Questions

1. What does a kinetic chain mean in a tennis serve?

A. Speed builds through the body from the legs to the racket
B. The racket is tied to the wrist
C. The ball spins in a line

2. Why is the scoreboard speed of a serve higher than the speed the other player faces?

A. The scoreboard is always wrong
B. It is measured as the ball leaves the racket, and the ball then slows
C. Players hit the ball back faster

3. How can Margaret Court's 24 and Serena's 23 both be records?

A. They count different tournaments
B. Court's count was never checked
C. One is for all time and the other is for the Open Era

4. In the sentence 'Serena was given a wild card to play doubles,' what is a wild card?

A. A lucky serve
B. A special entry into a tournament
C. A card game

5. What did Serena say about her fastest serve at the 2013 Australian Open?

A. It was her fastest one that landed in, and she had hit faster ones that missed
B. It was her slowest serve of the tournament
C. She could not remember it

Words to know

millisecond: thousandth of second
professional: plays for pay
qualifying: earning entry
semifinals: last four

Answer key: Serena Williams and the Serve

1. A. Speed builds through the body from the legs to the racket
2. B. It is measured as the ball leaves the racket, and the ball then slows
3. C. One is for all time and the other is for the Open Era
4. B. A special entry into a tournament
5. A. It was her fastest one that landed in, and she had hit faster ones that missed