Name: _____ Date: _____

Venus Williams and the Math of a Tour Career

Reading level 13 · 1523 words

Venus Williams's 26th US Open singles match began at 12:13 a.m. on Monday, August 31, 2026, because an earlier match had lasted four hours and 36 minutes. It finished at 2:01 a.m., the latest finish for a first-round match in the tournament's history. Venus was 46, and it was her first match of that tournament. The span between her professional debut in Oakland on October 31, 1994, and that night is 31 years and 10 months. A career of that length depends on more than talent. It also depends on machinery: rankings that expire, draws built from powers of two, seeding and rules that differ from one tournament to the next.

The WTA rankings have been computed by machine since November 3, 1975. They operate on a rolling 52-week basis, so points earned at a tournament count for a year and then disappear. A player's ranking is built from her results at no more than 18 singles tournaments, and a singles Grand Slam title is worth 2,000 points. The design rewards constant activity. A player who competes rarely will fall quickly, because her old points expire and nothing replaces them. A title therefore counts for exactly one year: a champion who does not repeat her result at the next edition of that tournament sees those points leave her total. The system measures what a player has done lately, not what she did once.

Since 2001, a Grand Slam singles draw has contained 128 players, and 32 of them are seeded, which means that the tournament chooses them by ranking and places them so that the top players are kept apart in the early rounds. Each round halves the field, from 128 to 64, then 32, 16, 8, 4 and 2, so a champion must win seven matches in a row and a finalist six. In 1997, Venus was 17 years old and ranked 66th. As an unseeded player she reached the US Open final. The Associated Press described that as a first for an unseeded woman in the Open era, the period since the major tournaments began admitting professionals in 1968. In the semifinal she faced two match points in a third-set tiebreak, saved both and won it, 9-7.

A seed is not the same thing as a rank. At Wimbledon in 2005, Venus was seeded 14th, while a Sky Sports list of the lowest-ranked women's champions gives her ranking that year as 16th. She defeated the defending champion in the semifinal and then met the top seed, who was the world No. 1, in the final. The final was a rematch of the 2000 final, and the score was 4-6, 7-6 (4), 9-7. That comes to 39 games across three sets: 10, 13 and 16. The deciding set could extend that far because, as Tennis.com reported, Wimbledon used no tiebreak in the final set at that time. A player had to lead by two games to win the match.

In the third set of that final, the top seed earned a championship point on Venus's serve, and Venus answered with a backhand winner down the line. Later she broke serve to lead, 8-7, and then held serve to finish the match. The final lasted two hours and 45 minutes, which

makes it the longest women's final at Wimbledon by time as of November 2026. Both finalists were former Wimbledon champions who had gone years without a Grand Slam singles title. She was the first woman since 1935 to win the Wimbledon final after facing a championship point. The record for time would change only if a longer women's final were played.

In 2007, Venus was seeded 23rd and ranked 31st in a 128-player draw. She won all seven of her matches and defeated a French finalist, 6-4, 6-1, for her fourth Wimbledon title. Since the WTA rankings began in 1975, no woman ranked lower had won the tournament before 2023. A Sky Sports list from July 2023 places the lowest-ranked champions at 42nd (2023, an unseeded player), 31st (Venus, 2007), 23rd (2022) and 16th (Venus again, 2005). Rank and result are therefore only loosely connected. Across two weeks on grass, the sequence of seven matches matters more than the number beside a name. From 2003 through 2006, she had won just one major title.

Prize money forms part of the same machinery. On February 22, 2007, the All England Club's chairman, Tim Phillips, announced that Wimbledon would pay women and men the same prize money in every round. "The time is right to bring this subject to a logical conclusion and eliminate the difference," he said. The US Open had paid equal amounts since 1973, and news reports described the club as falling into line with other Grand Slam events. Venus said, "I applaud today's decision by Wimbledon, which recognises the value of women's tennis." That summer each singles champion received 700,000 pounds. Venus became the first Wimbledon women's champion to be paid the same as the men's champion.

The International Tennis Hall of Fame holds a trophy that marks the 2007 decision. It carries a 2007 Wimbledon tennis ball signed by the winner, Venus Williams, and by the finalist. Money is one scoreboard, and speed is another. At the 2007 US Open, in a second-round match, Venus served at 129 miles per hour (207.6 km/h), then the fastest serve recorded on the WTA tour. Guinness World Records adds that a 130 mph serve during qualifying in 2006 was never recognized, because it occurred outside the main draw. The record now stands at 131 mph (210.8 km/h), which another player set on July 29, 2014, in California.

A tennis court is 78 feet long, and the net is 3 feet high at the center. A server stands at the baseline, 39 feet from the net. The ball must land in a box that ends 21 feet beyond the net, so the farthest legal landing spot lies about 60 feet away. At 129 mph, or roughly 189 feet per second, a ball that never slowed would cross that distance in about 0.32 seconds. That is only an estimate. A real serve slows in the air and again at the bounce, so the receiver gets somewhat longer. Even so, the whole exchange between one racket and the other lasts only a fraction of a second.

At the Sydney Olympics in September 2000, the women's singles event was a 64-player knockout with entrants from 33 countries, so a gold medal required six victories. Venus won her first three matches in straight sets, needed three sets in both the quarterfinal and the

semifinal, and won the final, 6-2, 6-4. The next day she and Serena Williams won the doubles gold medal. Olympedia places her title inside a 35-match winning streak that began after a loss at the French Open and continued into October. As of November 2026, her Olympic medals are four golds (singles in 2000; doubles in 2000, 2008 and 2012) and a silver in mixed doubles from 2016.

Doubles alters the geometry of the game: the court widens from 27 feet to 36 feet, while its length stays at 78. Venus and Serena Williams won 14 Grand Slam doubles titles together, and the pair never lost a Grand Slam doubles final. They became No. 1 in doubles on June 7, 2010, after completing a non-calendar-year Grand Slam at the French Open. That means they held all four major titles at once, from Wimbledon 2009 through the 2010 French Open. The WTA states that they topped the doubles rankings for eight weeks in 2010. Venus also won two mixed doubles major titles, both in 1998, and her WTA doubles total is 22 titles.

Time is the final number in this count. Her first Wimbledon final was in 2000 and her most recent was in 2017, a span of 17 years, and in 2017 she reached two major finals, at the Australian Open and at Wimbledon. On July 22, 2025, at 45, she beat the No. 35-ranked player, 6-3, 6-4, in Washington, It was her first singles match in 16 months, and Tennis.com called her the oldest player to win a match at WTA level in more than 21 years. On January 18, 2026, she became the oldest woman to play in an Australian Open singles main draw, passing a mark set at 44 in 2015, during her 22nd trip to Melbourne Park.

Through August 2026, the WTA lists 49 singles titles for Venus Williams. Seven of them are major titles: five at Wimbledon (2000, 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2008) and two at the US Open (2000 and 2001). It also lists 22 doubles titles, including 14 majors with her partner Serena Williams, and 11 weeks at No. 1 in singles. The Olympic record holds four gold medals and a silver. She has played the US Open singles tournament 26 times through 2026, and her seven major singles titles span 2000 to 2008. Her first professional match was on October 31, 1994, in Oakland, California, when she was 14. That match came 31 years and 10 months before the August 2026 match described at the start.

Questions

1. Why does a player who rarely competes fall in the rankings?

A. Seeds are drawn at random
B. Her coach is replaced
C. Her points from old results expire after a year

2. In the book, what does "rolling" mean in "a rolling 52-week system"?

A. Points count for a year and then drop off
B. Players must roll the ball
C. Points are doubled each week

3. How many matches must a player win to be champion of a 128-player draw?

A. Six

B. Seven

C. Eight

4. Why could the 2005 Wimbledon final's last set reach 9-7?

A. The players agreed to keep going

B. A medical rule extended the set

C. There was no tiebreak, so a player had to lead by two games

5. What does the book say about a 130 mph serve in qualifying in 2006?

A. It was not recognized because it came outside the main draw

B. It was the official record

C. It beat the 129 mph mark in the main draw

6. About how long would a 129 mph ball that never slowed take to cover 60 feet?

A. About 3 seconds

B. About a third of a second

C. About a minute

Words to know

seeded: placed high

draw: the bracket

tiebreak: short deciding game

rolling: moving window

qualifying: earlier rounds

Answer key: Venus Williams and the Math of a Tour Career

1. C. Her points from old results expire after a year
2. A. Points count for a year and then drop off
3. B. Seven
4. C. There was no tiebreak, so a player had to lead by two games
5. A. It was not recognized because it came outside the main draw
6. B. About a third of a second