

SERENA TEACHES LIFE LESSONS

BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX - Niaonline, 1/31/07

It has been a treat to watch Serena Williams romp the ladder to win the Australian Open last week. The seven-time Grand Slam winner and former number-one ranked tennis player came into the Australian games ranked #81. Despite the carping commentators describing her as "rusty" and "out of shape", she managed to beat players ranked #5, #11, #19 and the new #1, Maria Sharapova. To be sure, this isn't the Serena of old -- I winced when she double-faulted, screamed when she failed to move quickly enough, and banged my hands together in frustration when her shots went into the net. At the same time, she truly challenged herself and committed just 11 unforced errors in the final match against Sharapova.

I seethed at the bias that seeped from the very pores of ESPN commentator Mary Carrillo. Everything Serena's opponents did was "brilliant", but she was silent at Serena's great shots, especially when she played the Israeli soldier Shahar Peer in the quarterfinals. When someone commented on Peer's discipline, Carrillo snidely noted that discipline is something Serena can use more of. If I had a dollar for every time Carrillo used the word "rusty" I'd be buying a new pair of Manolo Blahniks right about now. If Carrillo's commentary determined the outcome of the match, Serena would not have made it past the first round. To be sure, Carrillo pulled her claws in during the final. She had to! Her snideness could not detract from the woman who came into the match ranked 81 whipping the stuffing out of everyone's darling.

You know what else -- her commentary didn't make a bit of a difference to Serena Williams. Serena's upbeat, positive, self-affirming attitude is a lesson or reminder to all of us. As the clichés say, she reminds us that a setback is a setup for a comeback. She reminds us to believe in ourselves. And she reminds us to relegate naysayers to the proper place in our lives -- somewhere on the sidelines.

Serena Williams didn't play much tennis in 2006. She had knee surgery and other physical complications. She had to deal with a lawsuit. And she still struggles with the grief her family experienced when sister Yetunde was killed in a drive-by shooting in 2003. Her grief was apparent when she dedicated her win to Yetunde, her voice catching and her eyes tearing. Challenges notwithstanding, she of iron will and fierce determination is coming back. "I don't like being #81", she told an interviewer. "I like being #1". How many of us have the will to deal with setbacks in the way Serena has? Watching her work her game ought to inspire each of us to work hers.

"I have to be my biggest fan out there. I don't want to get down on myself," Serena told an interviewer after she beat Peer. I love that attitude! Serena has been accused of being arrogant and self-absorbed, but isn't there part of each of us that ought to be? Shouldn't each of us be our #1 fan, firm believers in ourselves? After all, if we don't believe in our own selves, why should anyone else believe in us? Serena says only she and mom Oracene Price thought she could get as far as she did

in the Australian Open. How far could each of us get if we truly, truly believed that we could.

To be sure, there is sometimes a thin line between self-confidence and delusion. If Serena hadn't put the hours into practicing her tennis, the effort into losing some weight, and if she hadn't the knowledge of the Australian Open, which she has won twice before, she might not brim over with the confidence she brought to Australia. But part of her preparation was the mental preparation, the toughness that allows her to push herself, to get quickly past mistakes, and to improve her ranking in one short fortnight (she'll be ranked number 14 based on win in the Australian).

The most poignant lesson Serena teaches is to kick naysayers to the curb. While I was seething at Mary Carrillo's biased comments, Serena was ignoring them. She doesn't read what commentators say about her play, saying that she is saving some of her clips to read when she's retired. Of course, some of the negativity filters through – Serena doesn't live in a bubble, after all. But she puts the negativity on "never mind". "It doesn't matter what they write about me," she says. She knows who she is.

How often do we listen to other people's voices instead of our own precious inner wisdom? How often do we internalize the comments that come from naysayers from the haters who say we don't, won't, and can't do what we've set out to do? Incorporating these comments into our consciousness is a waste of energy. Like Serena each of us should learn to put negativity on "never mind."

Whether Serena's stunning performance at the Australian Open was both absorbing tennis and a series of life lessons for all of us. From the time she and her sister Venus hit the tennis courts, they've been an inspiration to African American women. As she battles her way back to the top she reminds us of the warrior queens we all can be, and she inspires us to stay positive, learn from setbacks, and kick naysayers to the curb!

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