Two of the best women players ever to play the game, due in large part to their unparalled speed, power and athleticism, five-times Wimbledon champion Venus and four-times champion Serena Williams grew up and learnt their trade in Compton, Los Angeles, under the watchful eye of their parents Richard and Oracene Williams.

The Compton area of South Central L.A. is not noted for producing tennis champions. Instead, this neighbourhood consists of some of the most economically deprived people of the USA. With a homicide rate eight times the national average, Venus and Serena grew up and learned to play tennis in a modern day war zone, where violent Black and Hispanic gangs carried out drive by shootings, and where drug addiction and prostitution were the norm.

In September 2003 their half-sister Yetunde Price was gunned down and killed in Compton. Both sisters claim to have dodged bullets whilst learning to play tennis with Serena later commenting, “If you can keep playing tennis when someone is shooting a gun down the street, that’s concentration!”

THE FORMATION OF A MASTERPLAN

Richard watched on TV in June 1978 as Virginia Ruzici earned $40,000 for winning the French Open ladies’ championship. This was more money than he’d made all year. He then allegedly turned to Oracene, who already had three daughters from a previous marriage and said, “Let’s have more kids and make them tennis players.”
One thing led to another and 17 June 1980 Venus was born, and 15 months later 26 September 1981, along came Serena.

Williams, who ran his own private security firm, had little tennis coaching or playing experience. He learned about tennis by watching television instruction programmes and videos, and reading tennis instruction books. He then taught himself and Oracene to play, so that they could hit with their five daughters. He claims to have had no idea of how to develop talent, but hoped that involvement in sport would provide his family with a way out of the neighbourhood.

The sisters though, didn't play tennis with just their father. In her 2009 autobiography *MY LIFE: QUEEN OF THE COURT*, Serena stated that at a young age she spent more of her time playing tennis with Oracene, a nurse and former schoolteacher, than with Richard.

**MAKINGS OF CHAMPIONS**

Age four, Venus was given her first tennis racquet and taken by her father to the rundown, cracked, public courts in Compton, where having been given some brief instruction from him, she was able to hit the ball over the net almost every time.

Richard said,

“The first time I knew Venus was going to be a good tennis player was the first time I took her out on her very first day. I was working with some other kids, and had a shopping cart that would hold 550 balls. It took three kids who were teenagers a long time to hit those balls. They wanted to take breaks. Well, while they were taking a break, Venus wanted to hit every ball in that basket. She wouldn't stop. Every time you tried to stop her, she would start crying.

She was only four years old. That doesn't mean she hit every ball. A lot of them she missed. But she would swing at every ball. When she got to the last ball in the basket, she told me to say, ‘Last one,’ and I said, ‘Okay, last one.’ And to this day, I say the same thing to her when she's practising.”

When Richard went home that day he told Oracene,

“We have a winner.”

“No, you're just a proud father,” replied Oracene.

“No, this girl is a winner,” said Richard.

“Well, how do you know?” asked Oracene.

“Because Venus demonstrated all four qualities of a champion. No matter what age, all champions are able to demonstrate that they are
rough, they are tough, they are strong, and they are mentally sound. You cannot teach that. That is a God-given quality, and Venus demonstrated that on the first day,” replied Richard.

Venus admits that one of the reasons she loved playing tennis so much, was that it gave her some time alone that she could spend with her father; within a year though, they were joined by Serena.

Both girls took to tennis at once and were blessed with exceptional natural physical ability. Age eight Venus could run a mile in less than five-and-a-half minutes. Serena played in her first tournament aged four-and-a-half, and according to her father, won 46 of the 49 tournaments she entered until age 10, in Southern California – at that time the toughest junior section of the USTA.

Venus and Serena both loved watching tennis matches on video with their “daddy” as they affectionately refer to him. They would study the pros on TV, watch their footwork, and noticed how the best players found their opponent’s weaknesses, and kept hitting the ball there, over and over again. For the next few years, both before and after school, and with Richard working night shifts so he could train them, the sisters hit cratefuls of old, dead tennis balls on these poorly lit, broken glass covered courts for hours on end.

**PAUL COHEN**

When the sisters were age seven and six, Richard telephoned Paul Cohen, who had taught 12 former Top-10 players on the ATP men’s tour and 17 USTA national junior boy’s champions, to ask if he would consider coaching them. Cohen agreed to take a look at the girls and Richard drove them to Brentwood, California to meet him.

On hitting with the sisters for the first time Cohen was astounded by their phenomenal athletic ability and said, “I had never seen a six-year-old as strong as Serena and I’d never seen a potential woman champion as athletic and as graceful as Venus.”

Cohen agreed to help Richard coach them and said later, “I wanted essentially to train two attack dogs who would intimidate every woman that stood on the other side of the net from them, and that they would literally beat the ball and pound their opponents into submission. With Venus and Serena we not only built their game to be perfect, we built them with the purpose of annihilating their opponents.”

A year later John McEnroe and Pete Sampras, who had both been pupils of Cohen, visited Brentwood and watched Venus hitting with him. Venus later got to hit with both pros and told reporters afterwards that she felt she could have beaten McEnroe if the bounces had gone her way!

On 3 July 1990 the New York Times ran an article on Venus who was the only undefeated 10-and-under player in the Southern California children’s league,
and an African-American girl at that. Nine months later the same paper ran a front-page story on the sisters, and spoke of the tremendous potential of Venus but dismissed the chances of younger sister Serena.

Age 10, Venus was told by her parents that she needed to concentrate on just one sport. Venus, who also played softball, soccer and did gymnastics, chose tennis, because she believed she could become the best of all time. Despite her vigorous training routine, she still maintained an A+ average at school and Richard even cut back on her tennis when her grades dropped. Venus said, “Tennis is just tennis, but when your grades start to drop - that’s a problem.”

When the sisters reached ages 11 and 10, and were ranked number one in their Southern California age groups, Richard decided that they would play in no more junior competitions. This was due to the racial undertones he claimed to have experienced at junior events, and because he didn’t want his girls exposed to the type of competitive pressures some tennis parents were subjecting their children to.

The sisters by this time had attracted national attention. Richard was offered cars, a bigger house and money from agents, including one who offered $87 million for a part in their future earnings. However, he turned them all down and wouldn’t even allow his girls to get professional coaching, as he believed he taught them well enough.

RICHARD WILLIAMS – GENIUS OR MADMAN?

Some observers considered, and still do, Richard Williams to be an arrogant madman. In a conversation with French coach Patrick Mouratoglou in 2007, Richard told him,

“When Venus turned six I wondered what I would do with her and her sister because any child is comfortable in a familiar environment. But it is an entirely different situation in real life, and you must come out of your cocoon in order to perceive your power.

So when Venus turned seven I did the unthinkable. I do not know if you know what the ghetto is really like; people who live on the street and do and deal drugs... Me I took my daughters to the ghetto!

One day we found ourselves in the street next to a drunken woman who screamed insanities and was hitting herself. She looked at Venus and Serena and said, “Look at the pretty little girls. Mine were like that once and look what they’ve become!” - her daughters looked crazy with dishevelled hair, completely scruffy. Bull’s eye! - they learned everything I had tried to teach them from this woman. As of that moment Venus made ambitious life projects and Serena started to comb her hair, she who never wanted to touch a comb before... That was all that needed to be said.”
Richard’s training methods included getting locals to come by and shout abuse at the girls as they played, in an attempt to try to break their concentration. Whether by accident or design, his comments made him an outspoken, sometimes unpopular, but well known tennis figure. He once said of himself, “I’m more of a personality than most of the players. The only players who are more of a celebrity than me are Venus and Serena!”

Having become the sisters’ manager as well as coach, he was instrumental in securing the major sponsorship deals, which would provide the family with financial security for life. Initially he said that he had only wanted to help his daughters have a better life and escape the ghetto but he subsequently stated, “I only got into tennis to make a million dollars. I didn’t really have the right motives in the beginning at all. Back then I was just like any other tennis parent.”

He claimed that one of the reasons he took the family to Compton was to show them that this is what happens, as had happened to him, when you don’t get an education, and insisted that all his daughters got the best possible. Throughout their youth, when not enrolled in regular school, Oracene took on the responsibility of home-schooling the sisters.

Early on in their professional careers, Richard caused indignation by suggesting that it would not be too long before his girls competed against each other in all the Grand Slam singles finals and would also dominate in doubles - a suggestion that was later proven to be true. As they grew up he attended almost all of the their training sessions and throughout their careers missed hardly any matches they played.

Whether you like him or loathe him, he helped raise six well-rounded, educated, happy, successful daughters, two of who happen to be tennis players, and all of who love and respect him. He has been described as a master psychologist and is a justifiably proud father of his two incredibly successful, tennis-playing daughters.

He said though, “I always talk stupid. I prefer people to think that I’m stupid.”

**Well Mr Williams – you can fool some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time!**

**LEAVING THE GHETTO**

In September 1991, Richard decided to move the entire family three thousand miles eastwards, to the Rick Macci Tennis Academy, at the luxurious Grenelefe Tennis and Golf Resort, in Haines City, Central Florida.

Rick Macci had previously coached child prodigy and world number one Jennifer Capriati. In May that year he had travelled to Los Angeles at Richard’s request, to cast his eye over the sisters, whose reputation had reached him in Florida.
Initially, having hit with and watched the sisters play, Macci was not overly impressed. It was not until Venus requested a comfort break, to which she walked partly on her hands and then did backward cartwheels, that he recognised her incredible athletic potential. He said to Richard,

“Mr Williams, it looks like you’ve got the next Michael Jordan on your hands.”

To which Richard then put his arm round Macci, looked towards Serena and replied,

“No Mr Macci, we’ve got the next two Michael Jordans!”

Macci believed that he could help the sisters become the Top-two ranked players in the world. He offered them free scholarships, free accommodation for the family, which now also included younger sister Isha, in return for a percentage of their future earnings, Macci also provided the Williams family with an $80,000 Winnebago motorhome, furniture, food, and a place on the payroll for Richard at his academy - all of which Macci paid for himself.

Despite offers from other Florida academies, Richard accepted Macci’s offer. For the next three-and-a-half years Macci coached the sisters free of charge for six hours a day, six days a week, with Richard looking on and learning. Extra training included boxing, taekwondo, ballet and gymnastics. There was time for fun too though, with Macci throwing in tickets to Disney World and a golf membership for Richard.

Macci saw the sisters as a challenge. He coached Venus for an hour a day on her volley and net game alone, believing this was where she would become successful later on as a professional. He realised though, that this type of game took longer to develop.

Long hours were also spent perfecting Venus’ serve. Macci stated, “I wanted her to have the greatest serve in the history of the women’s game; there wasn’t a day went by when Venus wouldn’t hit two hundred serves.” Not surprising then that in 1998 age 18, Venus hit the then fastest ever serve by a woman of 128 mph, to win a match against Mary Pierce.

**JUNIOR CAREERS – NOT!**

Although Macci believed Venus would get a better feel for the game by playing competitive tournaments, Richard disagreed. He said, “Our goal is not junior tennis - Venus has nothing to gain by playing junior tennis." He added that he wasn’t concerned about her being a good junior player, but about her becoming a good professional.

At the academy the sisters spent a lot of time hitting and playing against much older male players, including Dave Rineberg, who could hit the ball harder than most of the women players on the tour.
THE RICK MACCI TENNIS ACADEMY

In June 2009 the Rick Macci Tennis Academy moved to the 20-court, Boca Lago Country Club in Boca Raton, Florida. Unlike some Florida tennis academies, Macci’s prides itself on the quality not just quantity of its players and no more than 40 players train there at any one time.

Along with the Williams sisters, Macci’s former pupils include Maria Sharapova, Andy Roddick, Jennifer Capriati, Mary Pierce, Anastasia Myskina and many other top ranked professionals. He has been voted USPTA coach of the year an incredible eight times. You can find out more about Rick and his academy at http://www.rickmacci.com

THE RISE OF VENUS

In October 1994, 14-year-old Venus, the “Ghetto Cinderella” as her father referred to her, played her first professional tournament at Oakland, California. In her first match, with Macci and Richard looking on, she beat world No.58 Shaun Stafford, 6-3, 6-4. This was despite not having played a tournament match for over three years. In the next round she played world number two Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario. She lost the match in three sets having led 6-2, 3-1. Afterwards she was asked how this defeat compared to others she had suffered, to which she replied, “I don’t know I’ve never lost before!”

Then in May 1995 age just 14, and having played in just one professional event, Venus signed a five-year, $12 million contract with Reebok - thus virtually guaranteeing the family’s financial security for life. The contract though, effectively ended the coaching relationship between Macci and the Williamses. Although Richard wanted Macci to continue coaching the sisters, Macci wanted financial compensation for the $1 million worth of work and time he claimed to have invested in the family during their four years at his academy. Neither would budge and soon after Richard bought a 40-acre compound near Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, on which he built three courts. There, he trained the sisters himself, with the help of hitting-coach Dave Rineberg; Macci went back to working full-time at his Academy.

In October 1995 age 15, Venus gained her first world ranking of No.321, and ended the year No.217. During 1996 she rose to No.148, and in April 1997 age 16, entered the Top-100.

VENUS AT WIMBLEDON

Venus played Wimbledon for the first time in 1997, where, though performing well, she lost in the first round in three sets to Magdalena Grzybowska. Then in September ranked No.66 and unseeded; she reached the US Open final, losing in straight sets to Martina Hingis. She finished 1997 ranked No.21.

She entered the Top-10 in March 1998 and finished the year world number five. By the end of 1999 age 19, she had risen to number three.
Age 20, Venus beat Lindsay Davenport in the 2000 final, to win her first Wimbledon title. She again beat Davenport in the final, to win her first US Open, and later that month won the gold medal for singles at the Sidney Olympics. Also that year, with Serena, she won the doubles titles at the US Open, Wimbledon and the gold medal at the Olympics.

In 2001 Venus won her second Wimbledon, beating Justine Henin in the final, defeated Serena in the final to win her second US Open and ended 2001 ranked world number three.

Age 21, Venus reached world number one in April 2002. When asked if she was surprised that she had attained this ranking she replied, “I’ve known I could be number one since I was six years old. I heard my parents telling me so many times that I would become the world’s best one day, and that I would write my name in every Grand Slam’s records book, that I ended up believing it. When I was younger I even thought I could beat John McEnroe!”

People have sometimes been taken aback by Venus’ honesty and even accused her of arrogance. She replied, “Some people say I have an attitude, but I think you have to. You have to believe in yourself when no-one else does, that’s what makes you a winner right there.”

Having won the first of her five Wimbledon titles, Venus then suffered a variety of injuries, which curtailed her dominance at the top of the game. By the end of 2011 Venus had earned almost $28 million in on-court prize money, the second highest as a woman player. Outside of tennis, in December 2007, she graduated with an associate degree in Fashion Design from the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale and set up her own interior design company – “V Starr Interiors”.

TOWARDS THE SERENA SLAM

In September 1995 age 14, Serena played her first professional tournament at the Bell Challenge in Vanier, Quebec City. Claiming she froze on the day, she lost in the first round 6-1, 6-1 to world No.149 Anne Miller in less than an hour.

She spent all of 1996 working on her game at home with Richard and Dave Rineberg, entered no professional events, but due to her training improved dramatically.

Serena gained her first world ranking of No.448 in October 1997 age 16. The following month she played in the Ameritech Cup tournament in Chicago. There, she defeated both fourth seed Monica Seles and seventh seed Mary Pierce, on her way to the semi-finals where she lost to Lindsay Davenport. These results catapulted her into the world’s Top-100 age 16, and she ended 1997 ranked No.96.
Like Venus before, Serena then signed a five-year $12 million contract, but this time with Puma. In June 1998, just eight months after achieving her first world ranking, Serena entered the Top-20 and age 17, ended the year world No.22.

Serena entered the Top-10 in May 1999, and age 17, and seeded seven, unexpectedly became the first of the sisters to win a Grand Slam title; beating Martina Hingis in the US Open final. She rose to and ended the year, age 18, ranked world number four.

In 2000 Serena lost to Venus in semi-finals of Wimbledon and ended the year world number six; a position she repeated in 2001.

WIMBLEDON VICTORY

2002 was Serena’s breakthrough year. Age 20, and without losing a set in the entire tournament, she beat Venus in the final to win the French Open. She then defeated Venus in the final to win her first Wimbledon and became world number one. In September she again beat Venus in the final to win her second US Open.

Serena won the first of her four Australian Opens in 2003; thus completing her “Serena Slam”, in which he held all four Grand Slam singles titles at the same time. Incredibly, in all these finals, and that of Wimbledon 2003, she played and beat Venus, who remained world number two.

THE REALISATION OF A DREAM

16 years after it had all begun on those worn out, run down, public courts in Compton, Richard Williams’ dream that his daughters would compete in the finals of all the Grand Slam tournaments, had become a reality.

Between 2000 and 2003, in both singles and doubles, the Williams sisters dominated the world of women’s professional tennis, playing each other in four consecutive Grand Slam singles finals, from the 2002 French Open onwards, and with Serena winning six of the eight Grand Slam singles finals they have played overall.

Despite struggling with injuries, Serena again won the 2005 Australian Open. For the next few years though, like Venus, she spent much of her time out of the game injured. She used this time to develop her interest in acting, obtained a degree in fashion, and set up her own clothing line, “Aneres” - Serena spelt backwards.

At the 2006 Wimbledon Championships, which she missed through injury, I asked Richard Williams if Serena was coming back. He replied, “Yeah for sure she’ll be back, just as soon as she’s finished making movies, she be making movies now.”

*My how the mighty have fallen I thought!*
Serena did of course come back, winning the 2007 and 2009 Australian Opens, and in 2009 beating Venus for the fourth time in the Wimbledon final to win her third title.

Having captured her fourth Wimbledon in 2010, with a straight sets final win over Vera Zvonareva, shortly afterwards Serena suffered a freak accident, cutting her foot by stepping on a broken glass, when exiting a restaurant in Germany. The foot injury required surgery, which kept her from playing at the US Open, and in October she announced she would not be competing again that year.

In November she withdrew from the forthcoming Australian Open, explaining that she had had a second surgery to repair her damaged foot. Following this surgery her foot was in a plaster for the next 20 weeks. Perhaps as a result of general inactivity as she recovered, in March 2011 she was admitted to hospital for more surgery, this time to remove a series of blood clots, which had gathered on both her lungs, and brought her, in her own words, “Close to death.”

Meanwhile Venus, Serena’s closest confidant, who was also suffering from various injuries, took time out from the tour to be with her younger sister; competing only in the Australian Open. Thankfully the sisters were able to compete at Wimbledon 2011, where despite having hardly played any competitive tennis for almost an entire year, both made it to the fourth round.

At the US Open Venus was forced to withdraw from her second round match, having announced she was suffering from the debilitating disease Sjogren’s Syndrome, which causes fatigue and joint pain. She hopes though, still to make a return to the professional game.

Following Wimbledon, Serena won tournaments at Stanford and Cincinnati, before losing in the final of the US Open to Sam Stosur.

At the end of 2011 Serena’s on-court earnings stood at almost $35 million – the highest ever of a woman professional tennis player. Her 13 Grand Slam singles titles consist of four Wimbledons, five Australian, one French and three US Opens.

THE WILLIAMS SISTERS

One of the reasons why the Williams sisters have been so successful is that they share an intense personal rivalry. As a youngster it was Venus who received the majority of media attention. This made Serena all the more eager to keep up with her big sister. After seeing Serena win the first of their Grand Slam titles at the 1999 US Open, Venus said “Sitting there watching almost killed me.” No surprise then that this spurred Venus on to win her first Grand Slams at Wimbledon and then the US Open the following year.
In 2003 it was Serena’s turn to dominate as she completed the “Serena Slam”. Not wanting to be over-shadowed Venus then improved again and won more titles. Venus once said of Serena, “It’s difficult to say how I would have achieved many of my greatest accomplishments without Serena in my life.”

“It’s not easy for me to play someone I care so much about,” said Serena, before beating Venus in the 2003 Wimbledon final.

By the end of 2011 the Williams sisters had played each other 23 times as professionals, with Serena holding the edge 13 to 10. In Grand Slam singles titles Serena also holds the edge, having won 13 compared to Venus’ seven. Despite this, the two remain incredibly close as sisters, always supporting each other and declaring that when one finally retires then the other will do so too.

Along with their 20 Grand Slam singles titles, in doubles they have also collected 12 Grand Slam titles, two Olympic Gold medals, and four Grand Slam mixed titles too. They stick together through the good times and the bad. “It’s always been Serena and me. We just prefer each other’s company above any other. We get tired of other people pretty quick,” said Venus.

One observer remarked about them, “They come from a different place, play a different type of game and have a different type of attitude to virtually anything the game of tennis has seen before.”

Both are well educated, intelligent, have interests outside of tennis and are a credit to the parents who gave them their opportunities.

As of the end of 2011 the Williams sisters’ combined on-court career earnings were almost $65 million, a figure, which could probably be quadrupled when including their lucrative endorsements, exhibitions, and interests in the worlds of acting, fashion and interior design.

Now you can’t live on $250 million - but it’s a start, and not bad for two girls, “Straight Outta Compton!”

Find out more about Venus at

http://www.venuswilliams.com

And Serena at http://www.serenawilliams.com

From ‘So you want to win Wimbledon?’
Second edition available at

http://www.amazon.co.uk

http://www.soyouwanttowinwimbledon.com