

Williams Sisters Beam Inspiration

By Karen Guregian

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Serena Williams kicked in a serve, and 17-year-old Jennifer Seide of Hyde Park bravely struck it back. On and on the rally went, until the best player on the planet finally netted a return.

With that, Seide stepped away from the baseline, let out a scream, and let the next kid in line have a turn. Just seeing the beaming smile on her face, the same magical one practically every other kid in the building wore after hitting balls with the Williams sisters, along with the rest of the U.S. Federation Cup team, told the kind of story that will be retold and passed along in their families for generations.

It's really tough to beat spending an afternoon watching kids live out some of their greatest sports fantasies and dreams while also being inspired into having new ones.

That was the primary order of business at the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center in Roxbury yesterday, as the U.S. team, in conjunction with Tenacity, the City of Boston and USA Tennis New England, conducted a clinic for more than 1,000 youngsters.

"It was nerve-wracking. I'm still shaking," said Seide, who, as an African-American teenager, has been inspired to pursue a tennis career thanks to the Williams sisters. "I won my point, so I can quit now and say I beat Serena."

Serena and Venus, the No. 1 and No. 3-ranked players in the world, and two of the most recognized female athletes - correction, athletes - in the world, are in town to compete in the match against the Czech Republic this weekend at the Tsongas Arena in Lowell.

Currently, they are to tennis what Larry Bird and Magic Johnson were to basketball in the 1980s. While they certainly carry the torch for both their gender and race, they transcend those boundaries. Serena and Venus are in no matter what category you put them in.

They are huge stars and even greater role models in the sports universe, and having them competing in the Boston area, as well as making appearances, is a big deal. One young girl came armed with a large poster with snapshots of the Williams sisters through the years, including the recent picture of Serena in Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit edition.

"They are heroes to me," said 13-year-old Shavonne Hart of Roxbury, who received a huge hug from Venus. "I respect what they do. They're definitely an inspiration for me to be as dedicated as they are. I used to play tennis, but right now I prefer basketball. Their message to me is no matter the sport, anything is possible."

Hearing that kind of response also put a warm smile on the Williams sisters, along with Billie Jean King, who coaches the U.S. team with assistant Zina Garrison.

A large part of yesterday was about the players giving back and inspiring the next generation much like they were inspired. Talk about coming full circle, Venus remembered going to a similar clinic when she was about 8, and hitting balls with Billie Jean. She couldn't even describe how wonderful a feeling that gave her back then.

Serena recalled the impact of her first meeting with Garrison.

“I didn't have anything like this at all and I do remember one time meeting Zina Garrison and looking up to her,” said Serena, winner of the last four Grand Slams. “I thought it was the best thing in the world, so I can only imagine how these kids feel today.

“I hope they can go home and just say, I want to be an Alexandra Stevenson, I want to be a Venus Williams, I want to be like Serena. Hopefully, they can go home and think about that.”

Judging by a small sampling, it's mission accomplished. Perhaps even more compelling was watching the players having as good a time participating in the event.

“It's really special to see a lot of kids of different communities and different backgrounds. I was just over there hitting with one of them, and it made me feel really special,” Serena said. “These kids are all of a sudden starting tennis, and they're doing really well out here. I was hitting with one who wouldn't miss. That's how I am. I won't stop. It was fun. I'm really happy I came.”