

Williams Sisters Serve Up A Good Time

By Bud Collins, Globe Columnist - 4/24/2003

You wanted to draw a great big happy face on the gym wall at the Reggie Lewis Center because it would have been a reflection of 1,100 kids smiling and laughing -- hitting and missing -- as they bashed tennis balls at the world's leading practitioners of that diversion. Yes, indeed, the Sisters Sledgehammer -- Venus and Serena -- were hanging out for a couple of hours in Roxbury yesterday, amid a matinee maelstrom of fun that seemed a landscape of yellow polka dots. Balls were flying everywhere, rackets were flapping, kids were yelling joyfully and the planetary Nos. 1-2, Serena and Venus Williams, were having a good time, too. Beside the four courts, watching astutely, was a woman who used to be No. 1 herself, Billie Jean King.

Venus remembered being "a little kid," actually almost looking up at Billie Jean (instead of towering over her), "and my mom and dad took me to a clinic in Los Angeles. I got to hit some with Billie Jean. It was great." Now kids of that age, younger and older, too, were hitting with Venus and Little Sister. Maybe someday they will tell their children and grandchildren about the afternoon they were on the court with the women who have made the world their tennis ball.

The sisters said they enjoyed themselves. Why not? How often does what they usually do on the job kindle grins and laughter from people on the other side of the net? Taking time off from their appointed duties as the US Federation Cup team, preparing for a weekend recital against the outwomanned Czech Republic at Lowell's Tsongas Arena, captain Billie Jean, Serena, Venus, Meghann Shaughnessy, and Alexandra Stevenson bopped into town for an eye-catching performance. They were introduced to mega-whoops, answered some questions, then squared off against all comers.

It was an occasion. Any time, any place the two-lady sorority shows up it's an occasion. This time, arranged by the US Tennis Association and Tenacity, a tennis and education program, it was a free show to show off the game's foremost attractions. The idea was inspiration. "It's wonderful for kids to see what tennis can do for them," said Alveda Haynes, director of the Sportsmen's Club, who brought 200 of that program's children. "Not that they'll grow up to be pros, but that they'll respect education the way the Williams family has, and maybe tell their friends what fun tennis is. You can see it in their faces."

The Sportsmen's, with its indoor courts in Dorchester, and Tenacity, using Harvard, Boston Athletic Club, and the Lewis Courts, are the town's largest programs, their doors admirably open to any Boston youngsters. On hand, too, were kids from the Stillman Center in Charlestown and the Franklin Park Tennis Association. "We filled the place, it's gratifying. Could have used more room," said Ned Eames, Tenacity's director.

Boston is lucky to have these havens for kids. Some from the BCYF (Boston Centers for Youth and Families) also attended. Juanita Wade, the BCYF director, said, "How marvelous for the girls to see these women playing, to be impressed by their fitness, to be inspired to make sports and healthy living a part of their daily life." So it was 1,100 kids taking on Serena and Venus? Not quite. The sisters had help from teammates and their teenage sparring partners, Ally Baker and Jamea Jackson, USTA coaches, and the Ivy League-champion Harvard women's team. It may have looked like a Byzantine fire drill, but the system worked. With amplified emcee Kirk Anderson directing constantly moving lines of traffic, eight kids at a time, two on each court, traded shots with Venus, Serena et al. Everybody got swats.

"Do you think the top male pros would do this for a couple of hours? Doubtful," said a guy who once was one, Buddy Schultz, operator of the Cohasset Tennis Club. One spectator, a former Brookline High tennis team captain named Michael Dukakis, wanted a shot at Serena, but was ruled overage. However, he could watch one of his successors, BHS's state champ Katrina Elderbush, whack a forehand that made Venus nod approvingly.

Ten-year-old Renee Baxter, who could give the Sisters a run sartorially, stepped up in pink trousers and pink balls attached to her four pigtailed. She wasn't too sure who Venus was, but got one ball over the net, and departed pleased, determined to play more. Alicia Williams, 12, daughter of a Boston cop, said she can't beat him yet, "but I will. Seeing Venus and Serena makes me want to work harder at it."

Terry Gomes, president of Roxbury Community College, said, "It's very nice to have these women on our campus. It was gratifying to hear Venus say she'll go to college when her tennis career is over." Gomes thought he could find room for her. Erik Gomez, 14, after hitting with Venus said, "I was nervous, but it was fun. It was hard."

Leave out the fun part, Erik, and you know how the women on the tour feel opposite the Sisters: nervous, and it's hard.

This story ran on page C2 of the Boston Globe on 4/24/2003.

© Copyright 2003 Globe Newspaper Company.