

ON TENNIS

A Year Away, a New Coach and the Same Goal: Winning Wimbledon

Ahead of her 21st Wimbledon appearance, Serena Williams discussed coming back from a tough injury, but steered away from political discussions.



By Christopher Clarey

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WIMBLEDON, England — At first glance, it certainly looked like business as usual at Wimbledon on Saturday.

Two days before the start of this Grand Slam tournament, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal were practicing on adjacent grass courts with the steeple of St. Mary's Church for a backdrop.

As the two longtime rivals trained in the English sunshine, Serena Williams took a seat under the spotlights in the main interview room, as she has scores of times before.

But though this will be her 21st Wimbledon, it will be an occasion like no other for Williams. She is returning to the All England Club at 40, having not played a singles match since last year's Wimbledon, when she tore her right hamstring after slipping during the first set of a first-round match that she was unable to complete on Centre Court.

I asked Williams how much she was motivated during her comeback by the desire to give herself a different memory at Wimbledon?

"It was always something, since the match ended, that was always on my mind," she said. "So it was a tremendous amount of motivation."

Centre Court, now 100 years old and still the most atmospheric showplace in the professional game, has been the stage for many a triumph for Williams, who has won seven Wimbledon singles titles.

But it was all about pain and disappointment last year. She was in tears as she tried to continue after her injury and was in tears again after being forced to stop the match against Aliaksandra Sasnovich. Though Williams was able to limp off the court, she stumbled as she left the grass and needed assistance to reach the passageway leading to the exit to the clubhouse.



Williams left the court in tears last year when she was forced to withdraw from Wimbledon because of a torn right hamstring. Adrian Dennis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

"You never want any match to end like that," Williams said. "It's really unfortunate, but it was definitely something that's always been at the top of my mind."

It has taken a year for her return to the tour, withdrawing from three straight Grand Slam tournaments and sparking understandable speculation about whether she intended to continue playing tennis at all.

“I didn’t retire,” she said on Saturday, picking her words with particular care. “I had no plans to be honest. I just didn’t know when I would come back. I didn’t know how I would come back. Obviously, Wimbledon is such a great place to be, and it just kind of worked out.”

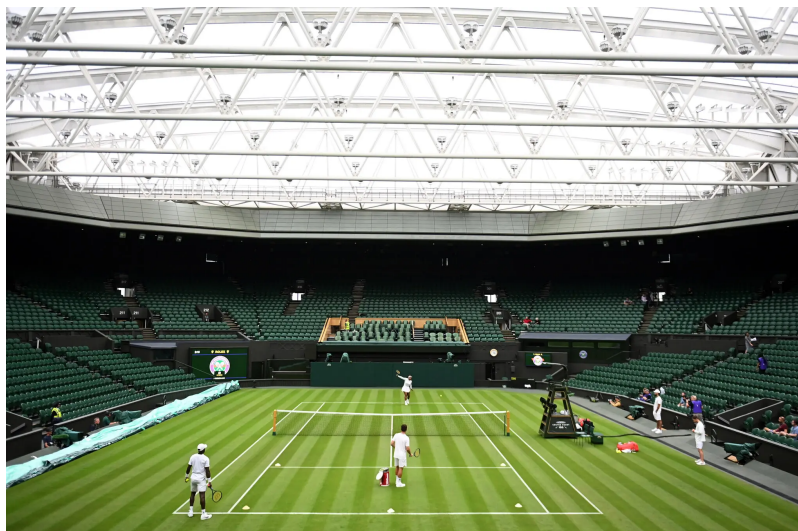
Since her last appearance at the All England Club, she has hardly been at rest: juggling motherhood — her daughter Olympia is now 4 — and business endeavors, including Serena Ventures, a venture capital firm with an emphasis on investing in companies whose founders come from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

“A part of me feels like that is a little bit more of my life now than tournaments,” she said of her interests outside tennis. “When you do have a venture company, you do have to go all in. It definitely takes literally all my extra time. And it’s fun. I’m currently out of office for the next few weeks, so if you email me, you’ll get the nice ‘out of office’ reply. Everyone knows that I’ll be back in a few weeks. But it’s good.”

Williams also has split with Patrick Mouratoglou, the high-profile Frenchman who has coached her for the last 10 years. Mouratoglou is now working with Simona Halep, a former No. 1 who produced perhaps the finest performance of her career to defeat Williams in straight sets in the 2019 Wimbledon final.

Williams is now coached by Eric Hechtman, a former University of Miami tennis player who is the longtime director of tennis at the Royal Palm Tennis Club in Miami. He has known both Williams and her older sister Venus for nearly 15 years and has been coaching Venus Williams since 2019.

Now Hechtman is coaching them both, although Venus Williams, 42, has yet to play a match on tour this year and will miss Wimbledon for the first time since 2013. Hechtman said the decision to begin coaching Serena Williams was made with Venus’s blessing. Though this is his first tournament with Serena, he clearly understands the goal is not simply to make an appearance and improve on last year, no matter how long Serena has gone without competing.



Williams, who has been practicing at Wimbledon ahead of the tournament, has won the Grand Slam seven times. Neil Hall/EPA, via Shutterstock

“She’s a champion, right? And she’s playing Wimbledon for a reason,” he said. “Just like I think anybody that walks into the tournament, their goal is to win the event. And that’s our goal.”

Williams made that clear, as well, when asked what she would consider “a good outcome” at Wimbledon this year?

“You know the answer to that,” she said, smiling. “C’mon now.”

Still, Williams was vague by design through much of Saturday’s news conference, declining to give a precise date when she decided to play Wimbledon, saying only that she made the decision before the French Open, which began in late May.

She also steered away from political topics. Some prominent American women’s athletes, including the soccer star Megan Rapinoe and the track star Allyson Feix, have voiced their opinion on Friday’s Supreme Court ruling to overturn Roe v. Wade.

Rapinoe has expressed opposition to the court’s decision, which removes the constitutional right to have an abortion, but Williams chose not to offer a viewpoint.

“I think that’s a very interesting question,” she said. “I don’t have any thoughts that I’m ready to share right now on that decision.”

It was unclear why Williams chose not to respond. She is a Jehovah's Witness, a religious faith whose members identify as Christians and who believe that the Bible teaches them to remain politically neutral. But Williams did not cite her religion on Saturday as a reason for reserving her opinion.



As Coco Gauff has been preparing for Wimbledon she has spoken out on political issues like the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Clive Brunskill/Getty Images

Her reticence was in sharp contrast to the American Coco Gauff, 18, who made an appearance in the main interview room later in the day. Gauff, like another of tennis's young stars, Naomi Osaka, has been eager to use her platform to speak out on social issues and made an appeal to end gun violence during the French Open on her way to the final earlier this month.

"I'm obviously disappointed about the decision," Gauff said of the Supreme Court ruling. "Obviously I feel bad for future women and women now, but I also feel bad for those who protested for this I don't even know how many years ago, but who protested for this and are alive to see that decision be reversed."

Gauff added: "I feel like we're almost going backwards."

But she urged activism. "I still want to encourage people to use their voice and not feel too discouraged about this because we can definitely make a change, and hopefully change will happen."

Williams also demurred when asked about Wimbledon's decision to bar Russian and Belarusian players this year because of the war in Ukraine. The list of those who have been banned includes Sasnovich, the Belarusian who faced Williams last year on Centre Court.

"Another heavy subject that involves a tremendous amount of politics, from what I understand, and government," Williams said. "I'm going to step away from that."

What she will do at Wimbledon is step back into Grand Slam tennis. Her first-round match against 113th-ranked Harmony Tan of France is scheduled for Tuesday, most likely on Centre Court. And though Williams, long No. 1, now has a ranking in the quadruple digits (1204), she will be the favorite on the grass despite her layoff.

She is back, no doubt. The question is for how long? Asked if this was her final Wimbledon, Williams remained in tune with her Saturday mood: elusive.

"You know, I don't know," she said. "I can only tell you that I'm here. Who knows where I'll pop up next? You've just got to be ready."