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Venus Williams: The New Queen of Clay?

By [Paula Vergara](#)

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Excusez-moi? Venus Williams is the queen of grass. Period. Her five Wimbledon singles titles verify that fact. Another well-known fact: Venus doesn't do dirt...er, didn't do dirt. Ok, Venus has had a good year playing on dirt (so far). She slipped and slid her way into winning the Acapulco title, and recently made it to the final at the Mutua Madrileña Madrid Open. Ok, so it's not exactly true that Venus doesn't do dirt.

But seriously, when was the last time you saw a WTA player (pushing-30) who suddenly develops into a champion clay court player? It just seems to go against the laws of nature (not to mention the laws of tennis).

I have to admit, when I saw Venus slipping into the wrong side of the top ten, my gut told me that she was making a slow move towards retirement. Her best playing days were simply behind her, and it was time for Venus to

start planning the next chapter of her life, I thought. Then she recently surprised us all by jumping to No. 2 in the world for the first time in seven years, and is now clipping at the heels of her younger sister, and current world No. 1, Serena Williams. Sometimes it's nice to be wrong.

Here's another fact: Venus Williams is currently the WTA Tour's best on clay. Yet her chances for success at Roland Garros greatly depend on how well she holds up against those who have historical records on clay (Justine Henin), or those who have beaten Venus consistently on clay (Jelena Jankovic). Venus does hold a 7-2 lead in the head-to-head series vs. Henin, and has a total of nine titles on clay—just four less than Henin.

But, Venus has only beaten Henin once on clay, back in 2002, and it's probably worth mentioning that four of Henin's 13 clay court titles came from Roland Garros. In addition, Jelena Jankovic has beaten Venus four times on clay (and most recently crushed her in the Rome quarterfinals 6-0, 6-1), and holds a 6-5 lead in their head-to-head series. Of course, the potential opponents for Venus will depend on how the draw plays out over the fortnight.

When it comes to injuries, Venus has been luckier than most this year (I won't get into the list of injured players here—too long). Venus was battling a knee injury during the Miami final, which subsequently kept her out of Fed Cup and Stuttgart, but she has been able to rebound.

One more fact: Venus Williams is the only player who has a shot at taking over the No. 1 ranking from Serena after the French Open. To do that, two things need to happen: Venus needs to win the French Open singles title, and Serena would have to fail to reach the fourth round.

The reality is, Venus has never won the French Open, which is the true litmus test for assessing clay court greatness. Despite having nine clay court titles, the closest that Venus has come to winning the French Open was back in 2002, when she lost in the final to her sister, Serena. Since 2007, Venus Williams has not made it past the third round of the French Open, and last year, she saved a match point in the third set against Lucie Safarova just to get to the third round.

The question is, will Venus Williams emerge as the new queen of clay? She might have an outside shot at the French Open title, but it seems that Venus still has much to prove before she can earn the clay-court crown. For now, being the queen of grass might have to suffice.

Paula Vergara is a freelance tennis journalist, covering the WTA and ATP tours. Paula's publishing credits include On the Baseline Tennis News, Tennis.com, USTA New England Magazine, and Bob



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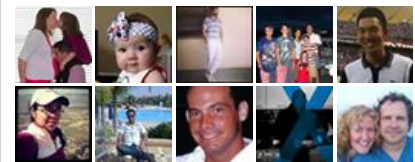
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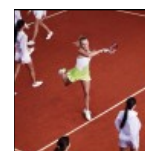
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Larson's Tennis News. Paula is also a member of the United States Tennis Writers' Association. To view her work, visit www.paula-vergara.blogspot.com.

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The Fan Child

May 27, 2010 at 4:04 pm

Yes, queen of grass may have to do, but Venus has looked great in her first two matches. I noticed (with the help of Tennis Channel's Martina Navratilova) that Venus doesn't really slide when she comes into the net to field a drop shot.

It's the little nuances that Venus doesn't display on the surface that don't make you think of her when you are making a list of classic clay courtiers. But she's been to the final, and as you mentioned - she could finish Roland Garros ranked #1.

Wouldn't that be amazing?