

Serena Williams wears a **Karla Colletto** swimsuit, **Swarovski** earrings and cuff, and **R.J. Graziano** cocktail ring.

Game On!

TWO YEARS AGO SERENA WILLIAMS, THE ONE WHO DELIVERS THOSE 120 MPH SERVES, WAS FIGHTING TO BREATHE. TODAY SHE'S HEALTHIER THAN EVER, WINNING NOT JUST IN TENNIS BUT IN LIFE

BY DENENE MILLNER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORENZO AGIUS

To understand the miracle sitting at the top of the women's international tennis rankings, one must first understand the way of the champion. Serena Williams's 5-foot 9-inch, 155-pound powerhouse frame—the same one that inspires 16-bar hip-hop paeans to her sumptuous derriere and whips paparazzi lenses into a frenzy—is a mind-blowing combination of speed, power and never-before-seen toughness that's allowed her to run roughshod over all comers during the last decade. Simply put: She's forced the entire women's tennis circuit to play her way. What sets off Serena's game, though, is her fight—the mettle she employs to face down imminent defeat. In her most intense matches, it can seem that she can't do anything right; the opponent will build up a seemingly insurmountable lead amid a barrage of Serena errors. But just when it seems all hope is lost, Serena becomes her best: summoning unbeatable will from somewhere deep to change her game and suddenly blast winning shot after winning shot, overwhelming and shocking her opponent with every stroke.

Which brings us back to this: Serena's perch as the No. 1 female pro tennis player in the world is a miracle. You see, two years ago she was on a gurney at Los Angeles' Cedars-Sinai, facing down her fiercest opponent yet: a pulmonary embolism. Both her lungs were full of blood clots, and a surgeon's scalpel meant the difference between living and dying. For the first time in her then 29 years, Serena felt far from invincible. The champion, who rose from the humble, glass-strewn tennis courts of Compton, and who has earned to date 15 Grand Slam titles, four gold medals and the distinction of being named No. 1 in the world six times by the Women's Tennis Association (WTA), was engaged in the match of her life. ▷

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Today Serena says, “I feel lighter, I feel healthier, and even though I’m 31—which really isn’t old, but for an athlete, particularly a tennis player, it’s old—I promise you, my body has never felt better. Considering how much I’ve played and how much I’ve done, I feel fine. I’m strong.”

It’s not that Serena *has* to play tennis. Her off-court activities—producing a popular Home Shopping Network clothing and accessories line, owning a part of the NFL’s Miami Dolphins, pursuing a nail technician certification and acting in TV shows—are just as important to her. Serena says fans need to understand this one true thing: Tennis is not her identity.

“It’s what people identify me as and I’m okay with that,” she explains as she stretches out in a recliner inside the sprawling Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, mansion she shares with her sister, Venus, 33. She’s picking at her crab legs and rubbing her eyes, which are in a fierce battle with her thick false eyelashes. “I embrace that and welcome that and love that. But it’s not me.”

This became an important mantra in Serena’s recovery, particularly as she confronted the very real prospect of never again picking up a tennis racket—a prospect set in motion in January 2011, when she cut both her feet on glass while at a restaurant in Germany and fainted from the massive blood loss. Two surgeries later Williams was looking forward to life without casts and bandages when she suffered an even greater setback: After a grueling trip from Los Angeles to New York City and then back, she felt deathly ill. “By the time I got off the plane, I couldn’t breathe,” she recalls, adding that her leg was severely swollen. Surrounded by her family and friends, she was rushed into surgery, a moment captured in the opening scenes of the recent documentary *Venus and Serena*.

“It’s weird, because when I was in that dire state, I was smiling,” Serena says. She knew her family was still devastated by the 2003 shooting death of her oldest sister, 31-year-old Yetunde (nicknamed Tunde) Price. “I was just thinking, *This is really serious, Serena. Smile. You don’t want your mom and dad to walk in here and get scared. They’ve already lost a kid.*”

Serena lived to tell the story, but the same body that pushed

through four-hour matches beneath a blazing sun was now spent from the trauma of clots, surgery and a subsequent tennis ball-size hematoma she developed after she hit an artery with one of her daily blood-thinning injections. “I had ‘why me’ moments so many times,” Serena confesses. “I literally was on the couch for three or four days. I didn’t shower. I didn’t get up. I was crying. I just lost it. It wasn’t easy.”

When she was at rock bottom, it was her sisters Venus and Isha who rallied for her to regain her health. “The most surprising thing about Serena and Venus is how truly close the two are as sisters, even though for

most of their professional life they’ve been each other’s greatest rivals,” says *Venus and Serena* codirector Michelle Major. But even with her sisters’ support, returning to the court was not easy, Serena admits. “That first match I was playing, I was seeing stars,” she says. “I remember saying to myself, *Serena, keep fighting!* I was struggling to win my matches and in tears again. I kept saying, *I don’t know why this happened. I didn’t deserve this.*”

But Isha, 39, set her little sister straight. “My sister said, ‘You know Jehovah has a bigger plan. Maybe he protected you. Maybe the reason it happened is because he was protecting you from something else,’ ” Serena remembers, her voice quiet. “Isha really broke it down for me, and then it just clicked.” And the comeback was on. Four months after the embolism threatened her career on the courts, Williams beat Agnieszka Radwanska of Poland to win a fifth championship at Wimbledon’s All England Club and a fourteenth major title overall.

Now, just days before she heads to Paris to train for several high-profile WTA matches, Serena’s got her nose deep in a Dutch oven full of beans and smoked turkey legs, a stew she’s been simmering all afternoon. On a nearby counter is that bowl of huge boiled king crab legs. Priority No. 1: Eat. Something healthy. Right now. She’s been battling a Skittles jones all day, and the bouquet wafting from the bottle of red wine her assistant just opened is calling Serena’s name—particularly since she’s weeks into her no-sugar, low-

sodium, no-fat food regimen. “I don’t believe in the *D* word, so I’m not going to say I’m dieting,” Serena insists as she backs away from the wine and scoops a spoonful or two of her 15-bean soup into a corn tortilla. “But I do need to get myself down to a size that’s right for the court. A size that makes it easier for me to move.”

Serena is careful not to say she’s losing weight for aesthetic reasons. Truth is, she’s happy with her body—especially after her health scare and 11-month stint away from the court. Still, there are days when she is feted more for what her body looks like than for what it can do. Pop culture ogles Serena like a modern-day Venus Hottentott, her body discussed in parts: her chiseled arms, her ample breasts and especially her perfectly round, bodacious butt. The attention, Serena admits, can be “a bit weird,” particularly when she sees the abundance of pictures of her, ahem, assets. Which weren’t always so well-received. “Before it was, ‘Serena has a big butt,’ and that was it,” she says with a shrug. But my, how things have changed. “Now there are way more people who feel comfortable with themselves and they’re saying, ‘I’m a woman, and this is what I look like.’ I always say, ‘We’re popular now! We’re finally in style!’ ”

She acknowledges that it took her some time to appreciate and embrace her body type, especially when she no longer could share clothes with her taller, thinner sister, Venus. “I always wore her old clothes, and then my boobs started getting bigger, but I wouldn’t even wear a bigger bra,” she says. “I just didn’t want to change.” But just about the time her envy of Venus’s body hit fever pitch—Serena was 19—her sister Tunde persuaded her to take a good look in the mirror and appreciate every... single... curve.

“Tunde said, ‘A lot of people like Venus and they love her body; she’s really thin. But if I had to choose a body, I would choose your body. You have to be comfortable with it,’ ” recalls Serena, who often sports her own HSN collection, which she designs with curvy, busty women in mind. “I felt way more comfortable after Tunde said that,” she shares. “And I appreciate that she did that.”

For sure, Serena wears her curves well—whether romping on the beach in a sexy bikini or hitting the red carpet in a skintight red number that hugs her just so. She’s neither flattered nor offended by the attention she gets, but occasionally does still have moments of doubt. “When I’m on the red carpet, I sweat so much that I have paper towels under my arms until I walk out,” she says. What makes her so nervous? “People criticize you. You might read or hear, ‘This didn’t look right.’ I’m normal. That confident girl you see is an everyday girl. I get nervous. I get shy. But when I step out there, I fake it. I really fake it.”

And when she’s out of the spotlight, far away from the cameras, Serena Williams reminds herself often that whatever’s “in” in popular culture doesn’t truly matter. “That’s why it’s so important to be comfortable with you,” she says. “You have to be able to look in the mirror and say, I love myself not because I’m popular but because I like the way my eyes look, I like the way my skin tone is, I like that I’m going to be a good person today and be helpful. It boils down not to the physical but how you feel inside.” And on this day, in her kitchen with her beans on the stove and her crab legs on the counter and plans in full swing for the coming Grand Slam season, Serena is feeling good. □

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Body Talk

GUEST EDITOR SERENA WILLIAMS AND ESSENCE READERS SHARE WHAT THEY ADORE ABOUT THEIR BODIES AND REVEAL HOW THEY STAY FIT AND SEXY:

What part of your workout do you enjoy and dread the most?

SERENA SAID: “I love when it’s over. I do not like working out. When I’m done, I can’t believe I did it.”

YOU SAID: “I have a love-hate relationship with my squats. Love the result but hate the wobbly legs after.”

—Zakiya Lee, via Facebook

What’s your favorite body part? Your least favorite?

SERENA SAID: “My smile. People I’ve hit with for years thought I had

veneers. But, no, [my teeth are] natural. I don’t love my arms. I know in ten years I’ll be like, what a loser I was, and I’ll really like them. I call them my long-distance arms.”

YOU SAID: “Fave: My full lips. As a kid I was picked on a lot, but now I get compliments. Least fave: My moles.”

—Cessily Eslinger-White, via Facebook

What are your secrets for caring for your skin and hair?

SERENA SAID: “Moisturize, moisturize, moisturize and clean, clean, clean.

And I never leave the house without sunscreen. Ever.”

YOU SAID: “Coconut oil. I use it on my hair, face and body. I also steam my face weekly and apply a face mask.”

—Kelli Monique, via Facebook

What’s your workout jam?

SERENA SAID: “ ‘Conga’ by Miami Sound Machine.”

YOU SAID: “Ricky Dillard and New G’s ‘Search Me Lord’ and ‘He Turned It.’ Yep, gospel while getting fit.”

—@sherrelledenise, via Twitter

HAIR: ANGELA MEADOWS. MAKEUP: SHEIKA DALEY/TSC AGENCY. MANICURE: LISA LE. MARKET EDITOR: RENÉE FRANCIS. STYLING: EMIL WILBEKIN.



On Serena: an **Hervé Léger** by **Max Azria** bondage gown, **Swarovski** earrings, a **Kenneth Jay Lane** cuff and **Christian Louboutin** pumps.

For clothing details, see **Where to Buy**.

