

A Dilemma in Women's Tennis

By
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Introduction

Serena Williams was born on the 26th September 1981 and currently aged 37, and had a baby at the age of 35. Williams has won 39 grand slam titles (23 singles, 14 doubles and 2 mixed doubles titles). Williams is only 1 grand slam away from reaching away from reaching the record of the most number of women's singles grand slams of 24 set by Margaret Court after winning the US Open in 1973. On September 1st, 2017, Williams and her partner Alexis Ohanian had given birth to a baby girl and named her Alexis Olympia Ohanian Jr, after her father. Since giving birth to this child, Williams has not won another grand slam title since (in particular another singles grand slam despite being in the Wimbledon and US Open finals in 2018 and 2019). Also, Williams missed playing in 4 consecutive grand slam singles titles from the 2017 French Open to the 2018 Australian Open as a result of the pregnancy and the child bearing duties.

According to healthline

<https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/best-age-to-get-pregnant#30s>

“Fertility gradually begins to decline at around age 32. After age 35, that decline speeds up. Women are born with all the eggs they'll ever have — about 1 million of them. The number of eggs gradually drops over time. At age 37, it's estimated that you'll have around 25,000 eggs left. By age 35, your odds of conceiving after 3 months of trying are about 12 percent. The risk for miscarriage and genetic abnormalities also begins to rise after age 35. You might face more complications in your pregnancy or during delivery having a baby later in life”.

Player profiles

In 1970, Margaret Court won all four Grand Slam singles titles but lost the Wimbledon singles final the following year to Evonne Goolagong Cawley while pregnant with her first child, Daniel, who was born in March 1972. Court made a comeback the same year and played in the US Open and then played throughout 1973. Her second child, Marika, was born in 1974. She started playing again in November of that year. After missing most of 1976 after having her third child, she returned to the tour in early 1977 but retired permanently that year when she learned that she was expecting her fourth child. Her last Grand Slam tournament appearance in the singles was in the 1975 US Open. Her last Grand Slam tournament appearance overall was in the 1976 Australian Open in the women's doubles. Court was born on the 16th July 1942 and won her last grand slam at the US Open grand slam doubles in 1975 at the age of 33. Court has won more grand slams than any other player with 64 (24 singles, 19 doubles, 21 mixed doubles).

Martina Navratilova won 59 grand slam titles, second most behind Margaret Court (18 singles, 31 doubles and 10 mixed doubles titles). The 31 doubles titles is all time record for doubles grand slams. Navratilova was born on the October 18, 1956 and capped off her career by winning the mixed doubles title, her 41st major doubles title (31 in doubles and 10 in mixed doubles) at the 2006 US Open with American doubles specialist Bob Bryan. At the time, she was only about a month shy of her 50th birthday and broke her own record as the oldest ever major champion (aged 49 years, 10 months). Navratilova never had a child.

Steffi Graf won 23 grand slam titles (22 in singles and 1 doubles title). Graf is third behind Court and Williams in terms of the number of singles grand slam titles. Graf was born on 14 June 1969, and won her last grand slam title at the French Open in 1999 at the age of 30. After competing in Wimbledon in 1999, Graf retired from tennis on the 13 August 1999, shortly after losing a second round match against Amy Frazier in San Diego with a strained hamstring. On October 22, 2001, Graf married Andre Agassi. The couple live in Las Vegas, Nevada, with their two children, Jaden and Jaz. Hence Graf had children after she had retired.

Conclusions

Based on the above, there is evidence to suggest that women becoming pregnant can restrict the number of grand slam titles they can potentially achieve throughout their career (due to the fact that you can't play tennis when you reach a certain stage within the pregnancy). In the case of Serena Williams there is evidence to suggest that having a child at the age of 35 may have prevented her from winning further grand slams and in particular reaching the 24 singles grand slam record set by Margaret Court (with Williams currently on 23 singles grand slams). There is also evidence to suggest that both Steffi Graf (retiring at the age of 30) and Margaret Court (retiring at the age of 33) could have won more grand slams by extending their playing career (given that Williams is still competing at the age of 37 and Navratilova won her last grand slam at the age of 49). Ultimately, it comes down to what you value more in life, having children or breaking records – hence a dilemma in women's tennis.