

# Venus shows age is just a number

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Venus Williams has her sights on the French Open: No, this is not a headline from the early 2000s. The 45-year-old is hoping, even if that seems a bit far-fetched, to return to Roland Garros where she has never won a singles title.

Venus was beaten 2-6, 4-6 by fellow wild-card entrant Kaitlin Quevedo in the opening round of the Madrid Open on Tuesday for her 10th straight singles loss after she returned from a 16-month break midway through last season.

The former world No.1 with seven singles, 14 doubles and two mixed doubles grand slam titles along with multiple Olympic gold medals under her belt is definitely not the player she used to be. But fuelled by multiple wild-card entries, Venus still grabs the headlines wherever she goes.

Venus's last win on Tour was against Peyton Stearns in the round of 16 of a WTA 500 event in Washington in July 2025. At the 2025 US Open, Venus stepped on to the court to play in the doubles alongside Leylah Fernandez. The Canadian, all of 23 years, wasn't even born when Venus won the singles gold at the Sydney Olympics in 2000. And they made it to the quarters.

That is one great story of longevity.

While Venus may not really be thriving, the Big Three of men's tennis defied age and kept much younger challengers outside the top bracket for decades. Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic (still active) stretched their careers well beyond what is traditionally considered an athlete's 'prime'.

Federer, with 20 grand slam singles titles to his name, retired only in 2022 at the age of 41, 19 years after his first grand slam crown: the 2003 Wimbledon.

Nadal battled on despite chronic injuries, retiring at the age of 38 in 2024, having

won 22 grand slam titles and two Olympic gold (singles in 2008, doubles in 2016)

Djokovic, 38 years, has no plans of hanging up the racquet soon. His goal is to compete until at least the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, when he will be 41. Despite recent fitness challenges and losing the world No. 1 spot, he remains motivated following the 2024 Olympic gold. And any addition to the 24 grand slam trophies that adorn his cabinet will be more than welcome. Stan Wawrinka (41) and Gael Monfils (39) are still playing.

Closer to home, Indian stars like Leander Paes and Rohan Bopanna have played well

into their 40s and have remained relevant in doubles on the international stage.

The question that naturally arises is where do these stalwarts get their motivation from, specially after they have bagged all that there is to win and what results in such endurance?

At a very basic level, tennis is suited to longer careers. Unlike contact sports, it does not subject athletes to constant physical collisions, and players can adapt their style as they age. The modern game allows for strategic evolution — shorter points, smarter scheduling, and surface specialisation. But that is only a tiny part of the bigger picture.

The most obvious factor is motivation. Federer, Nadal and Djokovic have driven each other to unprecedented heights. Their rivalry created a loop of excellence, where one's success compelled the others to push harder.

According to an ATP report, the standards set by these players forced them to "maximize their abilities".

The extraordinary longevity of these elite athletes is down to a mix of genetics, environment and lifestyle, associate professor Christina Ekegren, a physiotherapist

and researcher at Monash University in Melbourne, said in a report published in *The Guardian*.

For players like Venus now, or Paes in his later years, the motivation was more about leaving a legacy rather than winning titles.

Paes continued competing at the highest level in doubles well into his 40s, and even partnered the fantastic Martina Navratilova, who made a comeback to the court at the age of 43 in 2000, having previously retired in 1994. She won her final grand slam title in mixed doubles at the 2006 US Open with

Bob Bryan, just one month shy of her 50th birthday.

Similarly, Bopanna's late-career success offered him a path to longevity.

Another crucial factor that has helped players to play longer is the development in sports science and medicine. The modern tennis player is supported by a team that includes physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists and data analysts.

Injury management, once reactive, is now preventive. Players like Nadal have undergone multiple procedures and treatments, including advanced therapies such as platelet-rich plasma injections, to extend their careers.

What would once have been career-ending injuries are now manageable conditions. Recovery is aided by techniques like cryotherapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy, used by top stars like Nadal and Djokovic.

The development of rac-

quets, too, has worked towards reducing strain on players. Djokovic himself has credited strict dietary control, improved sleep and mental wellness as key to his longevity.

Also, as players get older, they tend to select which tournaments they would take part in, keeping in mind the importance of the meet and the ATP ranking points system.

Older players also have the advantage of having superior tactical knowledge and the mental strength to managing pressure situations in matches.

The Open era

reached grand slam semi-finals at 39, while Ken Rosewall won a major at 37 (the 1972 Australian Open), a record that stood for decades.

Federer reached a Wimbledon final at 37. Nadal won the Australian Open at 35, and Djokovic has continued to collect grand slams past that age.

On the women's side, Serena Williams have played at the top level till her late 30s. She retired at the age of 40 in 2022.

The elders in tennis thus thrive, despite challenges from their own bodies and the younger generation.



Venus Williams in action against Kaitlin Quevedo of Spain during their first round match of the Madrid Open on Tuesday. The 45-year-old Venus lost the battle of wild-card entrants 2-6, 2-6. (Getty Images)

Novak Djokovic of Serbia with the Paris Olympics men's tennis singles gold medal at the Champions Park on August 5, 2024. (Getty Images)

offers examples of players who thrived into their 30s and beyond. Jimmy Connors