

WIMBLEDON

SISTERS

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Foot Locker on South Street. As they thumb through the women's shoes section, something catches Sylvia's eye, prompting her to impress upon her shopping partner:

"D, isn't this the shoe that one of the Williams girls were wearing on that Reebok commercial?"

Destiny grabs the low-cut sneaker and, after a couple of seconds of examination, chimes back:

"Yeah, I think so. I can't remember which one of them it was, though. I think it was the younger one, Venus. She beat her sister in the French Open the other day, I think."

Of course, Destiny wasn't quite right.

The shoe her friend inquired about was that of the older sister and multimillion-dollar Reebok spokeswoman, Venus, and it was the younger sister, Serena, who claimed the French Open crown.

Yet, in a simple exchange between shopping buddies lies an all-too-perfect illustration of how some have come to see Venus and Serena — as interchangeable.

The reality is, they are as different as the products they market and how each is marketed to the public that still is discovering whom they are.

"I think what we have is a rather unique situation, not only in sports marketing, but marketing in general," said Mervin Heller, president of the United States Tennis Association. "It's the power of three. You can market them as two individuals or you can market them as a sister situation. I think they are both uniquely talented and can stand alone — both have market strengths."

And it is becoming clearer that they are hardly the little girls depicted in the Doublemint commercial racing to clean up their bedroom for a stick of gum.

They are women now.

Female pro athletes, rather than female teenage phenoms. And, little by little, their distinctive styles and personalities are emerging.

It is Serena Williams, after all, who has returned questions as well as volleys the past year-and-a-half about her rumored romances, first with Redskins linebacker LaVar Arrington and this year with Indians lefthander C.C. Sabathia.

While she avoided talking about the reported sightings with



Associated Press

Venus Williams is chasing her third straight Wimbledon title.

"Richard Williams told us this was going to happen, saying they would one day rise off ratty parks to best in the world. That kind of prophecy is something that has to be discussed. While it has been hard to separate them as a package, I think Serena doesn't want to be known as Venus' little sister and wants to get out of the web of her father."

MARY CARILLO, CBS analyst

Arrington, her liaisons with Sabathia have been well-documented, with Serena showing up at Indians games on more than one occasion.

The Sabathia sightings even spawned a handful of engagement rumors.

"You guys make me giggle," Serena said, regarding Arrington at the French Open in 2001. "That type of stuff makes me giggle."

She eventually would only say "no comment."

It was a hint that Serena, the Anna Kournikova of the Williams pair, can be just another 20-year-old.

And it's also proof Serena isn't afraid to poke a hole in the bubble her father often was guilty of putting up around Venus in the early years.

While both sisters have been flaunted as athletic divas on numerous magazine covers, Serena has wallowed in those waters far more often than her fellow Avon

spokeswoman, who reportedly once complained about having to wear makeup in a Reebok commercial.

Venus does have a softer side that differs from her on-court tenacity, sports marketing experts contend, but it simply hasn't been played up as much as Serena's.

Venus is the quiet homebody. As the first Williams to bust out of the gates, it might be because she is too busy being a pseudo-CEO Venus.

Along with megabucks deals with Avon, Nortel Networks and Wrigley she shares with Serena, Venus has solo deals with Wilson Leather and that \$40 million contract with Reebok she signed in December 2000.

Serena's shoe deal is with the lesser-known Puma.

Mickey Pant, Reebok's head of



CLIVE BRUNSKILL/Allsport

Serena Williams has been less discreet about seeing Indians pitcher C.C. Sabathia than she had been with LaVar Arrington.

marketing, said that in the company's 8- or 9-year relationship with Venus, she is starting only now to become a chief marketing tool, calling her and Allen Iverson their two lead representatives.

"There was a period when we wondered when [Venus] would display her full potential, and now she has," Pant said. "She now has a significant position in our marketing plan and is used as the lead spokesperson for female athletes globally."

"The two Williams sisters are on top of their sport. In basketball, there may be three or four other players fighting near the top and therefore don't translate as well as Venus — she is global, and that will be reflected in our future marketing of her."

That global appeal apparently is translating into cash for Reebok. As Venus has climbed in the tennis rankings, so too have the company's profits in campaigns in which she has been a part,

Pant said.

Bob Williams, head of sports marketing consultants for Burns Sports Chicago, thinks there will be little distinction between sports marketers in the near future as advertisers tap the Venus and Serena pipelines.

"I think the personalities will become more of a defining factor as they continue to win," Bob Williams said.

"I think Serena is the more charismatic right now in front of the camera, but they are so young right now, and who knows, Venus might have it as well."

"I don't see a clear distinction between their personalities — at this point. I don't think advertisers care which one it is."

"Chris Evert has long been a favorite, and still is for advertisers; I think, based upon what Venus and Serena have both done thus

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