

She was born for this role

After a tennis career as ‘the only one,’ Adams is now on a mission to open doors for women in sports



Tennis champions Venus Williams, left, and Serena Williams, right, pose with Katrina Adams, incoming chairman of the USTA, during a renovation gala at the Southeast Tennis and Learning Center, Nov. 7, 2014, in Washington. Alex Brandon/AP

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By Colleen Kane Chicago Tribune

When Katrina Adams recently spoke on stage at a TEDxBoston event, the topic was generally about her tennis career that began on Chicago’s West Side.

But the theme was about learning how to succeed as “the only one” — something Adams experienced at various points in her journey from Whitney Young High School to Northwestern to the WTA Tour to leading the United States Tennis Association.

After winning the Illinois High School Association state singles titles in 1983 and 1984, she was the first Black player to win an NCAA doubles national championship in 1987 at Northwestern. After a playing career on the WTA Tour that included 20 doubles titles, she became the first Black woman and former pro player to be elected USTA president.

Adams literally wrote a book on the topic last year: “Own the Arena: Getting Ahead, Making a Difference, and Succeeding as the Only One.”

“There are a lot of times I (was) the first of a lot of things,” Adams told the Boston crowd. “But in that process I wanted to make sure I’m not the last or the only one, that I opened the door and that I led the way and that I represented myself well so that others would have that opportunity to come behind me.

“I had to work twice as hard to make sure I did things right, that I did things well so that I could represent. And that’s hard. That’s not easy to do when you’re the only one because you know that you’re not just there for yourself or your family or your company or organization, whoever it is, but also for a culture and a whole race of people.”

She apparently was born for such a role.

Adams’ mother, Yvonne, who along with her father was a teacher and principal in Chicago Public Schools, used to tell Adams she came out of the womb a leader.

Adams always had an air of confidence about her. She was instinctive, nosy and able to duplicate almost anything she watched, especially as an athlete.

“(My mom) used to tease me. She used to say, ‘You’ve been here before,’ ” Adams told the Tribune in May. “Like, ‘How do you just naturally know certain things?’ ”

Those traits helped as Adams became a standout tennis player, starting when she was 6 years old and begged to play with her older brothers at a summer program near her Garfield Park home. They also served her as she embarked on a post-playing career that has been perhaps even more

impactful than her time on the court, even if it wasn't part of her original plan.

“When you're playing, you're hoping to win Grand Slams, you're hoping to become a multimillionaire and perhaps never having to work again,” Adams said. “That didn't happen for me.”

While Adams was still playing, she became involved with the WTA players association board, giving her a glimpse into the “political” side of the sport. She later rose the ranks in tennis leadership before serving two terms as USTA president, an unpaid position, from 2015-18.

“Katrina had great social skills and she always liked the politics part of it,” her former doubles partner Zina Garrison told the Tribune in 2015. “What she has done is not surprising to any of us who knew her as a player.”

During her tenure as president, Adams said she was proud of the projects she helped complete: the transformation of the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in New York, the opening of the USTA National Campus in Orlando, Fla., and the unveiling of the Althea Gibson statue at the national tennis center that celebrates the first Black woman to win the French Open, Wimbledon and the U.S. Nationals singles titles.

“For me, it's been about making a difference and giving back to a sport that has given me so much,” Adams told the Tribune. “When I started at the tender age of 6, (I had) no idea what the sport was, what it could offer and where it would take me. But the opportunities continue to be endless for me and I'm very grateful, and it's my obligation to make sure I give back to the next generation.”

After her second term as USTA president expired, Adams has remained busy as the executive director of the Harlem Junior Tennis and Education Program, where she has been for 16 years. She is a vice president of the International Tennis Federation, with which she is the chairman of the Billie Jean King Cup Committee and the Gender Equality in Tennis Committee.

She is also a co-host on CBS Sports' all-women sports analysis show “We Need to Talk” and on the advisory board of Athletes Unlimited, a network of women's professional sports leagues in volleyball, softball, basketball and lacrosse.

Her book, which came out in 2021, talks about her time with the USTA and the U.S. Open.

“It wasn’t my idea. It was other people pushing me to write the book,” Adams said. “I’m glad they did because it’s important to be able to share my story and (encourage) others to believe in themselves and know that they can be successful if they push themselves and understand that they do need to own their voice and courage and identity to get anywhere in life.”

Adams shared those ideas in her TEDxBoston speech, noting her career started with owning her choice to play tennis and knowing it was what she wanted to do even when she was the only Black player at a tournament.

As she considered what’s next in her busy career, Adams hopes more opportunities arise to share her ideas and leadership.

“When I hear the younger ladies who may come up and say they admire me or they appreciate me, I’m kind of in awe initially because I’m like, ‘Wow, you recognize me or you recognize what I do or what I’ve done,’ ” she said. “It makes me feel really good because it makes me realize that things I’ve done and continued to do serve a purpose, and they serve a purpose for the betterment of the next generation.”