

In 'King Richard,' Will Smith reigns as Venus and Serena Williams' dad and coach

By Chris Hewitt
Star Tribune

Maybe the most important thing about "King Richard" goes unmentioned in the movie: Alone among the women who started playing professional tennis with them more than 25 years ago, Venus and Serena Williams are still competing and loving it.

"Make sure you have fun," Richard Williams (Will Smith) tells his daughters before they practice or compete — and they listen. According to the film, there was never any question he had their best interests at heart, whether that was pulling them from the junior tennis circuit because of its toxicity, contradicting their coaches or, before they'd ever played a pro match, telling reporters they would be the best tennis players of all time.

There are reasons to be skeptical that we're getting the whole picture in "King Richard," starting



HBO Max
Will Smith (center) reigns in "King Richard."

with the fact that Venus, Serena and sister Isha Price are among the producers. The script glosses over troublesome areas, including confusion about how many children Richard has and with whom. Almost nothing is said about the Williams' finances (it seems Venus and Serena began supporting the family while in their teens). And were the three daughters not named Venus or Serena really OK with mostly being ignored? But, as a tribute to the dad who was their

WHERE TO WATCH

"King Richard" is now in theaters and streaming on HBO Max.

first and best coach, "King Richard" is inspiring and entertaining.

Despite obstacles that include violence near their home and even police checks, apparently initiated by jealous neighbors, Richard remains dedicated to his daughters' careers, sure in the knowledge that "I'm in the champion-raising business."

Smith is outstanding as the title character, capturing both his abrasiveness and a beaten-down quality that comes out in Richard's slow draw. Although he's less known than the Williamses' mother, Oracene, who still attends nearly all of their matches, it's Richard's movie. Venus (Saniyya Sidney) and, even more so, Serena (Demi Singleton) are supporting characters. Both actors are too old for their roles but they capture

the players' otherworldly confidence and the latter is a dead ringer for Serena.

It's such a remarkable story that "King Richard" could easily have been a miniseries. That would have allowed more time to talk about Richard's unorthodox coaching, which led to 14-year-old Venus making her pro debut having played no tournament of any kind for the previous three years. It also would be great to see more of Oracene, who's played with quiet dignity by Aunjanue Ellis. One scene in which she coaches Serena raises more questions than it answers.

Heck, I'd watch a whole miniseries episode about the moment Serena learns she'll miss out on working with a top coach who

agrees to help Venus. Richard consoles Serena by telling her she's going to be the greatest of all time, and it's fascinating because "King Richard" has shown us that he wouldn't say that because he's a dad who loves his kid (although he does) but because he is absolutely certain it's true.

"King Richard" ends when Venus turns pro, so there's nothing about the racism and rudeness the girls faced as young players, from the media and other athletes, and there's no insight into the mental game that, coupled with their physical gifts, has made them Hall of Famers.

Mostly, it's a story about being a parent, about having faith in one's children and about being absolutely right.

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