

Ahead of Her Time

Coco Gauff's 'youngest-ever' achievements haven't grown old even while she has matured

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Coco Gauff never meant to turn into a surprise teen queen who last year would take the women's professional tour by storm, among other things claiming her first WTA singles crown before she was old enough for a driver's license. But it happened. And, wise beyond her years, she embraced it. That's just her way.

Gauff's original dream was to become a high-level gymnast, but her parents couldn't picture her going for gold on the Olympic stage. It wasn't that mom, Candi, a child gymnast and then a hurdler and heptathlete at Florida State, and dad, Corey, a hoops standout at Georgia State, didn't have faith in the eldest of their three kids or confidence in the family genes. It's just that, well, Coco, at 6, was already much taller than the children in her age group. So instead of setting her up for inevitable disappointment, Candi and Corey redeployed Coco on the soccer field, on the basketball court, on the track, on the cheerleading squad—believing she, like them, could someday land a free ride to college as an athlete in one of those sports.

Tennis, though, did not appear to be an early contender.

Coco's introduction to tennis came at age 4, during the 2009 Australian Open—where the Williams sisters emerged as an inspiration. After Serena's run through the singles bracket ended in a 10th major singles crown and she partnered with Venus for their eighth Grand Slam tournament doubles championship, Corey took Coco to Target to buy a skirt, a racquet and a sponge ball, then

released her onto the driveway to whale away at the garage door. It seemed like something she'd do for fun, as a kind of father-daughter bonding thing.

Then, once Coco (née Cori) started taking solo lessons and club pros began raving about not only her natural skill and grace, but also her ability to focus and practice for yawning stretches, things changed. She won her age group in the "Little Mo" Nationals as an 8-year-old, and her mind was made up. "After that," said Coco, admittedly not a team sports person, "I decided to do that for the rest of my life."

Mom and dad, too, had seen enough by that time. Corey abandoned his career as a healthcare executive to manage Coco, Inc., while Candi left her teaching job to provide homeschooling. All the while, the family moved back and forth between Delray Beach, Fla., and Atlanta to extend Coco's access to top-flight training. "[It] appeared to me that she was special even among the supposed elite group that were playing the sport at the time," Corey said in April, during a Universal Tennis Rating (UTR)/Oracle-sponsored interview with Tennis Channel commentator and former pro Prakash Amritraj. "We knew very early that we had a very good athlete. Whether it was tennis or basketball, we knew that she could do something with proper training, discipline and direction."





A prime opportunity to accelerate that learning curve came in 2014, when Gauff received sponsorship to train at Patrick Mouratoglou's academy in southern France. "I'll always remember the first time I saw Coco," Mouratoglou, Serena Williams's longtime coach, said last year. "She was only 10 years old, but you could feel she was already extremely ambitious. When she looks at you and tells you she will be No. 1, you can only believe it."

Gauff's up-trending on-court results backed up the big talk. Also in 2014, she became the youngest-ever champion of the USTA Girls' 12 National Clay Court Championships, at 10 years and three months. In 2016, a 12-year-old Gauff entered Les Petits As, the prestigious 14-and-under French event with a knack for predicting future stars, and made it to the semifinals. In 2017 a 13-year-old Gauff stormed into the US Open girls' singles final, leaving 16- and 17-year-olds in her wake, and after falling 6-0, 6-2, promised, "I'll definitely be back here." The very next year, she took the French Open girls' singles championship, while the youngest player in the draw. A few weeks later, she became the world's No. 1 junior, the youngest ever. She closed out 2018 with the title at the highly esteemed Orange Bowl tournament.

Gauff turned pro in May 2018, a fast rise that speaks as much about her as her team. Corey Gauff, in fact, was honored this past April as the 2019 Team USA Developmental Coach of the Year. "We have many coaches here at the USTA that have worked along with her dad," says Kathy Rinaldi, head of women's tennis for USTA Player Development.

Coco Gauff, before catching everyone's attention with her standout summer in 2019, had proven herself as the world's No. 1 junior, taking the Roland Garros girls' title at age 14 in 2018.

"He's such a big influence, they're such a wonderful family, and she's such a sponge and hard worker. She has such a maturity about her, such a wonderful head on her shoulders and is so giving and so gracious—and yet she's this ferocious competitor who just wants to win."

And thanks to the abiding success of the Williams sisters and the emergence of 2017 US Open winner Sloane Stephens, '17 runner-up Madison Keys and Fed Cup hero

CoCo Vandeweghe, the 5-foot-9 Gauff was spared the usual "Great American Hope" hype. Initially.

Last year, Gauff made her Wimbledon debut under the radar and—with her Venus-esque loping court coverage, reliable backhand and 115 mph serve (remember, she was 15)—barreled through qualifying as a wild-card rookie to become the youngest player ever to reach the women's singles main draw. From there, she took down 44th-ranked Venus Williams in straight sets in the first round and marched on to Week Two before bowing to eventual champion Simona Halep in the round of 16.

Making her US Open women's singles main draw debut as a wild card later last summer, four weeks after taking her maiden WTA title in doubles in Washington, D.C., Gauff proved the legitimacy of her epic run at the All England Club, advancing to the third round in Flushing before falling in straight sets to defending champion Naomi Osaka in Arthur Ashe Stadium. What the tournament's most anticipated matchup lacked in fireworks, it more than made up for in waterworks.



Billie Weiss/USTA

"The fact that both of us still made it and we're both working as hard as we can is incredible." More than the tournament's emotional peak, it was one of the great moments in sportsman-ship—The Hug Felt 'Round the World.

Six weeks down the road, Gauff earned her first Top 10 win, toppling No. 8 Kiki Bertens in the quarterfinals at Linz and then stopping 2017 Roland Garros champion Jelena Ostapenko in the final. The following week, Gauff, alongside her by now regular partner, Caty McNally, captured her second doubles title, at Luxembourg.

While tour play was suspended during the coronavirus pandemic, Gauff and Osaka would go from adversaries—with Gauff exacting straight sets revenge on Osaka earlier this season in the third round of the Australian Open—to partners, lending their voices and their social media feeds to the Black Lives Matter movement. ("I'm not going to encourage her, when she [makes it], to stick her head in the ground and ignore social issues," said Corey, still his girl's CEO coach, to *The New York Times* in June 2019.) Four days after George Floyd, a black man, died at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, Gauff turned to TikTok, posting a video of herself, somber in a black hoodie. Images of the many unarmed

Gauff has reached the round of 16 in two of her three prior Grand Slam women's singles appearances. She advanced to the third round at last year's US Open, and still stole the show.



Don Emmert/Getty Images

black men, women and children killed by law enforcement officers cycle through the video, and then Gauff reappears, along with the question: "Am I next?" A week later, Gauff appeared at a Black Lives Matter rally in her native Delray Beach and delivered a searing speech in front of city hall. "If you listen to black music, if you like black culture, if you have black friends, then this is your fight, too," she said to a dense crowd, her voice thick with pain. "It's not your job, it's not your duty to open your mouth to say, 'Lil Uzi Vert is my favorite artist, but I don't care what happened to George Floyd. Now, how does that make sense?'"

Remember, she's 16.

"When you meet people who are exceptional, you know it," Mouratoglou told *The Guardian*, as Gauff's remarks drew national and international attention. "She has a self-confidence that serves her in her tennis, but to be able to come and make a speech at 16 the way she did? ... I'm not surprised that I am surprised, but I'm surprised."

With such an unwavering commitment to the good fight, Gauff continues a US Open tradition of activism, a tradition that runs from Louis Armstrong to Arthur Ashe to Billie Jean King and even David Dinkins, the pioneering New York City mayor who paved the way for the tournament's current home.

As far as what impact Gauff will have on-court in Queens this year, of course only time will tell. And if she should happen to rise to even greater heights? Well, that's just what she does... embrace the moment. ●

Before an inconsolable Gauff could rush off to have a good cry in the locker room, Osaka held her back so Gauff could bask in the love raining down from the capacity crowd and receive yet another embrace from the then-world No. 1—the women's tour's big phenom until Gauff entered the scene. "I remember I used to see you guys training in the same place as us," said Osaka, dissolving into tears herself as she addressed Gauff's parents.