

Voss, Arthur, *Tilden and Tennis in the Twenties*. Troy, N.Y.: The Whitston Publishing Co., Inc., 1985. xiv, 194 pp. \$15.00

This strangely crafted book surveys the tennis world in the 1920s, focusing on the dominant male player of the decade, Bill Tilden, as well as the premier women players, Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills. Arthur Voss, the Canadian junior champion in 1928, obviously grew up in the period about which he writes, and it is clear that the great players of the time were the heroic figures of his adolescence. Voss played varsity tennis in college and became an English professor at Lake Forest College in Illinois, from which he retired some years ago.

Voss asserts that tennis became a popular sport in the 1920s, not only because of the general increase in public interest in all sports, but also because of the “new aspect of masculinity” (xii) which Maurice McLaughlin gave to the game just before World War I with his serve and volley style of play. In addition, Voss suggests, without evidence, that the move of the national championships from Newport to Forest Hills in 1915 helped popularize the game. Finally, he makes it clear that Tilden himself, a showman who understood that he had an obligation to please his audience, brought much favorable attention to tennis during these years.

In fourteen short chapters and an epilogue, Voss edges the reader through the 1920s, treating a different topic in each chapter. Some chapters, such as one describing the celebrated Lenglen-Wills match at Cannes in 1926, add little to our knowledge of tennis history; others, such as the one on the professional tour of 1926, organized by C. C. Pyle and featuring Lenglen, contain much relatively fresh information. Voss also includes, from time to time, interesting discussions on the question of amateurism in the 1920s (a running controversy which often centered on Tilden) and on the careers and styles of the French Musketeers, René Lacoste, Jean Borotra, Henri Chagnet, and Jacques Brugnon, who collectively dethroned Tilden in the later years of the decade.

Ultimately, however, *Tilden and Tennis in the Twenties* is not a very satisfying book. Based on a handful of interviews and a world of newspaper and magazine sources, it does not capture the pathos of Tilden’s life as Frank DeFord does in *Big Bill Tilden* (1975) nor does it really come to terms with the historic context of 1920s tennis. Indeed, it hardly comes to terms with what is history at all. There are no footnotes, even for direct quotations, and only a few specific citations in a “notes and sources” section at the end. It is awkward that Tilden, Lenglen, and Wills are almost always referred to as Bill, Suzanne and Helen but Mary K. Browne is always Mary K. Browne. Moreover, Voss clutters up the text with too many lengthy descriptions of individual matches of little significance and other bits of tennis trivia.

Most bothersome, however, is Voss’ archaic writing style. Although antiquarians of English grammar may rejoice at the rediscovery of the present participial phrase, the modern reader will cringe at such spectacular sentences as:

In 1933, having won at Wimbledon earlier in the summer for the fifth time by defeating the English girl, Dorothy Round, who had put out Helen Jacobs in the semi-final, Helen Wills Moody was the favorite to gain her eighth American title with a final-round victory over the younger Helen, who was the defending champion, the older Helen not having competed the year before. (p. 173)

One blanches at the thought of Voss' Lake Forest students entering the real world with a fondness for such sentences.

In the end, the reader who has plowed his way through Voss' prose will have experienced a book by an author fond of his subject. But apart from the few items noted above, the book adds little to what sport history texts and the most widely read biographies and autobiographies tell us about either Tilden, or tennis, or the 1920s.

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