

Engelmann, Larry. *The Goddess and the American Girl: The Story of Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Pp. 464. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$21.95.

Picture the Riviera—the sand hot from the sun, the Mediterranean azure, the sky almost cloudless. “Heaven had looked after the weather,” wrote Helen Wills. It is 1926, the time of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, only one year before Lindbergh, a moment in history when Americans—their pockets stuffed with inflated French francs—decided that Paris and the Riviera were the places to be. Frenchmen could only look on in horror. A writer for the *Paris-Midi* noted that Americans were “degenerate and rotten, physically, intellectually, and morally. They offend our eyes, our ears, and our nostrils.” But one American that did not offend eyes, ears, or nostrils was the poker-faced tennis champion Wills. She was in France for sun, art, and tennis. Especially tennis. She had come to challenge Suzanne Lenglen, “the Goddess” of France, to a game of tennis. But everyone involved—from the promoters and the players to the journalists and the spectators—knew that it would be more than just a game.

They played on February 16, 1926, at the Carlton Club in Cannes, Suzanne’s home court. Tension filled the air and lined the face of Suzanne. Only the night before she had had a bitter fight with her father, who cursed her for playing the match. By contrast, Helen was placid tranquility. The fact that before the match Suzanne trembled and was visibly nervous gave the American even more confidence. The match started. The quality of play was superior. Suzanne won the first set at 6-3. Between sets she drank a small glass of iced cognac to calm her nerves and give her a quick lift. In the second set Suzanne tired. As Larry Engelmann writes, “Suzanne was feeling the heat. The sun was almost directly overhead. Yet to remove her sweater would indicate that she was working hard to win. She must not allow Helen’s partisans that pleasure. The sweater stayed on. Suzanne was perspiring heavily now, and the makeup was cracking and running down her cheeks and staining the silk of her dress. The little dark half moons under her eyes appeared beneath the makeup and gave Suzanne the weird appearance of having aged years during the course of the match” (p. 171). But she continued to play, fortified by more iced cognac and her need to win. The second set saw drama, bad calls, flashes of sportsmanship, and high suspense. James Thurber called the contest, “one of the most grotesque and thrilling and momentous games on record.” And in the end Lenglen won the second set at 8-6.

I have spent considerable space on the Lenglen-Wills match because it is the centerpiece of Larry Engelmann’s fascinating *The Goddess and the American Girl*. This is a superb dual biography, but it is also much more. Engelmann touches on such topics as amateurism, the structure of tennis on the Riviera during the first three decades of the twentieth century, nationalism in sport, and—of course—the role of women in sport. This last, he believes, has been an understudied area. As Engelmann notes, he became interested in Lenglen when he was in college. She was mentioned in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, but his teacher was uncertain who Lenglen was and, in fact, whether

Lenglen was a male or a female. To his surprise, Engelmann later discovered that Lenglen and Helen Wills were central figures in the 1920s and that women in sports during that period had not been placed into its proper perspective.

Engelmann's dual focus creates a sense of tension which moves the reader along wonderfully. The book constantly shifts from Lenglen to Wills—from the Riviera and the courts of Europe to California and American tournaments. Lenglen, the Goddess, ruled the game in the era after the Great War. A symbol of a revitalized France, she was a temperamental, spoiled *wunderkind*. She was dominated by her father, idolized by France, and feared by linesmen wherever tennis balls were stroked or tournaments were held. Discussing Lenglen's fragile psyche, Engelmann writes, ". . . Papa advised, directed, teased, criticized, cajoled, denounced, decried, praised and condemned his little girl without seeming to be really aware of the pulverizing emotional effect of his methods . . . her emotional growth was stunted. She became athletically formidable and emotionally tattered" (p. 13). Wills, by contrast, was a product of a secure loving family; she approached life and tennis with a sense of calm confidence. Engelmann observes that unlike the flappers of the Twenties, Helen stood apart: "There was something solid about her, like a principle, something that transcended the style of the moment or the latest rage. There was almost something timeless about her, something classic" (p. 97). It is the story of these two women, so different yet so alike in the will to excel on the court, that gives *The Goddess and the American Girl* its narrative force, and Engelmann, a superb writer, gets full mileage from the tale.

Engelmann also discusses the debate over amateur athletics during the first third of the twentieth century. Almost from the first, Suzanne was a professional in fact if not theory. For her father, she was a business, and nationalistic French tennis chose to overlook her commercial nature. Engelmann is particularly adept in detailing the financial structure of French tennis tournaments and the meaning of Suzanne to a recovering and dispirited French nation.

This last point leads one back to the importance of women's tennis in the 1920s. Clearly the heroics of Lenglen and Wills were followed. They were accepted as world-class athletes, not as freaks. They were even viewed as symbols of what was best in their respective nations: Suzanne was the modern Joan of Arc, Helen the reminder that wholesomeness survived in the age of the flapper. No reader can doubt the importance of women's tennis in the Golden Age of Sport. In fact—and this is a problem—after reading Engelmann, one is left with the impression that Wills and Lenglen overshadowed Tilden and the French Four Musketeers. *The Goddess and the American Girl* should be read with Frank Deford's *Big Bill Tilden* (1975).

Only a few flaws mar this splendid book. Although beautifully written, it is too long and occasionally repetitive. And perhaps Engelmann could have spent more time contrasting women's sports with men's. But these are small criticisms. *The Goddess and the American Girl* is first-rate biography and social history.