

The Contributions of Women to the History of Competitive Tennis in the United States in the Twentieth Century

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The transition of tennis from a “sissy” game for women at the turn of the century to its 1970’s status of a leading spectator and participant sport for the “fairer sex” was traced in the paper. Following a twenty-five year domination of the sport by Easterners, in the early 1900’s Californians began their near forty-year reign atop the national sport.

May Sutton’s baseline game captured American and English singles crowns to lead the onslaught from the West. Serve-and-volley expert Hazel Hotchkiss followed in her wake with a triple-triple sweep of a national singles and doubles championships. Mary Kay Browne rounded out the first California trio with her all-court approach to the game. Following Molla Bjurstedt Mallory’s eight singles’ titles, a second three-some from California emerged with Helen Wills at the baseline, Helen Jacobs’ all-court approach, and the women’s first power-serve with volley game of Alice Marble. Helen Wills captured a record number of American and English singles titles in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman due to her numerous victories, her instruction of younger players such as two-time singles winner Sarah Palfrey Cooke, and her promotion of international tennis through the Wightman Cup matches won her recognition as “Queen Mother” of tennis.

International tennis during the post-war years was dominated by Americans Sarah Cooke, Pauline Betz, and the dynamic doubles duo of Margaret Osborne and Louise Brough. These last three emerged again from the hard, fast California courts and also affirmed that baseline or net games could win.

The era of the 1950’s was dominated by two very dissimilar stars. Maureen Connolly was cut in the mold of the “baseline” California champions who preceded her as her scorching drives won her numerous singles championships including the 1953 “Grand Slam” — the American, English, French, and Australian tournaments. Her career, cut short by an injury, left only speculation as to what heights she might have attained.

As a child growing in the ghettos of Harlem, Althea Gibson never envisioned that one day she would stand atop the previously “all-white” sport of tennis. From street paddle tennis to ten straight American Tennis Association singles championships to the hallowed turf of center court at Wimbledon, this courageous Black lady fought prejudice and tradition as she became the number one player in the world.

Americans during the early 1960’s awaited a new star to dethrone Brazilian Maria Buezo and Australian Margaret Smith Court. Quietly entering world-class tennis at the age of seventeen Billie Jean Moffitt would be heard from again — by 1967 she had established herself as the best tennis player in the world. Off the court, Billie Jean Moffitt King battled too, as she led the fight against sham-amateurism in tennis. Almost carrying the women pros “on her back” through the era of contract pros, the Virginia Slims Circuit, and numerous controversies with the USLTA, she lifted tennis, women’s liberation, and herself into national prominence.

Besides the tournament circuit, other significant occurrences concerning the sport deserve recognition. Fashion, equipment, and courts changed dramatically during the century. Clad in short, lacy tennis dresses or pastel coordinated shorts and shirts, players hit colored balls on artificially surfaced courts. While the established stars competed in World Team Tennis, younger aspirants competed in Satellite circuits, collegiate tournaments, or junior development programs.

The number one ranked female tennis player of 1976, Chris Evert, standing at center court at Forest Hills seemed almost centuries removed from her “foremothers” of the early 1900’s. While she played for prize money of over \$200,000 per year, they had adopted the “new” sport of tennis at the turn of the century simply because of a “love of the sport.” While they vigorously competed when women’s place was in the home, Evert and the others have been accepted as sports heroines worthy of adoration as athletes. To say that women have come a *long way* would almost be an understatement. Truly, though, women racquet wielders have taken a “giant leap for women’s athletics.”