

# Helen Wills Tennis Champion and Popular Heroine

NANCY B. BOUCHIER

University of Western Ontario

JOHN E. FINDLING

Indiana University, Southeast

Between 1923 and 1938 Helen Wills dominated women's sports, winning eight Wimbledon singles titles, seven U.S. singles championships, and four French open singles crowns, not to mention scores of doubles matches and lesser tournaments and gold medals in the women's singles and doubles competition at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games. She was born in California in 1905, and although she did not take

up tennis until she was thirteen, her natural talent along with a careful training regimen provided by her coach, William “Pop” Fuller, and her father, Dr. C. A. Wills, at the Berkely Tennis Club, brought her to national prominence before she reached the age of eighteen.

Wills’ tennis game, which included powerful ground strokes and superb baseline play, was most noted for the intense on-court concentration and imperturbability that she was able to maintain while playing. While this concentration led to the nickname “Little Miss Poker Face,” her off-court manner was altogether different. She was pleasant, articulate, and an excellent interview subject.

In February 1926, Wills met Suzanne Lenglen, the French champion who was then the reigning queen of women’s international tennis, in the finals of a tournament on the Riviera. The match became a media event of incredible proportions, due in part to the marvelous contrast between the flashy, mercurial Lenglen and the calm, innocent Wills. Lenglen won narrowly, but when she turned professional later that year and Wills won her first Wimbledon title the following year, the young American was acknowledged to be the best amateur woman tennis player in the world and had become a popular heroine as well. The 1920s was a decade of many popular heroes, and various writers such as Marshall Fishwick, Dixon Wetter, Theodore P. Green, Frederick W. Cozens, and Florence S. Stump have examined this phenomenon. Generally, their conclusions suggest that the unusually high level of hero worship at this time stemmed from such causes as post-war disillusionment, and concern with the rapid economic and technological changes going on at the time, both of which led people to seek heroes who represented a safer and saner past. Also, women and organized sports were playing a greater role in American society, and people admired virtues such as inventiveness, self-sufficiency, and individual achievement, as represented in such non-sports heroes as Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh.

Other theorists have built on the ideas of Leo Marx (*The Machine in the Garden*) and have postulated the idea that in America a heroic person is one who can successfully mediate between power, symbolized by the Machine, and innocence, symbolized by the Garden.

The way in which Helen Wills combined her tennis game with her off-court lifestyle enabled her to rise to the status of a popular heroine. Her individual achievement was unquestioned: her personality and values, as reported in the press, were attractive, uncomplicated, and pure. Her powerful tennis game was almost mechanical in its style and was often described in terms applicable to the machine, while off the court, she represented the Garden, physically attractive, graceful, and modest.

Not until 1933 did a worthy challenger rise up against Helen Wills. This was the Californian Helen Jacobs, and when Wills defaulted to Jacobs in the finals of the 1933 U.S. Nationals in a controversial mid-match incident stemming from a back injury she had sustained some months earlier, a good measure of her popularity vanished. Wills was somewhat vindicated, however, when, after an extended convalescence, she returned to tournament play and defeated Jacobs in the finals of the U.S. Nationals in 1935.

After her eighth Wimbledon singles crown in 1938, Helen Wills retired permanently from competitive tennis. By this time, much of her star quality had faded with age, a divorce, and the fact that the depression-ridden 1930s was a more hostile environment for cultural heroes than the 1920s had been. But for fifteen years, she had combined a superior style of tennis with a winning public personality to establish herself as an authentic popular heroine of her day.