

The Little Old Lady in Tennis Shoes

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In 1972 one of the feature articles in *Sports Illustrated* was entitled "The Little Old Lady in Tennis Shoes." The subheading stated, "Still swatting the ball and barking orders like a drill sergeant, at 85 Hazel Wightman is truly the Queen Mother of U.S. tennis." Two years later, 15 days before her 88th birthday, Mrs. Wightman died of a heart attack at her home in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. This paper is not only a biographical sketch of Mrs. Wightman but also my memories of being personally acquainted with "The Little Old Lady in Tennis Shoes."

Before relating my personal stories of Mrs. Wightman, a brief overview of her career will indicate why she was known as "Queen Mother of American Tennis." Since the day she started to play, she devoted her life to tennis. She was a major influence in the development of girls' and womens' tennis tournaments in this country and fostered international competition through her donation of the famous trophy, the Wightman Cup. Mrs. Wightman not only won 45 national tennis titles, more than any other player, but taught thousands of youngsters to play the game. Beginning in 1923, she started conducting free classes for youngsters and at the same time started one-day tournaments for boys and girls at Longwood Cricket Club near Boston.

My first meeting with Mrs. Wightman occurred when I was 12 years old and was invited to one of her one-day tournaments. It was the beginning of my tennis career and I played competitively until I graduated from the Juniors when I reached my 19th birthday. Since Mrs. Wightman directed all the New England Junior tournaments, plus selected the New England Junior Wightman Cup team and selected the girls to go to the National Juniors, I became very well acquainted with her.

She was emphatic about deportment and sportsmanship and did not hesitate to correct any youngster who she felt was acting with less than proper decorum on the court. The ultimate punishment for not rectifying poor behavior was not being invited again to one of her tournaments. By her teachings she also imbued her pupils with not only love of the game but the will to win. She stressed that a match was never over until the final point and never to give up.

After the Juniors I spent intensive time with her for intermittent periods when I interviewed her for both my thesis and dissertation. I came to know more fully the real person, Mrs. Wightman, not as in the old days when I was an impressionable teenager and she was the tennis mentor.

In 1957 she was inducted into the National Tennis Hall of Fame and in 1973, on the 50th Anniversary of the Wightman Cup, she was made an Honorary Commander of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth. This wonderful and delightful lady and sportswoman was held in esteem by everyone who knew her. The ultimate tribute was made after Mrs. Wightman's death by Helen Wills, a former Wightman Cupper, who said, "When Hazel Wightman died . . . newspapers noted that the grande dame of tennis was 87 years old. But in her heart, where it mattered, Mrs. Wightie was always the youngest person I've ever known."