

Maureen Connolly: A Tale Half Told

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Maureen Connolly was born September 17, 1934 in San Diego, California. Horses were her chief childhood passion until at ten years of age her family moved to a house that was near the municipal tennis courts. The pro there invited her to hit balls with him and noticing her natural swing, gave her lessons. He switched her from a left handed to a right handed player and entered her in a tournament where she reached the finals. From then on tennis became the main dedication of Maureen Connolly.

In her second year of tournament tennis at the tender age of eleven, her teacher and coach was the well known Eleanor "Teach" Tennant, who had molded such champions as Helen Wills, Alice Marble and Pauline Betz. In 1949 after Maureen had won almost fifty titles in singles and doubles in tournaments in and around California, Teach Tennant decided it was time for her fifteen year old pupil to enter the big time – the tennis tournaments in the East. She became the youngest girl at that time to win the National Junior Championships in Philadelphia, which was for players eighteen years old. She won that title again in 1950 and also competed on the women's circuit. She did so well that year that at age sixteen she was tenth on the women's rankings list. Noticed by the press, she was dubbed "Little MO" in contrast to the then powerful battleship "Big MO," the Missouri. Her nickname was attributed to the fact that even though she was only 5'5", similar to the guns of the Missouri, Connolly mowed down her opponents from the baseline with her outstanding powerful forehand and backhand drives.

In 1951 she did not defend her National Junior title so that she would be rested for the United States Women's Championships at Forest Hills. She won the tournament and at seventeen years old was the second youngest player at the time to win the title. That year she also was selected for the Wightman Cup squad, being the youngest to that date to make the team. Moreover, she repeated as a member of the team in 1952, 1953, and 1954, and in four years of Wightman Cup play she never lost a match.

In 1952 Miss Connolly not only retained her United States title but won Wimbledon and the AP named her Woman Athlete of the Year. She was also ranked Number 1 by the United States Tennis Association (USTA) and, was presented the Service Bowl by the USTA, given to the person who makes the most notable contribution to the sportmanship, fellowship and service of tennis. The next year, she won the Grand Slam of Tennis, being the first woman to win this honor, which means that the player won the four major championships, (United States, Wimbledon, French, and Australia), in the same year. Only Don Budge, Rod Laver, and Margaret Court have also achieved this record. Again, Connolly was selected as Woman Athlete of the Year by the AP and was ranked Number 1 by the USTA and in the world.

At the age of twenty, Connolly won her second French title and her third consecutive Wimbledon and was predicted to repeat again at Forest Hills. But unfortunately, before the tournament she suffered a crushed leg in a horseback riding accident and never again was able to play competitive tennis. Even without this tournament the AP for the third year in a row voted her Woman of the Year.

It is speculation what Maureen Connolly would have achieved in the tennis world had she not been injured before she was twenty one years of age. But consider in addition to the titles mentioned above, that from September 1951, when she won her first United States Women's title, to July, 1954. when she won her third Wimbledon, Connolly had lost only one match, in 1954 in California. Most tennis authorities believe that had she been able to compete the normal years of a tennis champion, her record might have been unparalleled. Even so, she is regarded as one of the greatest women tennis players who ever played the game.

In 1955 Maureen Connolly married Norman Brinker and they settled in Dallas, Texas, where they had two daughters. She was elected to the Tennis Hall of Fame in 1968 and in 1969, knowing that she had terminal cancer, she created the Maureen Connolly Brinker Foundation to help promote promising junior players. At the same time, a dream of hers was realized when the USTA established the Maureen Connolly Brinker Award to be presented each year at the Girls' Nationals. Connolly planned to make the first presentation in August of that year but destiny prevailed and she died of cancer on June 21, 1969. Her legacy lives on as one of the game's greatest players through the Maureen Connolly Brinker Award and through the Continental Cup, which is international team play for girls 18 and under sponsored by the foundation that bears her name.