

Larry Engelmann, *The Goddess and The American Girl: The Story of Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Illus., pp. 464. \$21.95.

The French 'Goddess' of tennis, Suzanne Lenglen, dominated the women's game in the years from 1919 until 1926, when she quit

the amateur ranks. Her place was quickly taken by the American Helen Wills, who went on to achieve a similar eminence from 1927 until 1933, when she bowed out of top-rank tennis at the Irish Championships. The two played a match made legendary by preliminary and post-match ballyhoo and analysis at Cannes on the French Riviera in 1926, when Lenglen defeated Wills. This match provided the most publicised link between the careers of the two women and in turn makes the logical fulcrum of Engelmann's book about the life-trials of these two athletes whose tennis, dress, romances, lifestyles and artistic forays into painting and novel-writing became household conversation the world round.

Engelmann's book has faults. It is perhaps too long for its subject, but is nevertheless a valuable addition to our knowledge of lawn tennis, the media and national myth-making through sport, as well as for the insights it offers into the mind of the dedicated athlete and how that cast of thought fares in the world of ordinary and generous social behaviour. It contains biography, sociology and cultural and social history, as books on sporting personalities should - but mainly biography. It is a strange mixture of interesting detail, sometimes shaky continuity, fascinating reminders of the morés of the sport in those days and the methods of reporting it, and rather annoying 'floating quotations not sourced in the text or in footnotes, but presumably taken from the 'Sources' listed in detail at the book's end, where books, articles, interviewees and correspondents are cited. It is possible that it was decided that to footnote verbatim statements, given the depth of the research that spans more than a decade of the American and European past, was an insurmountable task. My view is that it should not have been, that to have taken that one step further in citation in chapter notes would have enhanced the book's value greatly. The reader yearns on many occasions throughout this work of undoubted scholarship for a footnoted source, giving some indication as to quality of evidence, bias of informant/speaker/writer, and an indication of her/his depth of

knowledge, experience and closeness to the game of tennis in the twenties.

The book seems to have needed some rewriting and certainly closer editing. Infelicitous and awkward sentences remain. Others trail away without completion, and there are many literals that have escaped the proof-reader's eye. Thus, as Senator Phelan, a friend of Helen Wills, ponders philosophically on her marriage to Fred Moody in 1929, he is allowed to tell us in all seriousness, that '...there comes a time when a girl creases [sic] to be a virgin and becomes a spinster...'

Again, Engelmann descends at times to a wording that is so opaque as to defy definition. Helen Jacobs, he judges, was a 'nice' and 'decent' women! But it is not all to be laid at Engelmann's door. These were the terms of the debate beaten up by tennis writers and others, first concerning the personal, national and cultural differences between the fiery Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills (later Moody and later still Roark), and then the differences between Helen Wills ('Helen the Great') and her fellow-American, Helen Jacobs ('Helen the Small'). These were the terms of the search for the paragon, the American Girl, who, it was generally conceded, had been found in the person of a girl tennis player, born in Centerville, California in 1905, and who reached the peak of her physical beauty and tennis prowess in the decade from 1923 to 1933, when she bestrode the world of women's tennis in Britain, the Continent and the USA to the tune of eight Wimbledon Singles victories, while not dropping a set in singles competition anywhere in the world from 1927 until 1933. Is it any wonder that 'straight' Americans were won over by her, wished to take her to their hearts for the values they imagined she represented - 'normalcy' in a society that was rapidly changing and morally kicking up its heels; 'wholesome' in the sense of coming from good family, of rejecting smoking, drink and cosmetics; in all, a drastic contrast, as Engelmann points out, to the gaudy, gin-drinking flappers of the era; in all, What American Needed.

Lenglen, on the other hand, was what the French needed. Her tennis skill and brain, her dancer's movement, her eye for publicity, her highly-strung and mercurial temperament, her almost unbelievable reliance on her Papa at courtside, her failure to achieve any other lasting relationship and love in her life, her strong urge to win which brought her physical and mental exhaustion, unnatural unhappiness, loneliness - all were what the press needed and what the promoters batted on.

It is the strength of Engelmann's account that the drama and uncertainty of the unnatural life of the top-ranking tennis player comes alive before us as he traces the careers not only of Wills and Lenglen, but also of the lesser flames of Helen Jacobs, who despite her great abilities and engaging, open personality, was fated to become the chopping-block for Wills' greater tennis genius, and the emerging Alice Marble, who Wills cruelly and bluntly refused assistance in practice or advice, as well as earlier figures such as Molla Mallory and Elizabeth Ryan.

Lenglen emerges as a Gallic firebird, feted by royalty, writers, actors and actresses, politicians, industrialists, agents, and capable - but at what mental cost? - of metamorphosing from 'the mortal Suzanne into the Great Lenglen' as Engelmann aptly puts it, whenever she stepped onto a court. But she is ultimately a tragic figure, driven to perform beyond reason over the years by Papa and her own ego, slowly dying in Paris even as Wills is defeating the injured Helen Jacobs in the 1938 Wimbledon final - dying of an exhaustion brought on by melancholia, overwork, and pernicious anemia.

Helen Wills, dubbed 'The Ice Maiden' for her wordless and expressionless lack of acknowledgement of her opponents during matches, emerges as a complex and ruthlessly dedicated athlete, who harboured inexplicable hatreds of certain other players, maintaining all the while, but not in the belief of those who studied her tournament campaigns, that painting and writing rather than tennis were her true dedications. After her retirement in 1938 she continued to play the

game amongst friends, pursued her painting and designing, even published a murder mystery centring on tennis players. 'In Mrs Moody's hand,' wrote the *New York Times* reviewer bluntly, 'the racket is mightier than the pen.' She played at times with the next generation - Kramer, Schroeder and others.

Engelmann's book is also a book of historical reminders - of how early the promoters saw the possibility of exploiting the athlete in professionalism; of how canny were players and their agents in calculating appearances and assessing the likely 'gate'; of how tennis as exemplified by Lenglen and Wills could become a sublimation of national desires, the battle of the Old World and the New, of how tennis drew some of the finest writers to depict it - Paul Gallico, James Thurber, Grantland Rice, Ring Lardner, the Spanish novelist Vincent Blasco Ibanez, Allison Danzig, with Teddy Tinling, who died in June 1990, in the winds as advisor, observer; and at what human cost comes fanatical application to a game. Engelmann's several interviews with Helen Wills Moody Roark during the 1980s allow fascinating insights, when the American Girl contemplates how her genius might have fared against Evert or Navratilova. In the end, we conclude, her life has conferred an omniscient maturity. 'Sometimes I wonder,' she said in an interview with Engelmann in 1981, 'why I tried so hard. When I was doing it, it seemed so much fun. It was a way of life. It was exciting.' And pondering the ephemerality of sports fame, her own as well as others, she describes her passing from the limelight: 'I don't think anyone is missed, and it doesn't matter whether it's sport of life. Do you?'

Graeme Kinross Smith
Deakin University