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Maureen Connolly

A Postage Stamp Honors a Determined Teen Seen by Some as the Best of All Time

(This article is adapted from the writer's story published by The New York Times on Sept. 8, 2013)

By JOHN MARTIN

Maureen Connolly was not yet 19 when she won the United States women's singles championship in 1953 at the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills, Queens.

With her 6-2, 6-4 victory over Doris Hart, Connolly became the second player after Don Budge in 1938 and the first woman to win the Australian, French, Wimbledon and United States championships in a calendar year. (Rod Laver in 1962 and 1969, Margaret Court in 1970 and Steffi Graf in 1988 followed.)

Connolly, a San Diego native known as Little Mo, stood 5 feet 4 inches and weighed 120 pounds. She captured nine consecutive Grand Slam events in which she participated starting in 1951, winning 50 straight matches while losing only one set.

Then Connolly's leg was shattered in a horse-back riding accident in



COMMEMORATING A CHAMPION: Issued in 2019, U.S. Postal Service stamp depicts Maureen Connolly reaching for low backhand on a grass court. She was nicknamed "Little Mo" by a San Diego Union sportswriter, Nelson Fisher, after the Battleship Missouri.

1954, ending her playing career when she was 19. She died 15 years later. "It was the shortest of great careers," said Bud Collins, a writer

and historian, "but few got more done in many more years."

In profiling the 40 greatest players from 1946 to 1996, Collins

wrote of Connolly, "She may have been the finest of all female players." That view is not shared by those who argue that the strength, power rackets and serving speeds of today's players would prevail.

"My serve has always been the major weakness in my game," Connolly acknowledged in her 1954 book, "Championship Tennis." Switched from left-hander to right-hander by an early coach, she was working with Les Stofen, a 1930s doubles champion, striving to hit "a hard flat ball and a good reliable spin," she said.

Ben Press, 89, a San Diego teaching professional and one of Connolly's closest friends, said, "Her serve was weak by comparison with today's girls,



Flink tennis history

'Who Could Say Who Would Have Beaten Whom?' Said Tony Trabert

but the other girls would have just as hard a time holding serve."

Connolly once faced Pancho Gonzalez, the world's top men's player in the 1950s, in a mixed doubles exhibition on a hardwood tennis court in San Diego. Connolly insisted Gonzalez "not hold back," Press said.

"When Pancho served — which was the best serve in the world at that time — on the boards," Press said, Connolly "handled Pancho's serve a majority of the time."

Tony Trabert, who won five Grand Slam titles in the 1950s, praised Connolly's skills and competitive instincts but questioned her ability to prevail today.

"I think these girls would overpower her," he said in a telephone interview. "They'd jump all over her serve. I think of a Serena Williams or someone like that."

Even so, Trabert, 83, said Connolly, like champions from other eras, deserved



THE BRIEFEST OF GREAT CAREERS: As a winner of all four major international tennis championships by age 19, Maureen Connolly held the throne in women's tennis for only an instant compared to her successors in the current century.

respect and admiration.

"Do me a favor," he said. "Speak very favorably of Maureen Connolly, because I think she was a terrific champion. She was a terrific lady and did a wonderful job."

Trabert spent 31 years as the lead CBS Sports tennis analyst at the United States Open, beginning in 1971.

"Who can say who would have beaten whom?" he said. "I think giving them a level playing field, let them be the same age, fit, and the same kind of equipment, and in

many cases, the top player of any era would have adjusted and done very nicely."

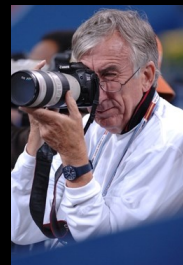
One Connolly trait shared by top players today is a fierce hostility on the court, said Steve Flink, a tennis analyst and historian.

In "Forehand Drive," her 1957

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Richard Osborn
Editor: John Martin

At the French Open in 1954, An English Adversary Saw Her As 'Ice'

autobiography, Connolly wrote: "I hated my opponents. This was no passing dislike, but a powerful and consuming hate. I believed I could not win without hatred."

Emphasizing that he was speaking of Williams's behavior on the court, Flink said: "I think Serena definitely has it. I think the others do too, the Navratilovas, the Grafts, the Everts, Billie Jean. That's while they're out there. Nothing is going to get in their way. Nothing's going to stop them."

Angela Buxton, an Englishwoman who reached the Wimbledon final in 1956, was beaten by Connolly in the 1954 French Championships quarterfinals.

"She was ice, all I can tell you, ice," Buxton, 79, said. "She'd strut backwards and forwards from the right court to the left."

After the 1953 United States women's final, Allison Danzig wrote in *The New York Times* that the match between Connolly and Hart had been fierce.

"Miss Hart, a finalist five times and a strong hitter in her own right,"



Doris Hart in photo on International Tennis Hall of Fame website. She was inducted in 1969. Below, San Diego Union-Tribune salute to Connolly on Sept. 17, 2019, the 85th anniversary of her birth. It reprinted a 1952 column she wrote as a Cathedral High School student, copy girl and writer.

Danzig wrote, "resorted to every device, including changes of spin, length and pace, in an effort to slow down her opponent."

Hart, 88, laughed as she recalled the match.

"She aimed for the lines, and she hit them most of the time," Hart said of Connolly, adding: "She just exuded confidence, you know. Everybody felt it. No matter what the score was, you felt like she was always ahead."

In 1953, Hart showed determination in defeating Connolly in the final of the Italian Championships, 4-6, 9-7, 6-3.

Then, at Wimbledon, Connolly defeated Hart, 8-6, 7-5, in the final, a match praised by Flink in his 2012 book, "[The Greatest Tennis Matches of All Time](#)."

"When I came off the court, I felt like I had won," Hart said. "I couldn't play any better. I felt that, deep down. She was better in every way."

"I always thought that. Her record, they never mention it today. Never. She won everything by the age of 19."

This year, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp honoring "Lil Mo." On Oct. 20, the Balboa Tennis Club and the Greater San Diego City Tennis Council will honor Connolly and Press in a special tribute, including the dedication of a Press Family Tennis Pavilion for tournament play.

FROM THE ARCHIVES SD UT 9.17.2019

'Little Mo' Connolly worked as a cub reporter

Maureen Connolly Brinker was born on this day in 1934. Nicknamed "Little Mo" after the powerful World War II battleship Missouri, she was ranked as the world's best women tennis player from 1952 through 1964. In her down time, Connolly often wrote short features for the Union. Her best was the human side of the world of sports. In this "Letter From Mo" the 18-year old tennis champ interviewed another local sports champion, golfer Mickey Wright.

From The San Diego Union, Tuesday, September 30, 1952

LETTER FROM 'MO'

Golf, Tennis Stars Share Same Ideals

By Maureen Connolly

Dear San Diegoans: Today I had the pleasure of talking to another hometown girl, Mickey Kathryn Wright, the 17-year-old wonder who began her road to fame out on the greens of the La Jolla Country Club.

The pretty, blue-eyed blond's crowning achievement to date has been the winning of the National Junior Girl's Golf Championship last summer. As we chatted on, Mickey and I discovered we have a lot of common interests, one being the aspiration to write.

While attending Stanford next January, she will become a staff member of the college newspaper. "They will probably start me out as a proof reader" but after that, here's hoping," she laughed.

I asked her why she chose Stanford out of all the colleges. The reply was tops, "To tell the truth, Mo, I hear-tell they have a wonderful golf course and also the ratio of men is 2.12 to 1." (Smart girl!) Other common trademarks — we both are superstitious. Mickey favors a lucky coin piece while I am induced by a ring and bracelet. She hates housework but enjoys cooking, "especially pastries."

She also loves music, preferring the semi-classical and light tunes such as in "South Pacific." News catch her fancy wherever a few spare moments appear.

As for clothes, you guessed it: The sports type, although she enjoys stepping out to formal affairs now and then, dancing "on the slow side."

The golfer's diet is very similar to the tennis player's with steak, fruit and energy foods enjoying top billing. Pastries and ice cream are thrown in for good measure at times but in both sports we have to watch the weight.

Travel has always held a deep fascination for our girl so it's no wonder her ambition is to become a member of the Curtis Cup team, a team representing United States that tours England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Our talk turned to tennis and soon I found that Mo was the one being interviewed instead of vice-versa. This girl is so modest that it was like pulling teeth to try to get her to tell of the many things she's done in the golf world. But finally I managed to squeeze out a few facts.

Mickey's father started her playing at the age of 11 out in La Jolla. Let's see what under the tutelage of well-known pros, Harry Thraenker, an exhibition with the famed Johnny Locke and Lew Worsham at the age of 12 first brought this belle into the public eye and it is a known fact that she completely stole the show from these two artists and all at the age of 12, mind you!

Mickey never takes a "lay-off" period from the game but continues practicing three and four hours a day.

I asked Mickey about her pro plans, if any, and she said she had not even thought of turning pro but will stay in the amateur field for many years. Her advice to juniors: "Just love the game, practice and you'll do all right."

It looks like Mickey has followed her own advice. Well — the interview pulled to a close and as Mickey was about to leave I got a treatise from her. "Say there, how's about a game of miniature golf out of these days, you know, just for fun?" Mickey smiled sweetly and replied, "Gee, Mo, 'til I see you, I'm afraid it would hurt my putting."

All kidding aside, Mick, good luck and keep up the good work. San Diego's proud of you. Sincerely yours, Lil Mo.

HISTORICAL PHOTOS AND ARTICLES FROM THE SAN DIEGO MONTELEONE YEARS. THE UT HISTORIC ARCHIVES AT MESSING NEWSPAPER.COM/UT/SDUT/