The GREATEST TENNIS MATCHES *of* ALL TIME




BY STEVE FLINK

FOREWARD BY CHRIS EVERT

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To my father, Stanley Flink, an invaluable ally, mentor and friend who inspired me to write about tennis for a living.

FOREWORD

When you look back at the big moments in the history of tennis—at least as I see them—time seems to stand still. When you read this book, time will stand still for you. You will return to special moments in the lives of great players, to times and matches that defined these champions. You will have the chance to relive wonderful points, remarkable shot-making and moments that mattered. Some of you will rekindle old memories, while others will learn about great matches you haven't heard of.

In these pages there are a lot of familiar names. Many of them played so long ago, however, that they have become remote figures. In this book, the history-making players will come to life. You will discover not only their styles of play but also gain insight into their personalities and characters. They will no longer be one-dimensional people.

For me, it is a great compliment to be included in this big picture of tennis. Tennis is such a wonderful sport, with so many colorful characters, that to be recognized for some of my matches gives me a nice feeling. My rivalry with Martina Navratilova was very special for both of us and, I hope, for the public. Any of us who have played in some of the best matches of all time have tried to add something to the history of the game and to bring it where it is today—an exciting international sport.

Steve Flink is the right person to take on the task of selecting the best matches of all time. He knows the game of tennis as well as anybody. He is a good journalist, but he also has a tennis player's mind. Steve knew my results and matches better than I did. All through my career in the 1970s and 1980s, it caused much laughter between us when I would be asked a question about my record at a press conference. I would always look over to Steve and he would have the answers. In many cases, I would inaccurately recall an important detail about a match and Steve would have to interrupt me to set the

record straight.

I have always admired Steve's style of writing for its fairness and accuracy. We have seen big matches in our lives the same way. He has never written an article about the U.S. Open, or other major tournaments, that failed to capture the essence of a match. We have always been on the same page about tennis.

His fairness is a real strength in his reporting. It seems to me that many writers do not describe what really happens on the court. Steve characteristically gets deep inside the matches and reports them as well as anyone in the field. I think the readers of the book will agree with me.

Chris Evert
Boca Raton, Florida
February, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Although tennis was invented in 1874 by an Englishman, Major Clopton Wingfield, it was not until the following century that the game proliferated and developed a worldwide following. While tennis had many admirable male and female champions in the formative stages, the first towering figures and fascinating match-ups among top players emerged in the 1920's. That was a particularly dynamic decade for tennis and the sports world at large. Tennis, as a viable spectator sport, made strong advances behind such powerful players as Bill Tilden, Suzanne Lenglen, Helen Wills and the renowned French " Four Musketeers"—Rene Lacoste, Henri Cochet, Jean Borotra and Jacques Brugnon.

At the end of 1999, I felt compelled to write a book called "*The Greatest Tennis Matches of the Twentieth Century*." The first full century of international tennis competition was winding down, so I took on the considerable challenge of selecting the 30 best matches played during that span. Tennis had expanded dramatically from a sport observed almost exclusively by the wealthy, to a much wider and more diversified cast of participants and fans around the world. Major changes in the game had occurred in the latter stages of the twentieth century. "Open Tennis" emerged in 1968 and, for the first time, amateurs and professionals were allowed to compete against each other. Two years later, the tiebreaker was introduced officially at major tournaments, shortening matches and heightening the drama for the spectators.

In that book focusing on the twentieth century, I tried to tell a larger story about the game and its evolution. But now, more than twelve years have passed and the sport has flourished and changed in many ways. When my original book was published, Roger Federer had just finished his first year as a professional player and was far from his zenith. Rafael Nadal was 13 and Novak Djokovic was one year younger. Serena Williams had only just secured her first major

and, at 12, Maria Sharapova was nothing more than a champion in the making. Prodigious competitors like Justine Henin and Andy Roddick had not yet surfaced in the upper levels of the game.

I realized over the last year how many top flight players have recently come to the forefront of tennis and how many compelling matches have been played across the last decade or so. Hence, the time has come for the release of this new book, *The Greatest Tennis Matches of All Time*. I have added six crucial new matches for inclusion in this book, including an epic contested earlier this year at the Australian Open between Djokovic and Nadal. Moreover, I have added a new section in this book called "The Best Strokes of All Time," ranking the top five men and women in a wide range of categories. I have included an all-time top ten list of the best male and female players, a ranking of the 30 top matches and an honorable mention list of matches. I hope all of these sections will add to your enjoyment in reading this book.

The early part of the 21st Century has been exhilarating for passionate observers of the sport. This book brings a new era more sharply into focus and celebrates standouts like Nadal, Federer and Williams, players who have enriched the sport so significantly during the formative stages of a new century.

The contests included in this book stand alone as pieces of a mosaic, but when they are placed in sequence they illustrate how the game has evolved, and signal the champions who have made the most substantial contributions to that process. By visiting, or perhaps for some readers revisiting, these great moments involving legendary players, we gain a better view of how certain matches shaped tennis history and why the personalities at their center left us with such enduring memories.

This journey takes us from Bill Tilden to Novak Djokovic and Suzanne Lenglen to Serena Williams. Looking in some depth at the most celebrated confrontations, we are reminded of the individual men and women who were pitted against each other in a struggle that tested not only their skills, but their stamina—and, at the end of the day, their imaginations.

In the early days of tennis, the field of competition was limited

and the leading players focused their attention on only a few rivals. In fact, defending champions at Wimbledon were given the luxury of an automatic ticket to the final round, which left them waiting for the winner of an "All-Comers" event to find out who they would face in the championship match. That system lasted from 1877 to 1922. Ever since, the title holders have had to endure the arduous progression of six and eventually seven matches to reach their ultimate destination. Over the same span, the array of promising young players clearly multiplied in both the men's and women's tournaments.

Some of the matches I have selected for this book are picked from landmark occasions. Others are less obvious, but nonetheless meaningful to the growth and distinction of tennis competition at the highest level. Most of the matches included are from the major championships—the Grand Slam events. Three are Davis Cup encounters in deference to that incomparable international team competition. A few were lifted from less glamorous settings, because they transcended the occasion and brought luster to a particular era. For example, consider the many years leading up to "Open Tennis" in 1968. From the 1930's until that pivotal year, the pros were relegated to near obscurity in the media. They could not play at Wimbledon or Forest Hills or other major championships. But, with few exceptions, they were playing the best tennis in the world. With that fact in mind, I picked three professional matches—one each from the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's—in an attempt to do justice to tennis luminaries like Vines, Perry, Kramer, Budge, Hoad and Gonzales.

The battles waged by these stalwart competitors had to be represented in this collection; their contribution to tennis history was as substantial as that of Bjorn Borg, Pete Sampras, Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova, Nadal, Federer and other modern figures. In any case, all of the selections in this book are showdowns between distinctive, accomplished players, duels which captured the admiration of the public and flourished in the recollections of those who reported on them.

Let me elaborate briefly on the criteria for the matches I have chosen as the top 30 of all time. There were a number of important considerations. In my mind, most of the meetings had to be finals, because so much was riding on the outcomes. Furthermore, it was

important to do justice to all of the eras of tennis, to the dominant players who have emerged in every decade since the 1920's. Therefore, included in this book are at least two matches from each of those decades. Some readers may question including so many matches from the 1970's right up until this year. Why is the book weighted so heavily on the modern era? The answer is that tennis competition at the highest level has grown profoundly across history, with a cavalcade of players emerging decade after decade to capture the public imagination. Included in this segment of the book are Billie Jean King, Jimmy Connors, Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe, Monica Seles, Steffi Graf, Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, Serena Williams, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Jennifer Capriati and Novak Djokovic. And there are two Martina Navratilova-Chrissie Evert contests—taken from the most memorable and enduring rivalry of all time—included in the book. This is not to suggest that the modern champions have been any more compelling than those who preceded them at the top. Rather, it is my judgment that the public has been treated to more widely anticipated matches from the seventies on than ever before.

Another factor must be mentioned. In my top 30 list, the women and men do not receive equal treatment. There are slightly more men's matches included. Why? It is my view that the women have irrefutably contributed every bit as much to the game's history as the men. Over the years, however, female champions have traditionally lasted longer at the top than their male counterparts and that distinction somewhat narrowed the selection process. I decided that no more than two matches should be chosen for the top 30 section from the career of any one player. I did not want the book to be too heavily slanted toward a particular champion of either gender. Drawing the line at two matches was a sensible solution.

I have been an avid follower of the game since I was 12, when my father took me out to Wimbledon for the first time. Since that memorable introduction in 1965, I have had the good fortune to be present for 44 of the last 47 editions of the world's premier tournament. I have been an observer/reporter at 34 French Opens and I have missed only one United States [Open] Championship since 1965. All in all, I have seen an extraordinary amount of top notch tennis across the years. I

have made my living writing about tennis since 1974.

Nevertheless, many of the greatest matches ever played took place before I was born. As a historian, I was able to draw on a vast library of material on these matches, relying on books and newspaper accounts about these legendary battles. I interviewed many of the players to get their recollections. In the case of modern matches, I looked at tapes of some contests and drew on my own experiences of watching these performances in person.

Tennis equipment has changed radically over the course of time. While the dimensions of the court have remained unaltered since the game's inception—78 feet long and 27 feet wide for singles and nine feet wider for doubles—racket technology has advanced dramatically. With few exceptions, wood rackets were used by all competitors—recreational and tournament class—until the 1960's. At that time, many highly-rated competitors began switching to steel and aluminum rackets which gave them added power, arguably without the loss of control. In the mid to late 1960's, Billie Jean King, Butch Buchholz and Clark Graebner were among the top players who made the move to steel and Pancho Gonzales traded in his old and trusted wood model for aluminum. Jimmy Connors followed on the heels of those players with his Wilson T2000, a trademark for nearly his entire career.

Over time, graphite frames were added to the marketplace. By the early 1980's, wood was nearly extinct in the upper levels of tennis. John McEnroe went to graphite in 1983, as did Chrissie Evert the following year. As for Connors, he stuck with his T2000 long after it was readily available in the marketplace. Once, in the mid-1980's, he made a public plea to fans watching on television during the U.S. Open. He was running out of rackets. Would someone be kind enough to send him any spare T2000's they might have in their homes? A number of fans obliged, enabling Connors to stick with an antiquated frame to which he was wedded from his youth.

Pete Sampras started playing with a graphite racket as a junior and stuck with it to the very end of his career in 2002. Wilson at one time took that racket off the shelves, but decided to re-release it because Sampras and other top players kept it so visible on the public stage. Sampras earned a well-deserved reputation as a complete player who

placed a premium on power—not only on serve, but off the ground. And yet, toward the end of his 15 year career on the ATP World Tour, Sampras sensed he was falling behind the times in technology because so many larger racket frames were being wielded brilliantly by younger competitors. In his final year on the tour, he said, "The racket I am playing with now against these guys with the newer technology makes it very tough for me."

As Sampras moved through his late thirties and on into his forties, he did take advantage of newer rackets as he competed in exhibitions and senior events. But the biggest change in the way the game was played from 2003 and beyond was with the vastly improved synthetic strings. Players began to feel that no matter how hard they swung, they could still keep the ball in the court. Moreover, the implementation of severe topspin became more accessible to all players with the new strings.

Another significant change in the quality of tennis over the decades has been measured by athleticism. Today's breed of player is better conditioned than ever before, faster off the mark, more prepared to play a strenuous point to the hilt for hours at a time. Their level of physicality can often be staggering. They cover the court with astounding alacrity. The baseline rallies in today's game of tennis are much more punishing than ever before. The sport is so physically taxing that it can often seem as if tennis is a contact sport. These players are phenomenal athletes.

And yet, it can still be persuasively argued that if Bill Tilden, Don Budge or Jack Kramer were given modern equipment and today's diets and training techniques, they would have remained at the head of the class. The same can be said for Suzanne Lenglen, Helen Wills and Maureen Connolly.

Remembering the players who stirred our emotions with their talents provides the narrative of this book. To be sure, this is not a definitive scholarly history of the game—an enterprise which has been taken up by a number of distinguished writers over the years. The view here is more narrowly focused in scope, but made ambitious by the very nature of the material. Closely examining epochal matches illustrates changes in style and strategy and invariably finds the real

drama in the clash of personality and character.

All of the matches included here are between two individuals who have pursued the same lofty goals, but have come to the court with different psychological and athletic resources. The essential excitement of tennis has always been one-on-one, mano a mano. They are out there on their own, isolated in a space surrounded by spectators, cameras and capricious weather. The pressure speaks in an inner voice and is fueled by sometimes supportive and occasionally hostile audiences. The best players have been able to summon their finest tennis when it has mattered the most, to perform magnificently in the face of intensely contested exchanges, to rise above and beyond themselves on the big points.

This book is, finally, not merely a compilation of the outstanding matches ever contested. I have set out to make it much more than that by examining not only the matches but the atmospherics, the preparation and the publicity surrounding these events. My purpose has been to provide a reflective picture of how tennis evolved among those inspired players who uniquely gave the game color and suspense. Great tennis requires an almost ineffable excellence on court. It emerges from both the observable and the mysterious. Progression from one tournament to another—along with training and equipment—are visible details, easily chronicled. The mystery is in the mind and heart of a player who determines that he or she will simply not be defeated. Finding the words to reveal some of that chemistry is the aspiration of the pages which follow.

Steve Flink
Katonah, New York
February, 2012

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• CHAPTER ONE •

Suzanne Lenglen *vs.* Helen Wills

CANNES, FRANCE, FINAL, FEBRUARY 16, 1926

A mythic Frenchwoman plays a young American in what was to be their only meeting. It would never be forgotten.

PROLOGUE

No tennis match played between two women across the storied history of the game has been more eagerly anticipated than the extraordinary meeting between Helen Wills of California against the Frenchwoman, Suzanne Lenglen, at Cannes on February 16, 1926. They were the two leading players of their era, and they also would be recognized by the cognoscenti as the best in the first half of the century. When they clashed for the only time in their distinguished careers that morning in Cannes, Lenglen was fast approaching twenty-seven and had suffered only a single defeat in the decade. She was a tightly-strung woman, entirely conscious of her fame and popularity, ruled by her deep emotions, as theatrical and graceful as any tennis player has ever been. As the renowned dress designer and historian Ted Tinling observed, "Suzanne was treated like Cleopatra in those days."

Wills was hardly less celebrated, but decidedly more understated as a personality. She was twenty and still a student at the University of California when she took a semester off to travel to France for appearances in a series of tournaments leading up dramatically to a showdown with Lenglen. Wills had already secured three consecutive U.S. Championships at Forest Hills (1923-25) and had established herself unequivocally as the lone authentic threat to Lenglen's enduring supremacy. While Lenglen was known to display her emotions vividly and unrestrainedly, Wills was stoic and stern, unwilling to reveal much about her feelings. She was classified by sportswriters

as "Little Miss Poker Face."

The two protagonists were brought up on opposite sides of the ocean by parents with contrasting plans and priorities. Lenglen's father Charles was a wealthy pharmacist who drove his daughter forcefully in the direction of technical and tactical excellence. From the outset, he demanded that Suzanne demonstrate unerring accuracy with her ground strokes. She was admonished that hitting any stroke into the net was an unforgivable mistake, an automatic loss of a point, a self-inflicted wound. Charles Lenglen insisted it was much less a risk to hit within inches of the baseline because you might get the benefit of a good call on a shot that was possibly out.

Charles Lenglen was a perfectionist, placing handkerchiefs at specific locations just inside the baseline and sidelines, testing Suzanne's patience and precision, making her strive for difficult targets. She was unmistakably groomed for success, trained to be a champion by a parent who believed unabashedly that she should settle for nothing less than the best. She responded favorably to his large goals and made them her own.

Wills was guided by parents who were pleased by the prospect of her playing tennis, but she developed an interest in the competitive game largely on her own. Her father, Dr. Clarence Wills, practiced medicine in Berkeley, California. The family lived modestly and did not want to stand in the way of her immense talent once she blossomed on the court as a teenager. But they did not anticipate her worldwide fame and prestige in that arena, not by a longshot. Helen Wills recalled in 1986, when she was eighty, that it was a considerable struggle to get her parents' consent to make the journey to France for the Lenglen confrontation sixty years earlier. "My father didn't see much point in it," she reflected. "And my mother did not want me to go. I don't know why they thought it was the end of the world to leave college for a term and go to the south of France. I almost cried I wanted to go so much. I begged and begged until my parents gave in, and looking back all that fuss doesn't make any sense at all."

Those strong sentiments were released six decades after the shining occasion, when perhaps some of the luster had been lost. But when Wills left California in January 1926 on a one week journey

Suzanne Lenglen

by boat to face a formidable world-class adversary for the first time, she knew she was on a mission, and recognized the need to follow her instincts and widen the range of her tennis aspirations. Neither Wills nor Lenglen could possibly predict how long their imminent contest would live in the public imagination, nor could they know that this would be a solitary experience, a one-time battle for supremacy that would not be repeated.

As the reigning queen of international tennis, Lenglen was prepared for her collision with Wills, and determined to stage this crucial event in her own country, on the slow red clay courts that she preferred. It was no accident that Wills was required to confront Lenglen in France rather than in the United States, or in a neutral place. Wills was forced to endure the long week of travel and then gradually adjust to her foreign surroundings while practicing for the Cannes tournament. Lenglen was right where she wanted to be, in her home land, on her favorite slow courts, bolstered by the notion of appearing in front of an audience who would bathe her in the warm fountain of sustained applause.

The dramatic buildup in the several weeks preceding Cannes was palpable. Here was Lenglen, a ferocious yet fragile competitor, a woman with a strong need to control her environment, to set the agenda in every sense. She had appeared only once at the U.S. Championships, coming to Forest Hills in 1921, leaving the courts in tears and turmoil after losing the first set of her match with Molla Mallory, defaulting the match as a severe cold weakened her stamina. Lenglen was so shattered by that experience that she never returned to Forest Hills despite the undeniable significance of that championship.

Wills, meanwhile, had played the vast majority of her tournaments in the United States, competing at Wimbledon only once, in 1924. She had yet to make her mark at that fabled place where Lenglen had succeeded so handsomely over the years. The stylish Frenchwoman moved about the court like a ballerina, and had been victorious on the Wimbledon grass courts during six of the previous seven years.

Both women had performed brilliantly on different continents, but their paths had not yet crossed anywhere in the world. Now, in the winter of 1926, at a time when the game of tennis was clearly on

Helen Wills

the ascendancy, the imperious Lenglen and the quietly imposing Wills had made an appointment to share a court at last. Neither woman would experience anything quite like this confrontation again.

THE MATCH

The stage was set at the Carlton Club tournament on the well-kept red clay courts in Cannes. The players were ready. But, as if by design, raising the level of the drama surrounding the proceedings to nearly impossible heights, nature intervened. After Lenglen and Wills easily recorded semifinal victories to reach the final without the loss of a set, rain fell steadily for two days and postponed the alluring matchup. By then, the battle and its significance had reached almost mythical proportions in the worldwide press, and with the football season finished and baseball not yet underway, America attached immense curiosity and passion to the match. It was a story that virtually wrote itself in the sports sections of newspapers all across the United States.

The small club in Cannes could only accommodate about one-thousand spectators, but others looked down from trees surrounding the facility and still more crowded near the fence behind the court to get at least a partial view of the play. With a scarcity of tickets available for afficionados, an Englishwoman bought up a bundle of them and sold them for as much as $50 apiece—an exorbitant sum in those days.

Ultimately, the weather cleared and the sun was shining as Lenglen and Wills walked on the court at 11 a.m. on a Saturday morning in February of 1926, for their historic showdown. The officials for this important contest were chosen carefully with the full consent of both participants, and the linesmen included Lord Charles Hope and Cyril Tolley, a revered golf champion from Great Britain. Commander George Hillyard—a distinguished veteran who had called many Wimbledon finals—was given the great honor of presiding as umpire. The presence of these Englishmen gave the occasion an air of essential integrity, providing at the very least the appearance of impartiality in the decision making.

Briefly, at the outset, Wills gave Lenglen cause for consternation.

The American broke serve for a 2-1 lead by exploiting her superior strength and power off the ground, but then Lenglen retaliated, displaying better ball control than her adversary. With a concentrated run of superb backcourt craft, Lenglen moved to a 4-2 lead. Wills stood her ground stubbornly and took the seventh game to close the gap. At that critical stage Lenglen asserted herself, conceding only two more points in the next two games to seal the set, 6-3. But playing this remarkable brand of tennis against such an accomplished rival was already taking its toll on Lenglen, who sipped brandy at the changeovers to calm her nerves.

In the second set, the pattern of play shifted in this engrossing spectacle. Wills began to rule the rallies with her potent strokes off both wings, forcing her foe into mistakes and coming up with the winner when she had the opening. The American grew visibly more confident and became much bolder in the process as she built a 3-1 lead, but then temporized and lost her edge. With Wills drifting dangerously into caution, Lenglen reestablished her authority and drew level at 3-3, seemingly within striking distance of victory. But the strain was increasingly evident in her demeanor and she walked to her chair at the side of the court to take sips of brandy after psychologically strenuous points, no longer waiting for the changeovers.

Wills was well aware that she was still very much in the match, and recognized that a third set could prove fatal for her fragile foe. The American moved ahead 4-3, then held her penetrating and skillfully placed serve again to reach 5-4. Lenglen was in an agitated state during this stretch, admonishing a boisterous audience to keep quiet, advertising her instability with her actions. But remarkably Lenglen lifted her game once more to take a 6-5, 40-15, double-match-point lead. Not afraid to lose and still believing she could prevail, the imperturbable Wills walloped a forehand crosscourt for an apparent winner. Both players heard an emphatic cry of "Out!" from the corner of the court. They assumed the ball had gone beyond the line and believed their battle was over.

An exhilarated Lenglen threw a ball in the air in celebration as she came forward to shake Wills's hand, feeling certain she had completed her mission. To her considerable chagrin, she had not. Linesman Hope

came forward, pushing his way through the flocking fans, urgently trying to get the attention of Commander Hillyard. When he finally reached the chair umpire, Hope explained that he had not made that call on the sideline, that in fact it had been an overly excited spectator who had screamed "Out." Hope confirmed that Wills's scorching shot had been just inside the sideline for a winner.

Hillyard clarified the situation for the players and bewildered fans, and after a brief uproar, play resumed with a shaken Lenglen now at 40-30, still at match point. Wills was neither euphoric nor distracted by her second chance to succeed; she simply got on with her task, calm and resolute. She produced a crackling forehand that Lenglen could not return, and moments later was back in business at 6-6.

Lenglen's legion of supporters, and indeed the champion herself, were apprehensive as a revived Wills served. The American sensed the possibility of bringing about a third set. In a long and extraordinarily hard-fought game, Wills had a point for 7-6. She seemed to have gained the upper hand. She believed she was heading toward a sparkling triumph.

But Lenglen was not willing to let go. She fought valiantly to hold Wills back, and broke serve for 7-6. With that burst of effective shotmaking, Lenglen successfully negotiated a second chance to serve for the match. She thoughtfully probed the Wills arsenal, breaking down the American's backhand, arriving at 40-30 and a third match point. Then a first-serve fault. Lenglen paused before hitting her second serve, then tossed. It was a double fault.

Had she squandered too many pivotal chances? Was the game's greatest match player losing her renowned ability to play her best under pressure? She answered those questions without hesitation, moving back to match point for the fourth time, then opening up the court with a deep forehand crosscourt, following with a clean winner into a wide open space.

That last perfect placement gave Lenglen a 6-3, 8-6 triumph—in precisely one hour. This time Lenglen knew her victory was official as she ran up to the net to greet Wills. The Frenchwoman seemed to float on the sounds of an ovation, surrounded by friends

and admirers, clutching flowers like a ballerina. Wills—so gallant and poised in defeat, able to detach herself and witness the wild jubilation around Lenglen with fascination rather than frustration—picked up her belongings a few minutes later and departed, almost unnoticed by the swarming Lenglen fans. Wills understood this was France, where Lenglen was larger than life. The American was not feeling sorry for herself, and she unreluctantly admired the persistence and artistry her opponent had exhibited.

"It had to be the most dramatic match I've ever seen," said Tinling, who was fifteen when he witnessed this clash, and subsequently saw more great matches (before his death in 1990) than any other authority. "There will never be anything quite like it again with the whole tra-la-la of the buildup. Suzanne and Helen was the first big show business match in the history of tennis, a sort of precursor for Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs in 1973. If there was one match I could go back and see again, Lenglen-Wills would be it."

EPILOGUE

The consensus among the experts of the time was that Lenglen and Wills would renew their rivalry frequently, and perhaps rekindle some of the magic evident in their Cannes showdown. But the two superb performers never faced each other again. Wills remained in Europe that winter and spring of 1926, and it seemed inevitable that she would confront Lenglen in the final of the French Championships in June. That would have been another tense encounter on red clay, but this time the stakes would have been even higher with a major championship on the line. As fortune would have it, in the middle of the tournament Wills was stricken with severe stomach pain and sent to the hospital, where she had an emergency appendectomy.

That setback kept Wills out of action for the rest of the major tournaments that season, and removed her from the circuit altogether. Lenglen, meanwhile, went through a crisis of her own. After winning that French Championship easily, with Wills not in her path, she went to Wimbledon in search of a seventh singles title. She was scheduled for an early-round match with Queen Mary in attendance,

but a major misunderstanding occurred and Lenglen did not turn up at the scheduled hour. When she was informed later that afternoon that she had kept the queen waiting, a disconsolate Lenglen could not bear the pain of her mistake, and fainted. She pulled out of the tournament, humiliated by what had happened, unable to get over the embarrassment. That summer, Lenglen signed a contract to play on the first professional tennis tour in the United States, winning all thirty-eight of her head-to-head contests with Mary K. Browne of the United States. But with Wills remaining an amateur and still competing for the great traditional prizes, it was no longer possible for the two superstars to meet each other in official competition.

Wills arrived at the peak of her powers in the years ahead. Between 1927 and 1938, she won eight Wimbledon singles titles—a record until Martina Navratilova broke it in 1990—and collected fifty match victories in a row. That mark has never been equaled in men's or women's play on the fabled lawns of the All England Club.

Returning to Paris with high aspirations, Wills took the French Championships four times from 1928 to 1932 and secured four more of her U.S. Championships at Forest Hills to lift her total to seven. She triumphed in that tournament in 1927, 1928, 1929, and 1931. Wills concluded her career with nineteen Grand Slam singles titles, a record surpassed only by Margaret Court and Steffi Graf. Wills was beaten a mere three times across the years in twenty-two major events, a standard of excellence no other player has ever achieved.

As Wills's tennis career ended in the late-1930s, an ailing Lenglen passed away. Having struggled with her health for much of the decade, the charismatic woman from France died on July 4, 1938, of pernicious anemia. She was thirty-nine. The tragic departure of Lenglen occurred within days of Wills's final championship run at Wimbledon. But while Wills had thrived on the court into her early thirties, she was sorting through some problems in her personal life.

On her trip to the French Riviera to confront Lenglen, she had met an American stock broker named Freddie Moody and they soon became inseparable. They were married in 1929, but the union ended in divorce eight years later. In 1939, two years after her breakup with Moody, Helen was married for the second time, to film writer Aidan

Roark. They were divorced in the early 1970s.

For twenty-five years thereafter, Helen Wills Moody Roark led a reclusive life in California, although her interest in tennis never waned. She was unfailingly gracious in her remarks about champions like Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova. In January 1998, at the age of ninety-two, she passed away.

The death of Wills seemed to stir the embers of debate, among those experts who had observed her career, as to where she stood when measured against Lenglen on the historical tennis ladder. Many have speculated on what might have transpired had they been able to play more matches against each other. The experts have concluded that Wills would surely have surpassed Lenglen within a year of their Cannes encounter, and would have controlled their rivalry in the late 1920s and beyond. Wills was then beginning to reach her absolute prime, while Lenglen was arguably declining.

And yet, many knowledgeable tennis reporters take the firm position that Lenglen at her peak, in the early to mid-1920s, would have been too cunning and capable even for Wills, and would have dominated during that stretch.

Lenglen's record on paper is far less impressive than that of Wills. She had to settle for eight official major championships, eleven fewer than Wills. But that is a somewhat misleading fact because Lenglen in her time of true triumph was every bit as invincible as Wills became, perhaps even more so.

For tennis historians, the Cannes duel achieved an incandescence beyond any other women's match of that time. Both ladies came away from that contest having gained respect for each other, and having learned something substantial about themselves. Even after the decades passed and a cavalcade of champions succeeded them, Wills remembered her meeting with Lenglen in very lucid terms, and had no regrets that they did not test each other again.

As Wills recalled in 1986, "Suzanne was a great player and had more generalship on the court than I did. She had the game down to a pattern in her mind which was the best according to her ability. I had more power and endurance. But I was not disappointed not to play her again. I remember we all went out to dinner that night after

the tennis match, everybody all dressed up in dinner clothes, and I didn't feel sad. I was very young for my age then and I just thought I would win the next time I played Lenglen."

• CHAPTER TWO •

Bill Tilden *vs.* Henri Cochet

WIMBLEDON, SEMIFINAL, JUNE 30, 1927

No player had more theatrical flair and tactical acuity than Tilden. Cochet was a gifted shotmaker and a tireless competitor. The two champions staged a classic confrontation.

PROLOGUE

Only one year after the much heralded clash between Helen Wills and Suzanne Lenglen at Cannes—a battle between a legendary Frenchwoman and a young American of immense promise—Henri Cochet of France and "Big Bill" Tilden of the United States collided in the semifinals at Wimbledon in 1927. As one of the famed "Four Musketeers" from the celebrated Davis Cup team (Rene Lacoste, Jean Borotra, and Jacques Brugnon were the others) Cochet was a player of remarkable originality and imagination, a competitor of rising fortunes. But in Tilden he was confronting the master of his craft, and the man who had sweepingly dominated tennis all through that decade. Cochet came from a very modest background, but because his father was the secretary of a tennis club in Lyon, young Henri had the opportunity to learn tennis. He had natural gifts, practiced little, and was largely self-taught.

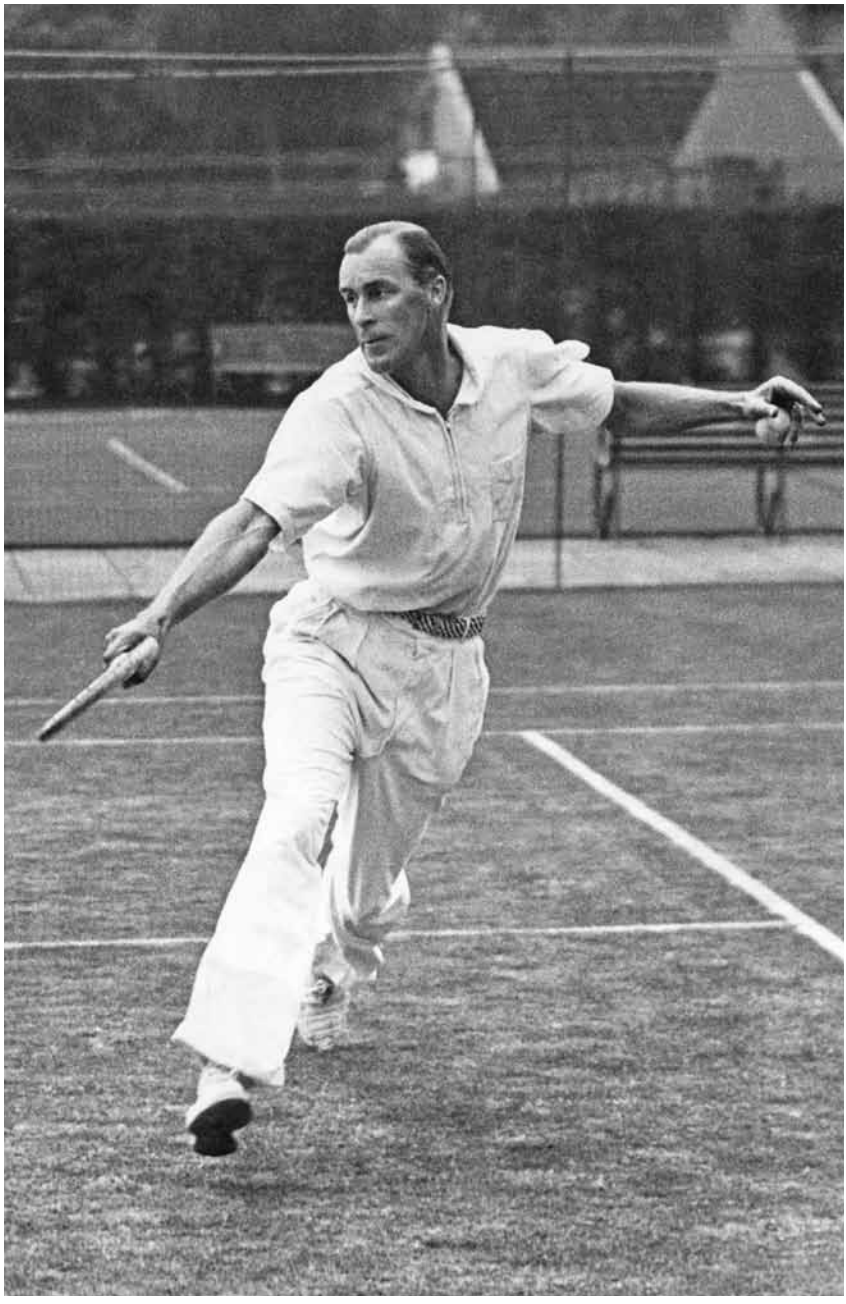
Tilden, on the other hand, enjoyed his childhood in a very comfortable family. He lived a short walk away from the Germantown Cricket Club in Philadelphia, and was considered to be a "mother's boy." His mother kept him out of school until he was fifteen, insisting that he be tutored at home, where he also spent hours listening to his mother play the piano. Tilden once said if he was asked to give up tennis or music, it would be tennis. Nonetheless, he began playing tennis at the age of five. In 1915, during his last year at the University of Pennsylvania, both his father and brother died. Tilden had not been

good enough to make the varsity tennis team at Penn. But he would coach the team at the Germantown Academy. Almost inevitably, this led him into competitive tennis at a much higher level.

So towering a figure in his field was Tilden that he became the champion of his country no fewer than six consecutive times between 1920 and 1925. At age twenty-six, he had been beaten by his countryman, "Little Bill" Johnston, in the 1919 Forest Hills final. Having suffered that setback, he realized that it was a single stroke in his repertoire that was holding him back. It was time to strengthen his backhand, rather than continue muddling through with his barely adequate defensively designed shot off that side. So he spent the winter of 1920 attending to that task, remodeling his stroke, learning to drive through the ball aggressively. Tilden turned his backhand into a versatile and effective weapon more closely aligned with his classic forehand. His glaring weakness was gone, and his game was decidedly enhanced by the new component, lifting him to another level.

Tilden established himself not only as a supreme ground stroker with nearly impeccable mechanics, but a superb server who could deliver the "cannonball" with regular success, and volley with conviction when he made his infrequent visits to the net. And yet, beyond the wide range of his technical capabilities, Tilden was the first great tactician the game had known. He had an astonishing and intuitive sense of how to play points, what would bother his opponents most, and when he would need to alter his patterns and shift his strategic focus. He relished opportunities to exploit the vulnerabilities of his rivals, picking them apart with sharp and purposeful execution. He was a maestro on the tennis court, a showman, but above all a keen student of the game. As he wrote perceptively in *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball*, "I may sound unsporting when I say that the primary object of tennis is to break up your opponent's game, but it is my honest belief that no man is defeated until his game is crushed, or at least weakened. Nothing so upsets mental and physical poise as to be continually led into error."

Cochet was just coming into his own as he approached this meeting with the world champion. The previous year at Forest Hills, he had ended Tilden's bid for a seventh straight championship with an



Bill Tilden

Henri Cochet

impressive victory in the quarterfinals. Earlier in 1926, he had won his own French Championships for the first time on the red clay courts at Roland Garros in Paris. With his fellow "Four Musketeers," he would play a pivotal role in leading France to victory in the Davis Cup for six consecutive years—1927 to 1932. In many ways, he was the ideal opponent for Tilden. He mixed his ground strokes adroitly by varying not only the pace but the length of his shots. His serve lacked Tilden's power and punch but he could place it precisely, and he was deceptive. He could conclude points with uncommon skill on the volley, and no one before his arrival had exhibited such consistent control and effectiveness on the half volley. His flair and flexibility on that shot were striking, and his handling of low balls by making quick, aggressive pickups was something that separated him from the rest of the opposition in that era. He was the best half-volleyer of his time.

Both competitors knew this would be a match of lasting consequences, but neither could have been prepared for the full extent of the drama they would produce in this duel.

THE MATCH

Despite being the dominant player of the decade, Tilden was placed at No. 2 behind Lacoste in this groundbreaking year of seeded players on the grass courts at Wimbledon. The primary reason he was not given the top spot was that he had not been back to the All England Club since winning in 1920 and 1921. In any case, Cochet was seeded fourth. Tilden had moved into the penultimate round with few obstacles and the loss of only one set—to Brugnon in the quarterfinals. In that same round, Cochet had conceded the first two sets to Tilden's capable doubles partner Frank Hunter, but the Frenchman struck back boldly to win in five sets.

With Tilden playing the more confident brand of tennis, the American was the firm favorite to win as they faced each other on a cloudy afternoon. At the outset, Tilden performed with both power and panache. He served thunderbolts that even the quick-handed Cochet could not return. He found the corners with his heavy ground strokes,

and dictated the pace for nearly three sets. Tilden took a commanding 6-2, 6-4, 5-1 lead and was on the verge of an unmistakable rout.

As Englishman Stanley Doust wrote in the *Daily Mirror*, "How could anyone have lived against such wonderful lawn tennis as Tilden played? Was there anyone who could beat him?" Cochet had the answers to those questions. From 1-5, 15-15 in the third set, seemingly caught in a hopeless corner, Cochet proceeded to collect seventeen points in a row on his way to a six-game sweep for the set. It was a combination of Cochet's courage and determination and an uncharacteristic lapse from Tilden that altered the complexion of the match, but the American's mastery was over. Despite some resistance from Tilden, Cochet closed out the set. He was maneuvering Tilden in a manner few had thought possible. Cochet took the fourth set after Tilden recovered from 4-2 down to reach 4-4. Then a resurgent Tilden rediscovered his early match form to break for a 3-2, fifth-set lead.

It seemed that Tilden would regain the initiative and run out the match, but that was not the case. Cochet channeled his energy and emotions into one last four-game burst, and Tilden collapsed down the stretch. At 3-2, he served a pair of double faults and at 3-4 he served two more. An electrifying reversal of fortunes was over, much to the dismay of the proud American who bowed 2-6, 4-6, 7-5, 6-4, 6-3. "Seldom has there been such enthusiasm at a lawn tennis victory," wrote Doust. "Enthusiasm not because Tilden was beaten but because of Cochet's marvelous recovery from what looked like certain defeat to a glorious victory."

Revered American journalist Al Laney of the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote revealingly about it in his book *Covering the Court*. He conceded, "I could not explain what happened to Tilden then, and I can not now. I think now the explanation might be found in a remark Tilden addressed to me immediately after the match, or as quickly as I could reach the dressing room. 'Maybe you were right' he said, and he said it with what I thought was scorn, but in a voice that carried a certain hatred, too. He was referring to the statement that he had now passed his best years and could no longer call on his matchless stamina."

EPILOGUE

Not content with one of the most riveting comebacks in the history of big-time tennis, Cochet managed in the final to produce another masterpiece of turnaround. Once again, he trailed two sets to love, this time against the stubborn Borotra. Borotra had won Wimbledon twice—including the year before—and could not have come closer to retaining his title against a coolly defiant Cochet. In this pendulum-swinging battle of the Frenchmen, Borotra—less talented but every bit as resilient a competitor—sealed the first two sets with relative ease, but then lost the next two as Cochet sank his teeth more deeply into the contest.

The fifth set, however, became a forum for Borotra to return almost effortlessly to the top of his game. He moved swiftly to a 5-2 lead and had a match point on Cochet's serve in the eighth game. When Cochet gamely saved himself and held serve, the odds still seemed heavily stacked against him with Borotra serving for the championship at 5-3. Here Borotra had five more match points, but his tenacious adversary was not about to surrender. Taking full advantage of an errant volley from Borotra on the last of the match points, Cochet proceeded to finish off this clash with elan, winning 4-6, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, 7-5. By virtue of this stunning feat, Cochet achieved a unique record among Wimbledon champions by completing his mission with three straight victories from two-sets-to-love down.

In the ensuing years, Cochet distinguished himself with steady conviction. He won three more French Championships (1928, 1930 and 1932) to lift his total to four. He won Wimbledon again for the second time in 1929, and was the winner of the United States Championships at Forest Hills in 1928, garnering that championship with another hard-fought, five-set triumph in the final over Frank Hunter. To be sure, his extraordinary exploits at Wimbledon in 1927 set the stage for a very productive period in the years ahead. Overcoming Tilden despite the darkest of circumstances, and then toppling Borotra with similar grit, had propelled Cochet to a stature he had never found before. Meanwhile, he contributed mightily to the enduring success of the "Four Musketeers."

Altogether, Cochet, Lacoste, Borotra, and Brugnon amassed fifty-

three major titles in singles and doubles. It was irrefutably the golden age of French men's tennis and there would be nothing quite like it again through the rest of the twentieth century.

And what of Tilden? In many ways, he never fully recovered from the bewildering defeat suffered against Cochet. He was clearly not finished as a major force, ruling at Wimbledon for the third and last time in 1930, after a seventh and last U.S. Championships title at Forest Hills the previous season. But the towering man from Philadelphia—at 6'2" he was unusually tall for his time—was never quite the same player after the devastating failure to vanquish Cochet. Tilden won ten major championships—seven U.S. and three Wimbledon titles—but took only two of those crowns after his 1927 surrender.

In retrospect, there was a certain logic to his diminished fortunes. He was thirty-four when he fell to Cochet. He had lost his capacity for playing the big points with automatic precision. He no longer controlled the agenda of critical matches with the force of his will and the skill of his shot selection. Tilden had moved irrevocably past his prime, and yet he remained a top-notch competitor for many years to come.

He turned professional in 1931 at thirty-eight, and played until he was nearly fifty. But while his court sense remained unimpeachable, his footspeed was dwindling, and his serve was a much lesser weapon. In his pro tour match series with a first-rate Ellsworth Vines, Tilden came out on the wrong end of a 47-26 record. Seven years later, in 1941, he was obliterated 51-7 in his meetings with another prodigious countryman, Don Budge. By then, he was forty-eight and fading steadily, but he was still a magnificent player.

Sadly, his personal life was shaded by his stepping beyond the boundaries of the law. Forced to conceal his homosexuality—a sports celebrity's reputation could be ruined by such a revelation in his day—Tilden was sent to prison in 1947 and again in 1949 on morals charges. His arrests were kept relatively quiet by the newspapers, but he had to live with the consequences of his actions.

Meanwhile, Tilden had lost most of his money on ill-advised theater ventures. A man who cherished drama on the tennis court—he was fond of digging deficits for himself in matches so that he could

climb out of those predicaments and win in heroic fashion—Tilden invested in plays unwisely, and performed on stage in roles he could not master. None of these ventures worked, but Tilden remained convinced he could be an accomplished actor nevertheless.

His genuine love of tennis was evident until the end of his life. He would show up to play casual doubles matches on friends' private courts in California, dressed in ragged clothing, speaking in his familiar high-pitched voice, instructing his admiring partners what to do. He remained largely a reclusive figure, poignantly trying to recover his high standards. And then on June 5, 1953, at sixty, he died of a heart attack in Los Angeles. He had packed his suitcase and was planning to compete in the U.S. Pro Championships at Cleveland.

He left behind an enviable record. As of 2011, only five men had secured more Grand Slam singles championships. They are: Roger Federer with sixteen, Pete Sampras with fourteen, Roy Emerson with twelve, followed by Rod Laver and Bjorn Borg with eleven each. In 2011, Rafael Nadal recorded his tenth major singles tournament triumph at Roland Garros. But it must be recorded that Tilden's rate of success was equally impressive. He never played the Australian Championships, and failed to win the French Championships in three attempts, but triumphed regularly at Wimbledon and Forest Hills, where he was beaten only ten times in twenty combined appearances. From 1920 through 1926, he led the Americans to victory in the Davis Cup. And he celebrated six consecutive years as the top-ranked player in tennis, a feat not replicated until Sampras did it in 1998.

Tilden was a central figure in the evolution of his sport, and until he lost to Cochet there was no better big-match player. Many writers, players, and historians placed Tilden at the top of the list of players who appeared in the first half of the twentieth century. For seven years—from 1920-26—he was virtually unstoppable. He understood the game on a sophisticated level, breaking it down systematically in his orderly mind, calculating the right strategic approach to take away his opponents' strengths and exploit his own.

It must be said that Tilden did not attack as persistently as future champions automatically would. A strong case can be made that it was not necessary in his day to conclude many points with decisive

volleys or unanswerable smashes. The design of his court craft was a product of his era, of how the game was played at that time, and of his personal preference for plotting longer points which did much more to reveal his virtuosity and supreme talent for playing chess on the tennis court.

This much is certain: Tilden in the 1920's was as masterful a player as the men's game had yet witnessed.

• CHAPTER THREE •

Helen Wills Moody *vs.* Helen Jacobs

WIMBLEDON, FINAL, JULY 6, 1935

These two very talented backcourt players met many times, but this clash was their epiphany.

PROLOGUE

Nearly thirty years old, Helen Wills Moody was slightly past her prime as she pursued a seventh Wimbledon championship in 1935. Her best seasons followed her once-in-a-lifetime battle with Suzanne Lenglen in 1926. After her loss to Lenglen, she was not beaten again until 1933. In that span, Mrs. Moody had taken four French Championships, four United States Championships, and six Wimbledon singles titles. She was as dominant during that stretch as Lenglen had been in the first half of the twenties.

The unbeaten streak achieved by Wills Moody was broken by the perseverance of her countrywoman Helen Hull Jacobs, who was born in Globe, Arizona, in 1908. The family moved to San Francisco just before World War I, and later occupied a home in Berkeley, California, where Helen Wills had lived. Like Wills, Jacobs learned to play at the Berkeley Tennis Club. She attended the University of California. In 1933, she became the first woman to wear shorts at Wimbledon. She was always a favorite of tennis fans because of her friendly, cheerful manner.

Jacobs, three years younger than her rival, was defending her title at Forest Hills in 1933. She took on her old nemesis in the final. They waged a tough battle in the opening set before Jacobs prevailed, 8-6. Moody answered by taking the second set, 6-3. Jacobs established a 3-0 lead in the third and final set. She seemed likely to move from there to the title, exploiting her comfortable lead.

At that point, Mrs. Moody walked up to the net and conceded defeat. She claimed her back was causing her too much pain to continue. She withdrew to the locker room in her customary long coat, and chose to remain silent on the subject of her default. Four years later, in her autobiography titled, *Fifteen Thirty*, Helen Wills Moody explained why she had left the scene and denied Jacobs a legitimate, full-scale triumph.

Her back had been bothering her for weeks, long before Forest Hills had begun. Her husband, Freddie Moody, advised her not to participate in the National Championships. She believed she might never have the chance to play at Forest Hills again. A few weeks before the tournament, the pain was excruciating, running down her back, into her leg, and even into the toes of her right foot. At times, her right leg felt numb.

Two weeks prior to the Nationals, Mrs. Moody was forced to withdraw from the Wightman Cup (U.S. vs. Great Britain) team competition after being examined by doctors who cited symptoms of instability in her vertebra. She took it easy for a few days, then resumed light practice. In her mind, she had to ignore the injury, or else she would be revealing weakness and apprehension.

Wills Moody reached the final of Forest Hills more on reputation than execution. After her semifinal victory, it rained heavily for an entire week, delaying the final. In that time off, she isolated herself in her room near the courts, but did not do anything physically strenuous. Her body stiffened. When the rain finally ceased, she faced Jacobs, who had consulted with Suzanne Lenglen earlier in the year about how to play Wills Moody. Lenglen urged Jacobs to hit short crosscourt shots to draw her opponent forward.

Wills Moody described that 1933 final with Jacobs in her book. She wrote, "I was trying to meet the competition of the match and at the same time was carrying on another fight within myself—one that was between my brain, which was commanding, and my muscles, which were bound in an iron-clad spasm trying to protect the injured nerves of my back. When I could not break through their grip, I was unable to bend or run, and when I could the pain was blinding.... I knew it was the end when the stadium began to swirl in the air, and I saw

Helen Wills Moody and Helen Jacobs

Miss Jacobs and the court on a slant. If I had fainted on the court, it would have been thought a more conclusive finish to the match in the eyes of many of the onlookers, for then they would have been convinced that I could not continue. However, my choice was instinctive rather than premeditated. Had I been able to think clearly I might have chosen to remain. It was unfortunate that Miss Jacobs could not have had a complete victory, as it would have been had I been able to remain a little longer on the court. But being naturally selfish, I thought only of myself. I could understand her feeling of disappointment, but the match would have ended this way no matter against whom I had been playing."

Mrs. Moody went into the hospital and stayed there for a month. She had a weight placed on her leg, pulling on it to build strength. She feared she would not play the game of tennis again. The following January, she took osteopathic treatments, and that made a substantial difference. She was clearly on the mend, but playing Wimbledon in 1934 was out of the question. She was asked to write about the event by London's *Daily Mail*, and enjoyed the detached experience.

By the spring of 1935, Wills Moody was ready to make another run at Wimbledon, prepared to pursue a seventh title on the grass courts at the All England Club. During her absence, Jacobs had flourished. At Forest Hills in 1934, she took the championship for the third consecutive year, defeating the rising Sarah Palfrey Fabyan in the final.

Jacobs, however, had never won Wimbledon. To round out her record and place herself irrevocably among the great players of her era, she needed that title. The two Helens had a great deal in common. Both had trained in their formative years at the Berkeley Tennis Club in California, and they shared the experience of attending the University of California.

Despite the common threads that ran through their lives; there were fundamental differences. Jacobs's game contrasted sharply with that of Wills Moody. Jacobs was comfortable anywhere on the court, volleying with confidence and aggression, smashing capably. She had a prodigious doubles record, where she put her attacking skills to good use.

Her singles game did have some holes in it. She had to find ways

to disrupt Wills Moody, who was more powerful and precise off the ground. Wills Moody hit through the ball unfailingly and found the corners with regularity, forcing her opponents into defensive positions all the while. Jacobs relied heavily on underspin off both sides, and did not break her adversaries down as easily from the backcourt as Wills Moody could. And yet, Mrs. Moody was often heavy footed and vulnerable against short angles and drop shots. Jacobs was a better athlete, quicker at covering the whole court.

THE MATCH

Jacobs had a distinct advantage over Wills Moody as they advanced through the women's draw at Wimbledon in 1935. She had been competing steadily and knew essentially what to expect from herself. Wills Moody had been out of action since her abrupt departure against Jacobs two years earlier at Forest Hills. In that time, Wills Moody had slowly re-acclimated to the rigors of playing competitive tennis, pursuing points which had once been automatic but no longer were. Mrs. Moody played a couple of minor tournaments in preparation for Wimbledon, but even that plan had its pitfalls as the constant rain in England cut deeply into her schedule and left her considerably short of where she wanted to be in her tuneup.

Having been away from the game for so long, Wills Moody was seeded fourth at Wimbledon, one place behind Jacobs. The Englishwoman Dorothy Round was seeded first and Germany's Hilde Sperling—who had won her first of three straight French Championships that year—was the No. 2 seed.

Round bowed in the quarterfinals and Sperling was routed by Jacobs 6-3, 6-0 in the semifinals. Wills Moody had a frightening round of sixteen meeting with Slecna Cepkova. The Czechoslovakian had Mrs. Moody in disarray for a set-and-a-half. The American trailed by a set and was 4-1 down in the second. She recovered her poise and her will just in time to salvage a three-set victory. That was the only set she conceded on her way to the final. Miss Jacobs did not lose any sets in her half of the draw. The two Americans had set up a widely anticipated final, their first since 1933 at Forest Hills.

As Al Laney wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune*, "Receiving the first service, Miss Jacobs brought into play the chop stroke she has made her own and Mrs. Moody swung into the ball and hit for the corner. There was the story of the match given in its very first exchange. For thirty games to follow Mrs. Moody attacked and Miss Jacobs defended and each player did her part superlatively well."

Mrs. Moody's hard hitting boosted her to an early lead against an opponent who had been beaten in all three of her previous appearances in the Wimbledon final. Moody took a 3-0 lead in the first set before Jacobs found her range. Jacobs struggled back to 3-3 and had Moody at 0-40 in the crucial seventh game.

Mrs. Moody had drifted into a difficult patch at that stage, losing eleven points in a row. Had she lost her serve again to trail 3-4, she conceivably would have surrendered the set. Instead, with her confidence restored, Moody held on for 4-3, broke in the following game, and served out the set, 6-3.

Jacobs was well aware that Moody was not in top tournament shape. She began directing her ground strokes closer to the sidelines, making her opponent move as much as possible, trying to tire her rival in the process. By the middle of the second set, that pattern was succeeding. From 3-3 in the second set, Jacobs collected three games in a row to draw level at one set all.

With the capacity Centre Court crowd murmuring, Moody held up her hand and asked for quiet as she started serving the opening game of the third set. It was apparent then that she was weary. After a pair of hard fought games, Jacobs broke for 2-1 as Moody's serve seemed devoid of all pace. Although Mrs. Moody managed to break back for 2-2, she lost her serve again in the following game. At 3-2, Jacobs slipped to 15-40, saved the first break point, and then reached deuce with a solid smash. After a series of deuces, Jacobs held on for 4-2.

Serving in the seventh game, Moody rebounded from 15-40 to deuce, only to miss an easy overhead from short range, well wide of the sideline. Jacobs got the insurance break for 5-2, and served for the match in the eighth game. She reached 30-30, two points from the triumph, but Moody was not obliging. She broke for 3-5. In the ninth game, Mrs. Moody served to save the match. Both players were bear-

ing down frantically. One long point after another was played. Neither woman wanted to take any unnecessary chances with so much riding on the outcome of this game. A resolute Jacobs arrived at match point. She had the gumption to go into the net. Moody lifted a lob into the air. Jacobs was poised to smash it out of the reach of her adversary. If she could connect solidly, the match would belong to her.

An instant before contact, a burst of wind blew the ball slightly away from a baffled Jacobs. She sent her overhead tentatively into the net. Mrs. Moody had saved a match point, and she held her serve for 4-5. Jacobs still had another chance to close out the account, another opportunity to win it on her serve. At 5-4, she served for the match a second time.

Once more, Jacobs progressed to 30-30, two points from the triumph. Moody added velocity to her shots and played them into safe spaces, several feet from the sidelines. She broke back gamely for 5-5, then held for 6-5. With Jacobs serving to save the match in the twelfth game, the two competitors endured a three-deuce game. Moody reached match point. They had one of their longest rallies of the day. Jacobs got the short ball she wanted, approached the net, then had a volley well within her range with the court open ahead of her. She overplayed it. The shot landed long. Mrs. Moody was the victor, 6-3, 3-6, 7-5, coming through for the seventh time at Wimbledon, denying Jacobs the chance to secure a first crown.

Mrs. Moody offered an intriguing analysis of her turnaround in *Fifteen Thirty*. She wrote of her recovery from match point down, "I knew naturally that the set point had been saved, but there was no way to tell that the match had been rescued. During the last couple of games, my 'wind' had returned—why, I don't know. It may have been 'second wind' or it may have been a quieting down of the breathing process induced because of the demands of what seemed to me to be an emergency."

Both Wallis Myers and Al Laney had their notions of why Helen Wills Moody had persevered. Myers wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, "Courage, as Stevenson has said, respects courage, and both these girls, inspired by the intensity of the other's, revealed more of it on Saturday than I have ever seen on a lawn tennis court. Yet valor, like the

other virtues, has its limitations; it was the technique of Mrs. Moody which finally triumphed. In fluent footwork, Miss Jacobs was the superior; without this supreme asset she never could have made those wonderful redemptions in the corner that startled both the crowd and her opponent. But Miss Jacobs, with all her great agility and her unbreakable heart, had not the 'happiness of style' that belonged to her adversary."

Laney wrote in the *Herald Tribune*, "No women's match in the longest memory at Wimbledon ever has been fought with such grimness or presented so many tense situations. It is not likely that Miss Jacobs ever played so well before or that she will ever come so close again and fail. She staked all of her unyielding defense against Mrs. Moody's unremitting attack and, although she defended wonderfully well for an hour and a half—so well, in fact, that she saw her greatest ambition about to be realized—her defenses finally crumbled under pressure of an attack that never let up from the first point to the last."

EPILOGUE

When Moody did not return to Wimbledon in 1936, the gallant Jacobs took her chance at last to win the world's most prestigious tennis tournament. Late in 1935, Jacobs was offered $50,000 by a promoter to play a professional tour series against Moody. Determined to make her breakthrough at Wimbledon, she turned the lucrative offer down. She was well rewarded for her decision.

In the 1936 Centre Court final, Jacobs had her fifth opportunity to win a Wimbledon championship match. She met Hilde Sperling and led by a set and 3-1. Sperling bounced back, took the second set, and fought hard all through the third, but Jacobs triumphed, 6-2, 4-6, 7-5.

Jacobs made it to the final of the U.S. Championships in 1936 for the fifth year in a row, took the first set from the gifted Alice Marble, but bowed in three sets. Top seeded in defense of her Wimbledon title in 1937, Jacobs was beaten in the quarterfinals by Dorothy Round. Mrs. Moody had secluded herself again in her married life in California. When she wrote her autobiography in 1937, she seemed to have put her tennis career behind her, looking forward to other endeavors away

from the arena.

But in 1938, she could not resist one more journey back to Wimbledon. She had not lost a match there since 1924, had amassed seven singles titles since, and seemed incapable of playing anything but her best tennis in that preeminent setting. Mrs. Moody and Jacobs met each other in the final for the fourth time. They were engaged in a typically spirited showdown when Jacobs aggravated an ankle she had injured in her quarterfinal. Jacobs was serving at 4-4, 40-30 when she landed painfully on the sore ankle. Thereafter, she could put up only token resistance as Moody glided to a 6-4, 6-0 victory for a record-breaking eighth singles title.

Mrs. Moody was approaching thirty-three. She realized her resources were dwindling, and quit competitive tennis. Jacobs remained a formidable force for a few more years, reaching two more Forest Hills finals, losing both to the blossoming Alice Marble in 1939 and 1940. She left the game with five major singles championships in her possession, fourteen fewer than the major trophies won by Moody. Jacobs, who passed away in 1997 at 88, was overshadowed by Moody on one side of her career and Marble on the other. But there was no doubt about her standing as one of the finest players of her era.

• CHAPTER FOUR •

Fred Perry *vs.* Ellsworth Vines

PRO TOUR SERIES OPENING, NEW YORK, JANUARY 7, 1937

A dashing Englishman and his explosive American rival played a magnificent pro tour against each other. This was the first battle of a scintillating series.

PROLOGUE

The 1920s was a crucial decade in the evolution of tennis as a sport worthy of widespread international attention. The impact of Bill Tilden, the "Four Musketeers," Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills gave tennis an immeasurable boost. It was a time of unparalleled glamour and growth for tennis, a period of passionate interest among fans everywhere in the world.

The decade that followed was almost as remarkable in its cavalcade of champions. Late in the 1930s, the Americans, Don Budge and Alice Marble, achieved eminent successes. Their personalities and performances were alluring to all close followers of the game. Two other men made their mark during that period and established themselves as great stars of their era: The versatile Californian, Ellsworth Vines, and the dashing Englishman, Fred Perry. Vines played semi-professional baseball when he was fifteen and center for the USC varsity basketball team in his sophomore year. But it was tennis that engaged his deepest commitment.

Perry was born in Stockport, England, a textile town not far from Liverpool. His father Sam worked as a spinner in the mills but became a union president at twenty-one and a Justice of the Peace before he was thirty. The Perry family moved to London after World War I, where Fred attended the County School, winning honors in cricket and soccer. He also became a champion ping-pong player, winning the world championship at Budapest—the first non-Hungarian to do

so. He started to play tournament tennis at the age of fifteen and at twenty he qualified for the 1929 Wimbledon.

The American and the Englishman showcased their talents appealingly. Vines came to the forefront first. He provided a bright series of matches in 1931 and 1932. In the former season, still a few weeks shy of his twentieth birthday, Vines and Perry clashed for the first time in a match of meaning. Vines—the No. 1 seed among U.S. players— took on Perry, the top-seeded foreign participant, in the semifinals of the U.S. Nationals at Forest Hills. Perry led two sets to love before Vines brushed him aside in five sets. Vines then won the tournament—his first major—over fellow American George Lott (who became one of the all-time great doubles players) in four sets. In 1932, Vines captured both Wimbledon and Forest Hills.

A very slender 6'2," he weighed about 140 pounds. Vines, nevertheless, was a power player of remarkable strength. His big first serve was a "cannonball" opponents did not relish trying to return. He could crack the forehand with demonic speed and depth. He set the pace in most of his matches with the sheer velocity of his strokes. As the esteemed critic Lance Tingay of the *Daily Telegraph* wrote in *200 Years at Wimbledon*, "It is to be doubted if ever a player hit the ball harder than did Vines in his last three rounds at Wimbledon in 1932." At that 1932 Wimbledon, he defeated the gifted Australian Jack Crawford in the semifinals after Crawford had accounted for Perry in the previous round. Vines then handled Englishman Bunny Austin with ease in a straight-set final. He staked his claim as the best amateur player in the world when he safely defended his turf at Forest Hills. Seeded first again among Americans, he made a gallant recovery from two-sets-to-love down in the semifinals and ousted countryman Cliff Sutter. In the final, he beat top foreign seed Henri Cochet 6-4, 6-4, 6-4.

After taking those three major tournaments in 1931-32, Vines was in a position to turn professional. He elected to remain in the amateur game for 1933, but was not up to the same standards. At Wimbledon, he did manage to play inspired tennis for the fortnight. He confronted Crawford in the final. The Australian reversed the result of their 1932 semifinal meeting, prevailing 4-6, 11-9, 6-2, 2-6, 6-4. Perhaps somewhat shaken by that loss in one of the most heralded Wimbledon finals,