Helen Wills: Queen of Berkeley Tennis



Tennis star Helen Wills won the Olympic golds medal in singles and doubles at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. Getty Image

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Cal Alumna Won 31 Grand Slam Titles And 2 Olympic Gold Medals
Long before California women's tennis earned its first No. 1 ranking and long before the likes of *Amanda Augustus*, Raquel (Kops-Jones) Atawo, Jana Juricova and *Maegan Manasse* roamed the Hellman Tennis Complex, Helen Wills was the queen of the courts in Berkeley.

One of a handful of women's tennis players who are in the conversation as the greatest of all time, Wills captured 31 Grand Slam titles during an illustrious career that was set in Berkeley during the early part of her life. She was born in Centerville, California, on Oct. 6, 1905, and later grew up in Berkeley. Her father, Dr. Clarence Alfred Walls, taught her to play tennis, and at the age of 14, her parents, including mother Catherine Anderson Wills, gave Helen a membership to the Berkeley Tennis Club. Don Budge, another tennis great from the San Francisco Bay Area, used to ride from east Oakland to Berkeley on his bicycle to watch her practice.

That led to an amazing career that included Wills winning 180 consecutive matches while not losing a set from 1927-1933 and posting a career record of 398-35. With a powerful forehand and backhand and an excellent serve, the implacable Wills won eight Wimbledon singles titles, seven U.S. Open (then the U.S. National Championships) singles titles and four French Championships (French Open) singles crowns along with 12 doubles titles. She was the first

woman to win three Grand Slam titles (the U.S., Wimbledon and French) in the same year. Wills – and many of her contemporaries – never played in the Australian Open because of the travel time and distance involved.

Wills won her first major title in 1923, when she became the youngest player to win the women's U.S. National Championship in singles at 17 years, 10 months and 12 days old (until she was surpassed by a 16-year-old Maureen Connolly in 1951). Wills was ranked No. 1 in the world nine times.

The reserved Wills had an intense focus on the court that earned her the nickname "Little Miss Poker Face." Other nicknames included "American Girl," "Queen Helen" and "Ice Queen."

Wills attended the University of California several decades prior to the founding of the women's tennis program in the early 1970s, studying fine arts and graduating with a Phi Betta Kappa key in 1927. Prior to leaving Cal, she won Olympic gold medals in singles and – with fellow Cal alumna Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman – in doubles in 1924 in Paris, which hosted tennis for the last time in the Olympics until the sport returned in 1988. In the 1924 gold-medal singles final, Wills defeated France's own Julie "Didi" Vlasto, 6-2, 6-2. Wills and Wightman beat Great Britain's Phyllis Covell and singles bronze medalist Kitty McKane, 6-4, 6-4, for doubles gold.

The veteran Wightman, who graduated from Cal in 1911, was a star in her own right. In 1909, she became the first woman to win the singles, doubles and mixed doubles titles at the U.S. National Championships – a feat she repeated in 1910 and 1911. In hopes of generating more interest in women's tennis, she donated a sterling silver vase to the USLTA (U.S. Lawn Tennis Association) as the prize for the Wightman Cup, an annual tournament between the top U.S. and British players that was similar to the Davis Cup in men's tennis.

One of Wills' biggest rivals, Helen Hulls Jacobs, was another Cal alumna who like Wills was coached by William Fuller at the Berkeley Tennis Club. Wills sparred often in singles with Jacobs, beating her in 10 out of 11 matches – dubbed the "Battle of the Helens" – including six out of seven Grand Slam finals. Jacobs prevailed in the U.S. National Championship final in 1933, when a back injury forced Wills to retire while trailing 3-0 in the third set. In the 1935 Wimbledon singles final, Wills rebounded to win after trailing 5-2 in the third set after Jacobs injured her ankle.

Wills was a member of the U.S. Wightman Cup team from 1923-25, 1927-32 and in 1938 and won the Cup with her teams in 1923, 1927, 1929, 1931, 1932 and 1938.

Berkeley products Wills, Wightman and Jacobs - who was ranked No. 1 in 1936, won nine Grand Slam titles of her own and matriculated from Cal in 1930 - all earned induction into the International Tennis Hall of Fame as well as into the Cal Athletic Hall of Fame. Wills entered the International Hall of Fame in 1959 and, along with Wightman, was inducted into the Cal Athletic Hall of Fame in 1978. Wightman claimed induction into the International Hall of Fame in 1957, and Jacobs was part of the class of 1962, while Jacobs entered Cal's Hall of Fame in 1979. Wills (class of 1981) also belongs to the Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame as does Jacobs (1984).

Yet another Cal product, Anna McCune Harper (class of 1924), earned the world No. 1 ranking, won the 1931 Wimbledon mixed doubles title and was inducted into the Cal Hall of Fame in 1981. She paired with Edith Cross to finish as runners-up to Wills and Wightman in doubles in the 1928 U.S. National Championships.

Wills also played in the same era as Suzanne Lenglen, the French star who preceded Wills as the best player in the world. However, the two only played each other once, with the 26-year-old Lenglen beating the 20-year-old Wills, 6-3, 8-6, in what was called the "Match of the Century" on Feb. 26, 1926 in Cannes. Wills had to pull out of the 1926 French Championships due to an appendectomy, which also caused her to miss that year's Wimbledon. Years earlier, Lenglen had to pull out of the Paris Olympics due to illness, paving the way for Wills to defeat Vlasto – France's second-best player and Lenglen's doubles partner – in the singles final.

That fateful day in Canes was not a complete loss for Wills, who met financier Frederick Moody after the loss to Lenglen. The two married in 1929. They divorced in 1937, with Wills marrying screenwriter and polo player Aidan Roark in 1939. Wills divorced Roark in the 1970s, with neither marriage producing children.

Her rivals – including the graceful and glamorous Lenglen and the gregarious Jacobs – provided a contrast with the powerful and stoic Wills. The latter expressed herself through her art, showing paintings at the Cooling Galleries in London and at the Grand Central Art Gallery in New York.

She served as inspiration for Mexican artist Diego Rivera. American artist Ralph Stackpole, a friend of Wills, commissioned Rivera to paint the interior of the then-San Francisco Stock Exchange, which is now the City Club. Wills posed as Califia – the spirit of California – for "The Riches of California" two-story mural.

Playing as Helen Wills Moody, she retired as a professional player after defeating Jacobs in the 1938 Wimbledon final. With her art and writing – she published "Tennis" in 1928 and "Fifteen Thirty: The Story of a Tennis Player" in 1937 – the retiree had plenty to keep her busy. Wills, who sold paintings from her studio in San Francisco and later in Southern California, also played tennis until the age of 82.

At the age of 92, on Jan. 1, 1998, Wills died in Carmel, California, at Carmel Convalescent Hospital. The Cal alumna bequeathed $10.5 million to the University to endow the Neuroscience Graduate Program and to support the growth of neuroscience at Cal. In 2000 the University renamed the Center for Neuroscience, which was founded in 1999, the Helen Wills Neuroscience Institute. The HWNI currently consists of 51 faculty members and 12 academic departments.