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# World Tennis Gazette

## 'Maureen'

The American Teenager Who  
Conquered the World  
of 1950s Women's Tennis

*"I believed I could not win  
without hatred."*

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By JOHN MARTIN

Sixty years ago this summer, on Sept 6, 1953, Maureen Connolly won the United States Women's Singles Championship at the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills, NY, defeating Doris Hart, 6-2, 6-4.

With her victory, Connolly, an 18-year-old San Diego student, completed a sweep of all four major international tennis championships in a single year.

Little known outside tennis circles today, Connolly was the second player and first woman in tennis history to win the Australian, French, Wimbledon, and U.S. titles in a calendar year. The distinction is shared only by Don Budge (1938), Rod Laver (1962 and 1969), Margaret Court (1970) and Steffi Graf (1988).

Beginning in 1951, Connolly, who stood 5 feet 4 inches and weighed 120 pounds, captured nine consecutive grand slam championships in which she played, winning 50 consecutive matches and losing only one set.

Connolly's leg was shattered in a 1954 horseback riding accident and her career ended suddenly at the age of 19. She died of cancer 15 years later.

"It was the shortest of great careers," said Bud



Central Press/Getty Images

**MATCH VICTOR: Maureen Connolly won epic 1953 Wimbledon final over Doris Hart, 8-6, 7-5.**

Collins, the writer and historian, "but few got more done in many more years." In a 1998 profile titled "The 40 Greatest Players, 1946-96," Collins wrote of Connolly: "She may have been the finest of all female players."

That view is not shared by tennis ana-

lysts who argue that strength, power rackets, and the serving speeds of today would prevail.

"My serve has always been the major weakness in my game," admitted Connolly in her 1954 book, "Championship Tennis." She was working with Les Stoeffen, a men's doubles champion of the

1930s, striving to hit "a hard flat ball and a good reliable spin," she said.

Ben Press, 89, a San Diego teaching pro and one of Connolly's closest friends, said "Her serve was weak by comparison with today's girls, but the other girls would have just as hard a time holding serve."

Press said 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 won five grand slam titles, including the men's trophy on the same weekend Connolly collected the women's title to complete her grand slam sweep. He 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



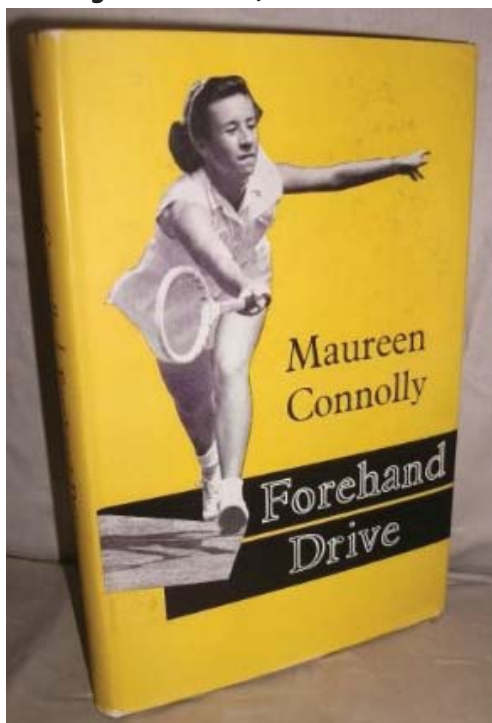
**COVER GUY: Tony Trabert "The Man to Beat."**

## USTA Plaque Honors Connolly Career, Her Book Describes Motivation

### MAUREEN CONNOLLY

"SHORT IN STATURE, LONG ON FIREPOWER, "LITTLE MO" -- NAMED AFTER THE UNFAILING SALVOS OF "BIG MO," THE BATTLESHIP MISSOURI -- PLAYED WITH BIG-GUNNING GROUND STROKES AND UNMATCHED COMPETITIVE ZEAL. SAN DIEGO'S CONNOLLY WON THREE CONSECUTIVE U.S. CHAMPIONSHIPS -- THE FIRST AT AGE 16 AND THE THIRD IN 1953, MAKING HER THE FIRST WOMAN TO WIN THE GRAND SLAM. SHE PEERLESSLY LED THE WORLD UNTIL AN ACCIDENT ENDED HER CAREER IN 1954

**WOMEN'S SINGLES CHAMPION  
1951, 1952, 1953"**



### FOREHAND DRIVE:

"I hated my opponents. This was no passing dislike, but a blazing, virulent, powerful and consuming hate. I believed I could not win without hatred. And win I must, because I was afraid to lose. The fear I knew was the clutching kind you can almost taste and smell and the specter of defeat was my shadow. So, tragically, this hate, this fear became the fuel of my obsession to win."

**ENSHRINED:** Words on plaque, left, honoring Connolly at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows, NY. Among honorees are the five players who won the Australian, French, Wimbledon, and United States Championships in a calendar year: Don Budge (1938), Connolly (1953), Rod Laver (1962, 1969), Margaret Court (1970), and Steffi Graf (1988). Connolly's credo of motivation, right, describes her struggle against fear of losing, from her autobiography, *Forehand Drive*, published in 1957.

Serena Williams or someone like that."

Even so, Trabert, 83, of Ponte Vedra, Fla., said Connolly, like champions of many eras, deserved respect and admiration.

"Do me a favor," he said to a reporter. "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 prime CBS Sports tennis analyst at the U.S. 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, according to Steve Flink, the tennis analyst and historian.

Connolly wrote in "Forehand Drive," her

1957 autobiography: "I hated my opponents. This was no passing dislike, but a powerful and consuming hate. I believed I could not win without hatred."

"I think Serena definitely has it," Flink said, emphasizing that he was speaking of behavior on the tennis court. "I think the others do too, the Navratilovas, the Grafs, 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, a British player who reached the Wimbledon final in 1956, said she was beaten 6-0, 6-0 by Connolly in the 1954 French Open quarterfinals.

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

Darlene Hard of Los Angeles saw a different side of Connolly. They met on a grass court at

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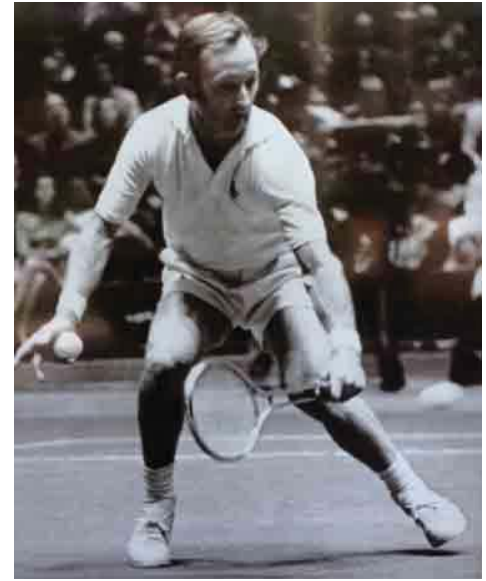
## Sixty Years after Connolly's Sweep, Only Five Share Its Distinction



**Don Budge**  
1938



**Maureen Connolly**  
1953



**Rod Laver**  
1962, 1969

the Essex Country Club in Massachusetts in 1952, the year before Connolly's grand slam sweep.

At 16, Hard was a budding champion. She fell, 6-4, 6-4, to Connolly, the U.S. women's national champion.

"She shook my hand and put her other hand around my shoulder as we walked off, and she said, words to the effect, 'Just keep practicing, you played beautifully.' That's really nice, really nice. Yeah, it is," Hard said.

Eight years later, Hard won the French and United States women's championships. A year later, in 1961, she won at Forest Hills a second time.

Looking back at Connolly's post-match behavior, Hard said "she had no trouble beating me. She was just being nice to me. She really was."

Barbara Scofield Davidson was surprised to learn she had conquered a rising American player when she defeated Connolly in the second round of the U.S. championships at Forest Hills.

Scofield, now 89, had grown up playing tennis on the



**Margaret Court**  
1970



**Steffi Graf**  
1988

public courts of San Francisco. Invited to play the European circuit in the summer of 1949, she returned in late summer to encounter a 15-year-old opponent whose name she did not recognize.

Scofield won, 6-4, 6-3, then discovered that she had achieved more than a straight set victory.

"It was one of those things where I had no idea that she was as good as she was, because after I won the match and I was wandering around, people came and said 'Oh, you beat Maureen Connolly!' 'My goodness, you beat Maureen Connolly.'

Scofield said it was probably better that she did not know she had beaten the national junior girls champion.

"It didn't even occur to me, fortunately, before that, I mean I think it was very fortunate that I didn't realize that she was as good as she was.

Scofield said she noticed something unusual about the way Connolly struck the ball.

"She always hit the ball on the rise. I think she was probably basically the originator of hitting the ball on the rise for women," she said in a telephone interview from

## Connolly's Wimbledon Victory Over Hart Praised Among 'Greatest'

her home in Milwaukee.

"I don't know that I thought about it that way, but she, when you watched her, you could see the ball was going much faster and stronger because she hit it on the rise."

Sixty years ago this week, after the 1953 U.S. women's final, Allison Danzig of *The New York Times* wrote that the match between Connolly and Hart was fierce.

"Miss Hart, a finalist five times and a strong hitter in her own right," Danzig said, "resorted to every device, including changes of spin, length and pace, in an effort to slow down her opponent."

"She aimed for the lines," said Hart, 88, of Coral Gables, Fla., laughing, "and she hit 'em most of the time."

"She had wonderful determination, for one thing. She just exuded confidence, you know. Everybody felt it. No matter what

the score was, you felt like she was always ahead," she said.

Earlier that summer, Hart showed her own determination, 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 battle praised by Flink in his 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



**WIMBLEDON FINAL:** Doris Hart, left, defeated Connolly in the 1953 Italian Open final, then fell to her in epic match at All England Club, 8-6, 7-5.

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."

Connolly was a sports celebrity before and after her death in 1969.

In 1978, her exploits and the tragedy of her accident were made into a movie for televi-

sion, "Little Mo," featuring top Hollywood actors.

Glynnis O'Connor starred as Connolly. Mark Harmon played her husband, Norman Brinker, an Olympic equestrian. Leslie Nielsen took the role of Nelson Fisher, the sportswriter who first described Connolly as "Little Mo" after the U.S. battleship Missouri.

Anne Francis played Fisher's wife, Sophie, a close Connolly friend and traveling companion, according to Press.

One day in 1957, Connolly visited the offices of *The San Diego Union*, where she had worked as a copy girl and wrote tennis columns with Fisher as her editorial patron.

At one point in the afternoon, Fisher and Connolly walked together into the city room. At their desks, reporters and editors looked up. Connolly smiled and greeted friends.

"It's Maureen," said a copy girl.

"It's Little Mo." corrected a copy boy.



**Connolly and Hart**  
"She was better in every way."



**STAR BILLING:** Leslie Nielsen portrayed *The San Diego Union* sportswriter Nelson Fisher, first to call Connolly "Little Mo." Anne Francis played the role of Fisher's wife, Sophie.