

HAZEL WIGHTMAN AND HELEN WILLS

TENNIS AT THE 1924 PARIS OLYMPIC GAMES

by Patricia Henry Yeomans



July 1924, the French tennis players were looking for victories at Wimbledon and the Paris Olympic Games. Suzanne LENGLEN, the 1920 Olympic ladies champion was playing at Wimbledon for her sixth-in-a-row title. The French "Four Musketeers", Jean BOROTRA, Henry COCHET, Rene LACOSTE or Jacques BRUGNON gave them four chances to win because Bill TILDEN of USA chose not to play. There was a "player-writer controversy" over his eligibility to cover matches as a reporter and be a player for Davis Cup matches.

In late June this headline appeared: *"Suzanne Will Take The Oath – Tennis Marvel Will Take Olympic Oath on Behalf of Athletes of Forty-Two Countries"*

"While the flower of the athletic world looks on a young woman, slight in build and even diminutive of frame alongside many of the Herculean male athletes, will take the Olympic oath early next month on behalf of the 42 nations entered in the international games this year. [...]"

Olympic officials have practically chosen Mlle. Lenglen in preference to any of the male athletic stars put forward, believing that she typifies perfectly the 'spirit of the Olympiad.'

The coming honor is a pretty tribute to Mlle. Suzanne. It is a double recognition of her greatness – greatness of heart as well as her prowess as an athlete [...]"

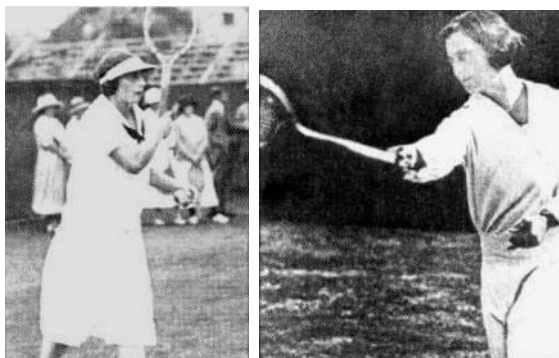
Suzanne LENGLEN of France was a defending tennis champion having won two gold medals at 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games: women's singles and mixed doubles.

Wimbledon had dropped the title *"The World's Championship on Grass"* in favor of *"The Championships"* and, instead of "blind draw", had begun seedings which allowed each country four persons to be placed in four quarters of the draw.

On June 30, Jean BOROTRA in the quarterfinal, defeated USA's Vincent RICHARDS 6-4, 4-6, 6-0, 6-2. Suzanne faced Elizabeth RYAN and lost a set for the first time, barely pulling out the match 6-2, 6-8, 6-4. Suzanne was so exhausted, the doctor advised her to retire.

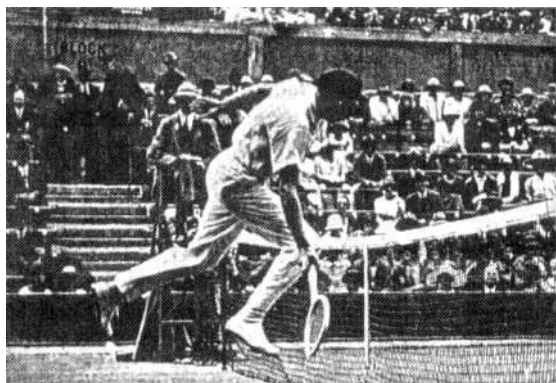
"The aftermath of her recent attack of jaundice had been accentuated by the severe physical strain of her struggle with Miss Ryan when only her will power had prevailed over her bodily weakness and an enlarged liver was not a malady to be trifled with."

On July 3 she withdrew, defaulting to the eventual winner, Kathleen "Kitty" MCKANE. In the finals, Helen WILLS, then 18, on her first trip to Europe, lost to MCKANE, after leading 6-4 and one point from 5-1, she faltered, losing 4-6, 6-4, 6-4. WILLS and Hazel WIGHTMAN won the ladies' doubles title over Phyllis COVELL and MCKANE 6-4, 6-4.



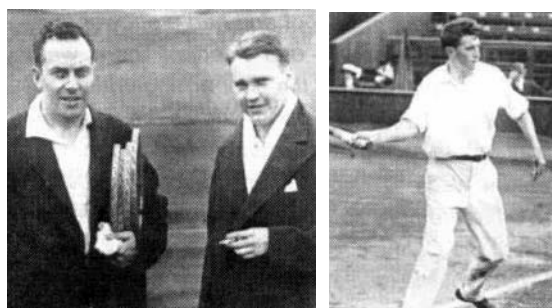
WILLS and
WIGHTMAN

BOROTRA won the all-French final for the men's singles, defeating Lacoste 6-1, 3-6, 6-1, 3-6, 6-4. The cover photo of *American Lawn Tennis* August 1, 1924 shows Jean BOROTRA of France, *"The Victor at Wimbledon Is Seen Doing one of his Pyrotechnic 'Stunts' at the Net. Lightening is scarcely as fast as the Brilliant 'Basque'."*



Jean BOROTRA

In an all-American men's doubles final, Frank HUNTER and Vincent RICHARDS defeated Watson WASHBURN and R. Norris "Dick" WILLIAMS 6-3, 3-6, 8-10, 8-6, 8-3.

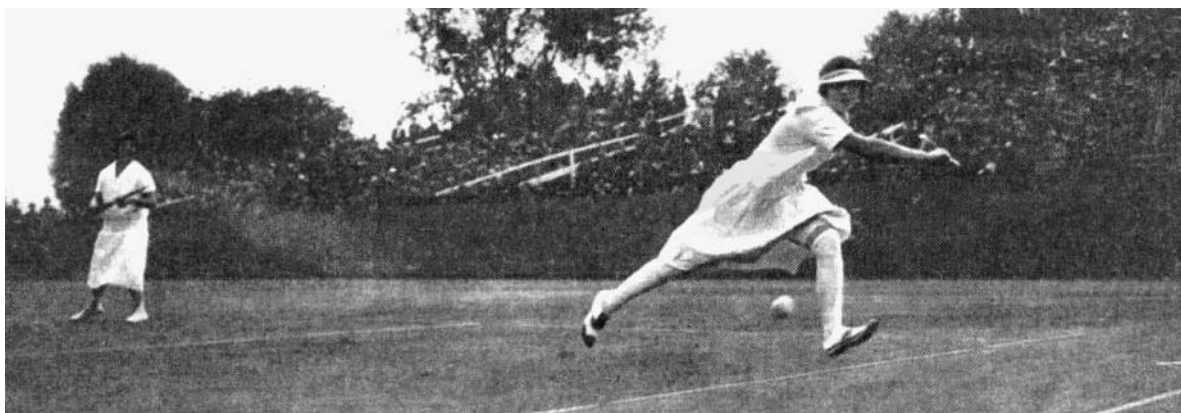


HUNTER,
RICHARDS and
WILLIAMS



Αντισφαίριση Tennis

**"Run,
Helen!
Run!"**



Julian S. MYRICK, manager of the American Olympic team reported on the events:

"The American team assembled in London and played in the All-England Championship where they obtained much good experience and improved their playing condition. They proceeded to Paris on July 6th and 7th and at once started practice on the grounds at Colombes."

The Olympic tennis matches were held July 13-20, 1924.

Helen WILLS in her autobiography *Fifteen-Thirty* describes the conditions.

"On the outskirts of Paris, Colombes was a dusty manufacturing district dotted with dirty cafes and grimy buildings. What greeted the team when they first arrived and viewed the court site was a Fellini-like surrealism. In the background, where the roaring crescendos of approval would soon erupt, was a large stadium in a barren field overgrown with dry woods and stickers. Close to it, anxious for a moment in the spotlight, brawny wrestlers practiced on a platform, and on a frame of rods and bars, chiseled gymnasts polished their daring feats of precision. In the foreground was the shocking sight of pyramid piles of red clay and sand – the tennis courts. [...]"

"The courts were laid in time, however."
Helen WILLS said.

"It seems to be the French way to work to the last minute, and a little after, if necessary. The stands were completed, too, finally. The dressing room for the women players was a large shed with a tin roof and had a shower in it that worked on only one needle. There was much complaint about the poor arrangements. "

"The courts were very good, and as the weather was hot, they became extremely fast by the end of the week. This suited my game, as I was used to the hard courts in California. I had more fun in the Olympic tournament than in any other. When you were playing on a side court [...] it

was hard to keep your mind on the game. The gymnasts would get into extraordinary positions on the bars and stay there. When you looked up again after the end of a rally they would still be there immobile. The tumultuous shouting of the vast crowds in the big stadium would burst out just as you were waiting to hit an overhead. [...] Everyone appeared to be in a violent state of mind. No One seemed pleased when a face was won, and pistols were being fired all the time. [...]"

"The ballboys at the Olympic tennis were very small, and spent most of their time under the grandstands eating lemons. There was a delapidated-looking woman vendor who went through the stands crying. 'Oranges, bananas, glaces!' until Norris Williams had to ask her to stop. Jean Borotra objected to her, too."

"Dick" WILLIAMS, HAZEL'S partner in the mixed doubles complained, too. *"There was no knowing when a pistol would suddenly go off, or a national anthem blare forth, or just same announcement bellowed out or rebelled in several languages"*.

Hazel Hotchkiss WIGHTMAN, age 37, mother of four children, served as Captain of the Ladies team. She had donated the *Wightman Cup* for an International Team Match to balance the men's *Davis Cup*. The *Wightman Cup* matches were played first in 1923 at the new Forest Hills Stadium in New York. The USA team beat the British team 7-0. On June 18-19, 1924, at Wimbledon, the British team defeated the Americans 6-1, Phyllis COVELL defeated both Helen WILLS 6-2, 6-4, and Molla MALLORY 6-2, 5-7, 6-3. Kitty MCKANE beat MALLORY 6-3, 6-3 and WILLS 6-2, 6-2. The only U.S. match was won by WILLS and WIGHTMAN over MCKANE and Evelyn COLYER 2-6, 6-2, 6-4.

WILLS and WIGHTMAN won the women's doubles at Wimbledon 6-4, 6-4 over COVELL and MCKANE.

"They were never defeated. Mrs. Wightman established the tactics for the team and punctuated their matches with commanding cries of 'Yours!', 'Up now!' and 'Run, Helen!' This last phrase cut so startlingly and so repeatedly through the polite stillness of the air at Wimbledon that the English made it part of their tennis lexicon and it is still shouted today [...] at Cynthias, Daphnes and other slow freight of all nomenclatures."

At the Olympics, WILLS relaxed and won her singles matches easily. Didi VLASTO, a Greek who was born at Marseilles, played for France and eliminated MCKANE in three long sets in the semi finals. When VLASTO arrived to play the finals, she did not have her ticket and was stopped at the gate. She was overwhelmed by the strong backcourt strokes of WILLS, 6-2, 6-2. In the ladies' doubles, Hazel and Helen, repeated their triumph over COVELL and MCKANE 7-5, 8-6 after being behind 2-5 both sets.

"Dick" Norris WILLIAMS, Hazel's partner in the mixed doubles severely injured his ankle having a broken Achilles tendon before the mixed doubles final. They almost defaulted to fellow Americans, Vincent RICHARDS and partner Marian JESSUP, but Hazel refused to quit.

"Williams, who usually played two feet inside the baseline and rot hard and flat, couldn't move at all [...] Williams had to stand in one spot, at the net or in the backcourt, hitting only balls he could reach in one step. He couldn't push off. Of course at the net he was a sitting duck for lobs. Never mind, Hazel anticipating them, would pick up her skirts and dash back to cover anything over his head. They won rather handily, 6-2, 6-3. Even the small, pencil-thin ballboys, who usually spent their spare time beneath the bleachers eating lemons, came out to watch the sight. And a peregrinating knot of UC Berkeley students and athletes showed up to add the school favourite 'Oski-wow-wow' cheer of encouragement, which must have mystified the rode audience which booed every close call. 'All Dick could do was return the serve and then hobble to the net.' Hazel said in a 1972 taped interview, 'And I would take his lobs and the short chops hit to him. I don't know how I did it, but I did. '"

Years later, WILLIAMS confessed *"he was not only gimpy but grumpy then, too. The tournament, from its trappings to its officiating, galled him. In a commemorating speech pointing out Hazel's extraordinary concentration, he recalled 'Most people think*

Hazel owes her record to her brilliant footwork and sense of anticipation. [...] But if you ask me, the greatest thing about her is the way that woman can concentrate. [...] What's more, the officiating was the poorest I've ever seen. Several times, only the umpire showed up for work and line judges had to be recruited from the crowd. I was on edge the whole time. but nothing bothered Hazel – nothing at all. I don't even think she even heard them selling those bananas.' "



Helen WILLS

A USLTA official commented *"Of course, it was her overhead game we talked about most. Remember, none of us had ever seen a girl who could smash and volley like a man. Until Hazel came along, mixed doubles was quite an ordeal for the female half of the team. [...] Hazel restored a balance to mixed doubles. [...] It was very enjoyable [...] watching this unassuming girl from California smashing the ball plumb at the feet of our celebrated court hogs."* Another remarked *"She was like a fox terrier going after a butterfly."*

The men's matches were hotly contested and featured the Americans against the great hometown French "Four Musketeers." Henri COCHET reached the finals to play USA's Vincent RICHARDS who won in five sets 6-4, 6-4, 5-7, 4-6, 6-2. Among the 97 players entered were Jacques BRUGNON, BOROTRA and LACTOSE. BOROTRA had edged LACTOSE in five sets to win Wimbledon, after beating RICHARDS in the quarterfinals two weeks before.

RICHARDS and Frank HUNTER faced a tough draw of 45 teams but finally triumphed over Jacques BRUGNON and Renri COCHET 4-6, 6-2, 6-3, 2-6, 6-3.

In his final report to the *United States Lawn Tennis Association*, Olympic Team Manager Julian S. MYRICK reported

"Under arrangement with the American Olympic Committee, the USLTA agreed to finance its own team and to obtain subscriptions from

Drawings by
H. WILLS



tennis clubs and players. The subscriptions amounted to about \$ 4,500 and the cost for sending the team was about \$ 12,000. There was a deficit of about \$ 8,000."

"The ILTF, dissatisfied about the organization of the tennis events, sought to impose conditions on the IOC for future Games. Following a row between the Belgian spokesman of the ILTF, Paul de Borman, and fellow-Belgian, Count Baillet-Latour, President of the IOC, the ILTF withdrew. Sixty years later the way was clear for a return. After six years of negotiations tennis was finally reinstated as a demonstration event at the Los Angeles Olympiad of 1984 and would become a full sport at the Seoul Games of 1988."

Steffi GRAF of Germany won the women's singles at the age of 15 and Stefan EDBERG, aged 18, won the men's singles in 1984. GRAF won the women's singles again in 1988.

Another sticking point was the demand that the Olympics tennis be called "the world's championship" and that Wimbledon should be cancelled in Olympic years.

"Tennis stayed out of the Olympics for the next sixty-four years. That made Hazel and Helen Wills and the rest of the winning Americans the longest titleholders in Olympic history. More impressive – and lost in obscurity was the fact Hazel had won two gold medals as a thirty-seven year old mother of four."

The USA Olympic team arrived home and went to Boston to play the USA doubles tournament. Bill TILDEN, ranked No 1 in USA teamed with Molla MALLORY. The two Olympic champions, Vincent RICHARDS and Helen WILLS, defeated them 6-8, 7-5, 6-0.

WIGHTMAN continued to play tennis. WILLS and WIGHTMAN won US doubles over Eleanor Goss and Marian JESSUP in 1924 and in 1928, repeated with a win over Edith CROSS and Anna McCUNE HARPER. Hazel had won 44 US titles before she retired from competition after 45 years of play. She continued her support for

the *Wightman Cup* and finally stopped being a player in 1931 but continued as Captain until 1948.

In 1946, when the *Wightman Cup* matches were reinstated after *World War II* and USA defeated Britain 7-0, she took a 6 weeks "vacation" to instruct children in England and Scotland. For this she was awarded the O.B.E.

– *Order of the British Empire*. Her true love was instructing children in tennis, banging balls in her garage on rainy days and organizing outdoor and indoor events for juniors, college girls and seniors. As Captain of the US *Wightman Cup* team she coached all the women champions of the 20s, 30s and 40s: Helen WILLS, Helen JACOBS, Sarah PALFREY, Margaret DUPONT, Louise BROUGH and Pauline BETZ. In 1956 she encouraged Althea GIBSON, the first black women in US tennis. GIBSON won US and Wimbledon titles in 1957 and 1958. She even instructed Arthur ASHE on his serve just before he won the US Men's Open singles in 1968.

She must have asked ASHE about his decision to remain an amateur although playing in the first U.S. Open tournament. In a letter to Mrs. WIGHTMAN from Arthur ASHE dated 12 February '68, he said:

"So good to hear from you. It's not often people of your stature stop and drop me a line. I do appreciate it. As for my turning professional, rest assured I won't until I feel I'm ready. With Army duty and no major title under my belt I have a bit more 'amateur' left in me.

I feel the game is undergoing a change for the better. The public, I mean the working man, will now get exposed to this great game. This does not detract from the game as it is, it only adds to it. If you could believe the 23,000 people to see tennis in February in Philadelphia last weekend, you wouldn't believe your eyes. That's what we need. 23,000 people saw tennis over 3 days at the Spectrum Arena.

Thanks for your interest. See you at the doubles.
Yours, Arthur"

In September 1968, Arthur ASHE got two major singles titles "under his belt" – the US Amateur, beating Clark GRAEBNER and Bob LUTZ. In the *U.S. Open*, he beat Tom OKKER of the Netherlands 14-12, 5-7, 6-3, 3-6, 6-3. ASHE received his *Davis Cup* allowance of \$ 20 a day. OKKER won \$ 14,000 as a professional.

Hazel Hotchkiss WIGHTMAN died December 5, 1974 at the age of 88.

Helen WILLS paid tribute to "The Unforgettable Mrs. Wightie" in *Readers Digest* for October 1977.

"Blessed with a thumping 'natural' forehand, I learned from her to use it with greater finesse, and to anticipate an opponent's shot by her position on the court and the position of her body [...] She taught me to rivet my attention – 'See only the ball' – and to stifle anger or elation as useless distractions.

Much of my tennis education – and so much pure fun – came in teaming with Mrs. Wightman, a superb doubles player. After I lost my first Wimbledon singles final in 1924, she all but carried me to a share of the doubles prize. Each time I got caught out of position, because of inexperience at doubles. Mrs. Wightie covered my mistake, sensing where the ball would go or spurring me on with calls that startled and delighted the crowd: 'Up now!' and 'Cross over!' and 'Run, Helen, run!'

To greet the return of Tennis as an Olympic sport at Los Angeles in July 1984, Helen WILLS ROARK sent a message to Pat YEOMANS, saying:

"On this day that welcomes the return of Tennis as an Olympic Sport, though I am not present for the occasion, I am there in my thoughts, and join you all in welcoming the return of the game we love so much to the competition that it so well deserves.

At this moment, my thoughts go back to July 1924, in Paris, the last time tennis was included in the Olympic Games.

*Using the word 'last' once more, I, the last member of our Olympic Team, who is still living, am so happy to extend a message that I believe would be expressed by each member of our 1924 Olympic Team: We are very happy not to be remembered as the 'last team' – We now belong to the future. Our message to all future contestants is to carry on proudly the Olympic Tradition of Sport for all Nations – In Peace
Helen Wills Roark 1984."*



"In 1990, however, Hazel [Wightman] became the first tennis player featured on a U.S. Post Office stamp. It was on a commemorative series honouring posthumously five extraordinary U. S. Olympic stars from the first half century. The other four were sprinter Jesse Owens, boxer and bobsledder Eddie Eagan, swimmer Helene Madison and high jumper Ray Ewry. Nationwide, the stamp announcement popped up as little stories and 'mention' in the print media. But in Healdsburg, Hazel's childhood home, and the community which placed a plaque in the plaza honouring Hazel in 1963, it was front page news."

Helen WILLS ROARK was still living at the time. The posthumous stamp required that a person must have died at least 10 years previously. Helen WILLS ROARK passed away January 1, 1998 at the age of 93, the last of the 1924 Tennis Olympians.