

This Day in History... December 20, 1886

Birth of Hazel Wightman

Olympic tennis star Hazel Virginia Hotchkiss Wightman was born on December 20, 1886, in Healdsburg, California. She won two Olympic gold medals, in addition to many US titles and has been called the “Queen Mother of American Tennis.”

Wightman was weak and awkward when she was young and her doctor suggested she play sports to help build her strength. Her brother suggested tennis because it was considered a “genteel” sport. She started practicing on the tennis courts at the nearby University of California, Berkeley. Wightman also practiced at home, hitting the ball against the outside of the house. She wouldn’t let the ball bounce because of the uneven ground. Wightman was relatively short, but she moved quickly around the court. She grew up playing against her brothers and later the Sutton sisters, including her later rival, May Sutton.

Wightman attended the University of California, Berkeley, where she was president of her sorority. In 1909, she participated in the US Championships at the Philadelphia Cricket Club, where she played on grass for the first time. Wightman impressed everyone with her keen attacking style and heavy use of the volley, which few women used so extensively. She won the title match as well as the women’s and mixed doubles that year.



Wightman has been called the “Queen Mother of American Tennis” and “Lady Tennis.”

The following year, Wightman became one of the few people to win a Golden Match (a match where the winner doesn’t lose a point) at the Washington State Championships. She defended all three of her titles at the 1910 and 1911 US Championships. Wightman didn’t compete in 1912 when she married George Wightman. However, her father challenged her to become the first American mother to win a championship. In 1915, she returned to the game and won the women’s and mixed doubles titles. She won her fourth singles title in 1918 and after that most of her victories were in doubles matches.

By the 1920s, Wightman believed that women should have a team tournament similar to the men’s Davis Cup. In 1923, she helped establish the Ladies International Tennis Challenge between the US and Great Britain for the Wightman Cup, a silver cup she donated. The series was popular and ran through 1989. Wightman won two gold medals at the 1924 Olympics in the women’s doubles and mixed doubles competitions.

Outside of her competitions, Wightman dedicated a great deal of her time to teaching a younger generation of tennis players, including Sarah Palfrey Cooke, Helen Wills Moody, and Helen Jacobs. She was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1957 and the International Women’s Sports Hall of Fame in 1986. Queen Elizabeth II made her an Honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1973 and she was the first honoree in the University of California’s women’s athlete hall of fame. Over the course of her career, she won 45 US titles, including 17 Grand Slams, earning her last win at the age of 68. She died on December 5, 1974.



From the 1990 Olympians set.



Wightman won all three US women’s championships for three straight years from 1909 to 1911.

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