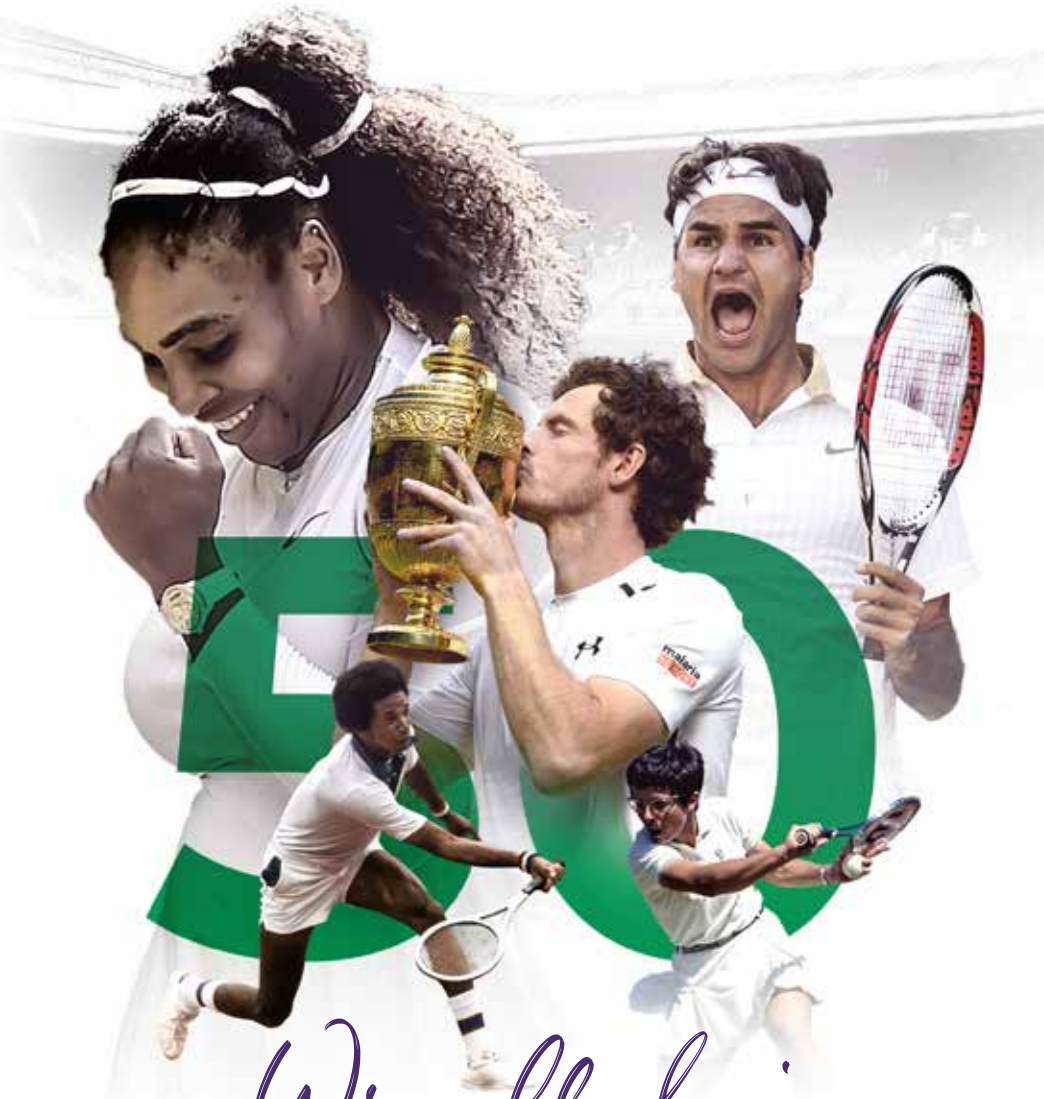
ABI SMITH



50 Wimbledon's GREATEST GAMES

THE ALL ENGLAND CLUB'S FIFTY FINEST MATCHES

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pitch

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Maureen Connolly vs Louise Brough

Date: 5 July 1952
Score: 7-5, 6-3

'Here was the realm of my hopes, my fears,
my dreams, and as long as I live, I shall
be there in spirit, savouring the glory.'
Maureen Connolly

CHAMPIONS ARE sometimes known for their longevity in the world they play in, their years of domination cementing their success status. But not Maureen 'Little Mo' Connolly. Arguably* one of the greatest female players of all time, Mo was just 17 years old when she first came to Wimbledon, a journey that also marked her first ever trip to England. Her nickname, given to her when she was 11 years old by a San Diego sportswriter, was in reference to her powerful forehand and punishing backhand. After watching her hit a ball, he described her shots as having the same power as the big guns of the USS Missouri, known as the Big Mo.

The All England Club fell in love with her as soon as she arrived; she was young, passionate and poetic to watch, sailing through the tournament to reach the final on a warm July afternoon. Centre Court was packed. An all-American final between Mo and her opponent – three-time Wimbledon champion Louise Brough – meant that the crowd would be witnessing a teenager making her way for the first time onto the grass courts and competing with someone who was well acquainted with her surroundings. It wasn't so much young versus old – Brough was 29 years old, but would still go on to rank as world number one three years later; it was more that the crowds and commentators sensed that this was going to be a special moment for the little but mighty Mo.

Before the Championships, Mo had injured her shoulder in a practice game at Queen's Club and her coach, Eleanor 'Teach' Tennant, one of the top women's coaches at the time, wanted her to withdraw from the competition.

Seeking advice, Mo visited a local trainer who told her the slight pain in her shoulder was a bit of bursitis, a swelling to the joint, and that a simple ointment would help. But Tennant wanted a second opinion, and a chiropractor told the two that Mo had torn a muscle. The guidance was clear: Mo was not to play. If she did, not only would she be in a lot of pain, but it could potentially cause irrevocable long-term damage to her shoulder.

With that risk made clear and eager to protect her young protégé, Tennant informed the press that Mo would default the tournament that year because of her injury. But what an unforced error that turned out to be! Furious, Mo called her own press conference to announce not only that she would be competing at Wimbledon, but also that she had sacked Tennant. Some commentators thought this was a precocious act by a stubborn teenager, but her determination to play and prove them wrong was now her motivation. She might have come across at the time as a tough cookie who was not to be messed with, but years later she admitted that her argument with Tennant, on the eve of her first ever Wimbledon, had a profound effect on her psyche and left her 'emotionally torn'.

As they stepped out on to Centre Court all smiles, Mo was already harbouring the fighting spirit that had won her so many matches before this final.

The year before, at the US Championships in 1951, her opponent, Doris Hart, had called her a spoiled brat, but instead of intimidating Mo, it unleashed a killer instinct on court. Admitting that she had never hated anyone more in her life, Mo came back from four games down in both sets to win the match, revealing afterwards that she had 'turned on her [Doris] like a tiger'. Make no mistake; behind the sweet, smiley persona of someone so young was a ferocious and determined competitor. In fact, being angry with her opponent before a game, particularly

if she got wind that a criticism had been made or she had been dismissed as an opponent, was like lighting a fuse and then giving that fuse a weapon in the shape of a tennis racket. Playing angry with an opponent suited Mo. Her anger turned into energy, focus and an overwhelming desire to punish.

So, in a way, you might want to feel a little for Louise Brough, who had hinted early in the Championships that such a big fuss had been made about Mo's shoulder injury that it would act as nothing more than a good excuse if she lost. When Mo heard about these quotes, she was fuming. This was going to be one explosive final. And given that both Mo and Louise had dropped just two sets across the whole tournament, the expectation that neither would be in the mood to tread lightly proved correct. This attitude from the American teen – who had readily admitted that she hated losing more than she liked winning – tested the reserve of the British crowd. We celebrated sportsmanship, fair play, good manners and decorum. Now Mo was paving the way for aggression, self-assurance and ruthlessness in women's tennis. Here was an assassin, armed with a big smile and a racket, and who played like she would never lose.

The final was indeed a hard-fought affair, with the action unyielding from both players in the first set before Mo broke Brough early in the second to secure a swift yet polished execution. Her shots carried weight rather

than speed across the court, and her backhand punished Brough on more than one point. Her superiority was never in doubt; the accuracy of her groundstrokes was matched by their pace, and her volleying, which was still developing, was nothing short of devastating. It was remarkable for the crowds to comprehend that not only was this young teenager capable of causing such upset to a previous Wimbledon winner, but that she did so with such ease. As one sports reporter wrote at the time, 'This was as near to perfection in sport as one is likely to witness.'

No one at the time, other than her first coach, Wilbur Folsom, knew that she was a naturally left-handed player. Mo had originally visited Wilbur as a ball girl before picking up a tennis racket in her left hand, but she was told in no uncertain terms that no one had ever reached the top in tennis as a leftie. If she wanted to continue, she would have to learn to play right-handed. Perhaps it was this first 'unjust' hurdle that fuelled the spark in her competitive drive.

This win at Wimbledon marked the first of three consecutive Wimbledon titles, and the following year she became the first woman to achieve the Grand Slam. So an event that occurred in 1954, Mo fresh from celebrating her third consecutive win at W1A, was tragic in every sense. Little Mo was riding her horse near her home when it became spooked by a truck and her right leg was

crushed. The accident meant she was unable to play again. She retired from international tennis that year and died, aged 34, of cancer. She had one of the shortest yet most significant tennis careers, but perhaps it was her spirit that was her greatest contribution. She showed no fear when she was on court, she took on champions and counter-punched all her rivals. There were no excuses when she played the game she loved, and she played with her mind, body and soul.

*Sorry, no argument; I have been told on good authority that she was the greatest.