

This Day in History... September 17, 1934

Birth of Tennis Star “Little Mo”

Maureen Catherine Connolly-Brinker, also known as “Little Mo,” was born on September 17, 1934, in San Diego, California. For four years, she dominated women’s tennis, winning nine Grand Slam singles titles, over 50 consecutive matches, and was named Female Athlete of the year – three years in a row.

When she was young, Connolly loved riding horses, but her mother couldn’t afford riding lessons, so she took up tennis instead. She displayed a natural talent for the game by the age of 10 and her first coach encouraged her to switch from a left-handed grip to a right-handed grip. The change helped make her an even better player, with great power and accuracy plus a strong backhand.

When Connolly was 11 years old, a local sports writer commented that her strength reminded him of the firepower of the USS *Missouri* (known as “Big Mo”). He called her “Little Mo,” a nickname that stayed with her for life. When she was 14, Connolly won 56 matches in a row and the following year she became the youngest girl under 18 to win a US national championship.



Connolly got her nickname “Little Mo” from the nickname for the USS Missouri, “Big Mo.”

In 1952, Connolly won her first Wimbledon title, despite suffering from an injured shoulder. The following season, she won Wimbledon and the Australian, French, and US Opens, becoming the first woman and second person to do so (a feat known as a Grand Slam). During those four tournaments, she only lost one set.

Connolly quickly became a media darling and was named Female Athlete of the Year three years in a row. However, her career was cut short in 1954. That summer, she was horseback riding when a truck frightened her horse and she was thrown, severely injuring her leg, and ending her career.

Although she could no longer play, Connolly became a correspondent for various newspapers at tournaments and even coached for the British Wightman Cup team. She also wrote two books, in which she recalled the drawbacks of her career, writing, “I have always believed greatness on a tennis court was my destiny, a dark destiny, at times, where the court became my secret jungle and I a lonely, fear-stricken hunter. I was a strange little girl armed with hate, fear, and a Golden Racket.”

Connolly also co-founded the Maureen Connolly Brinker Tennis Foundation, which organizes junior tennis programs. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 1966 and died following a surgery on June 21, 1969, at just 34 years old.

Connolly was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1969 and the International Women’s Sports Hall of Fame in 1987. A trophy was named after her for female tennis players under 18 from the US and Great Britain.

Nine-time Wimbledon champion Martina Navratilova said it best: “Had her accident not cut short her remarkable career, we all would have been chasing her records.”



Stamp pictures Connolly in action on the tennis court.

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