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LIFE

History: Talented and intrepid Miss Marble made the desert home

Tracy Conrad Special to The Desert Sun

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Asked in 1981 if she would ever retire, Alice Marble answered: "Not as long as I have my forehand and my backhand." Marble did indeed have a forehand, backhand, volley, serve and a lot more. She led a most interesting and imaginative life and had a spectacular tennis career, forging a new path for women in the sport.

Born on a farm in the middle of nowhere near the Sierra Nevada, Marble's climb to the heights of society and sports was improbable. She attributed her strong legs to climbing the hills on the farm and in San Francisco, where her family moved when she was 7 years old. Her uncle taught the family to play sports. She earned seven letters in high school in all those sports, but at 14 years old, in order to be more ladylike, she concentrated on tennis.

Brought to Palm Springs in 1931 by Eleanor "Teach" Tennant, the hostess and tennis teacher at the Beverly Hills Hotel, Marble found herself hitting balls with the pro at The Desert Inn while Tennant was playing bridge. A little girl with a profusion of pin curls approached on a kid's bike and challenged Marble, betting that surely she couldn't play tennis on a bicycle. Marble was intrepid. The pro scrambled the hotel photographer and publicity personnel who proceeded to document the feat of Marble playing tennis on two wheels. Forty years later, when Marble was on a trip to the United Nations in New York, someone asked the Ambassador to Ghana if she were acquainted with Marble. In a surprising answer, Shirley Temple said of course she knew Marble, a woman who could play tennis on a bicycle.

Tennant knew the reigning queen of the Hollywood movie colony, Marion Davies; as a result, she played tennis with lots of movie stars like Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, Robert Taylor, George Brent, Paul Lukas, Barbara Stanwyck, Spencer Tracy and James Stewart.

It was Lombard who hung the sobriquet of "Teach" on Tennant, and it stuck. Lombard and Marble became fast friends — perhaps because of their shared triumph over serious adversity: Lombard recovering from an horrific car accident and Marble from tuberculosis after collapsing on the court in Paris in 1934.

Marble described how the doctors told her she would be an invalid for the rest of her life. Yet somehow Tennant and Lombard had faith in her and helped her make one of the most spectacular comebacks in the history of sport. Returning to Palm Springs in 1935, Tennant became the pro at Charlie Farrell's Racquet Club, and Marble worked in the shop while she practiced and recovered her health.

Marble recalled her first New Year's Eve party at the Racquet Club when George Bancroft threw her up into the air and she hit her head on the ceiling and "saw stars." There were lots of hijinks, including Charlie Butterworth throwing hundreds of tennis balls in the pool, distraught about his wife not understanding him. Everyone gathered around the piano singing, hamming it up, Marlene Dietrich showed off her legs. Stars flew their planes to the desert to get away. Exhausted after tennis all day, there would be drinks at the bamboo bar.

Tennant and Marble lived together over the downtown drugstore and led a mostly quiet life that caused some speculation about the nature of their relationship.

Marble played "like a man," inaugurating the serve and volley game that would become a staple of women's tennis. Marble won four U.S. singles titles from 1936 to 1940 and 18 Grand Slam titles in her career. In 1939 she swept singles, doubles and mixed doubles at Wimbledon.

That year, on July 4th in front of a packed Yankee Stadium, "baseball legend Lou Gehrig announced his retirement due to the crippling illness that less than two years later would end his life at the age of 37. 'For the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break,' said Gehrig. 'Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.'"

Joel Drucker, writing in *Racquet* magazine, noted that the same week Gehrig made the whole country cry, "Marble won all three titles at Wimbledon. Though she'd earn her share of publicity in the short term, including gracing the cover of *Life* later that summer, it was always going to be impossible for a tennis player, particularly a woman, to capture the American imagination for anything longer than the occasional flicker."

Unlike baseball, tennis wasn't for the masses but was the sport of royalty and the fabulously wealthy. At the very top of social ladder was William DuPont Jr., heir to the eponymous chemical fortune and president of the Delaware Trust Company. DuPont was a tennis fanatic and snuggled up to Marble. When he purchased the Point Happy Date Gardens in La Quinta, he asked Marble to supervise the construction of his home and a house for Marble and her friend and fellow player Mary K. Browne. DuPont eventually married Margaret Osborne, with whom Marble also played, causing speculation about the ongoing at Point Happy.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, Marble taught lessons and played exhibition tennis in addition to singing in nightclubs, designing tennis togs, writing for early comic books and hobnobbing with the rich and famous. She cultivated a profusion of stories about herself, some quite fantastical, like a spy mission during WWII, and an elaborate story of a husband and being shot by Nazis. Writer Robert Weintraub in his definitive biography "The Divine Miss Marble: A Life of Tennis, Fame and Mystery" goes down the rabbit hole sleuthing out the truth of her existence.

What is certainly true is that Marble helped to integrate tennis by effectively advocating for Althea Gibson. In an open letter to American Lawn Tennis entitled "A Vital Issue," Marble was eloquent in asking if Althea Gibson would be permitted to play in the nationals. "If tennis is a game for ladies and gentlemen, it's also time we acted a little more like gentlepeople and less like sanctimonious hypocrites. ... If Althea Gibson represents a challenge to the present crop of women players, it's only fair that they should meet that challenge on the courts, where tennis is played ... (not) where a different kind of game is played ... she is not being judged by the yardstick of ability but by the fact that her pigmentation is somewhat different. If the field of sports has got to pave the way for all of civilization, let's do it. At this moment tennis is privileged to take its place among the pioneers for a true democracy, if it will accept that privilege."

With Marble's leadership and imagination, women's tennis was integrated and found a spectacular new champion in Gibson.

In the early 1970s, after the death of DuPont and years of a life well-lived, Marble moved to Palm Desert Country Club and became entrenched in the community. With her many skills still intact, including her forehand and her backhand, she was far from retiring and mused, "I love living, my many friends, my home, my swimming pool, my cat, my new job and, of course, the desert."

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