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EDITORIALS

AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS is privileged to turn over its editorial columns to Miss Alice Marble. Miss Marble's column this month deals with an issue of such importance to the game that we felt that its rightful position was on a page specifically devoted to opinion. We hope on future occasions to carry editorials by other outstanding tennis personalities. At times we may disagree with their opinions, but in this case AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS wishes to go on record as wholeheartedly supporting the sentiments and opinions expressed by Miss Marble in the following editorial.

A Vital Issue

When Oliver Rea, the new publisher of *ALT*, gave me the green light on this article, I couldn't have been happier. The subject has been on my mind for some months, and I consider the opportunity to speak my piece a privilege. Moreover, the willingness of the magazine to take a stand, to examine as honestly as possible all the salient points of an issue important to tennis, pleases me enormously. Whether its views coincide with my own is not the relevant factor; that it doesn't choose to emulate an ostrich seems awfully important.

On my current lecture tours the question I am most frequently expected to answer is no longer: "What do you think of Gussy's panties?" For every individual who still cares whether Gussy has lace on her drawers, there are three who want to know if Althea Gibson will be permitted to play in the Nationals this year. Not being privy to the sentiments of the USLTA committee, I couldn't answer their questions, but I came back to New York determined to find out. When I directed the question at a committee member of long standing, his answer, tacitly given, was in the negative. Unless something within the realm of the supernatural occurs, Miss Gibson will not be permitted to play in the Nationals.

He said nothing of the sort, of course. The attitude of the committee will be that Miss Gibson has not sufficiently proven herself. True enough, she was a finalist in the National Indoors, the gentleman admitted—but didn't I think the field was awfully poor? I did not. It is my opinion that Miss Gibson performed beautifully under the circumstances. Considering how little play she has had in top competition, her win over a seasoned veteran like Midge Buck seems to me a real triumph.

Nevertheless the committee, according to this member, insists that in order to qualify for the Nationals, Miss Gibson must also make a strong showing in the major Eastern tournaments to be played between now and the date set for the big do at Forest Hills. Most of these major tournaments—Orange, East Hampton, Essex, etc.—are invitational, of course. If she is not invited to participate in them, as my committee member freely predicted, then she obviously will be unable to prove anything at all, and it will be the reluctant duty of the committee to reject her entry at Forest Hills. Miss Gibson is over a very cunningly-wrought barrel, and I can only hope to loosen a few of its staves with one lone opinion.

I think it's time we faced a few facts. 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 there is anything left in the name of sportsmanship, it's more than time to display what it means

to us. 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. I know those girls, and I can't think of one who would refuse to meet Miss Gibson in competition. She might be soundly beaten for a while—but she has a much better chance on the courts than in the inner sanctum of the committee, where a different kind of game is played.

I can't honestly say that I believe Miss Gibson to be a potential champion; I don't know. In the Indoors she played under tremendous pressure, but there were moments when she exhibited a bold, exciting game that will doubtlessly improve against first-class competition. Whether she can achieve championship status here or abroad depends no more on her lovely strokes than on what Althea Gibson finds within herself when the chips are down. If she can do it, a proud new chapter will have been added to the history of tennis. If she cannot, we will have seen nothing more and nothing less than one more youngster who failed to live up to her initial promise. But if she is refused a chance to succeed or to fail, then there is an uneradicable mark against a game to which I have devoted most of my life, and I would be bitterly ashamed.

We can accept the evasions, ignore the fact that no one will be honest enough to shoulder the responsibility for Althea Gibson's probable exclusion from the Nationals. We can just "not think about it." Or we can face the issue squarely and honestly. It so happens that I tan very heavily in the summer—but I doubt that anyone ever questioned my right to play in the Nationals because of it. Margaret duPont collects a few freckles—but who ever thought to omit her name for such a reason? The committee would have felt pretty foolish, saying, "Alice Marble can't play because of that tan," or "We can't accept Margaret duPont; she gets freckles across her nose." It's just as ridiculous to reject Althea Gibson on the same basis—and that's the truth of it. 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. If it declines to do so, the honor will fall to the next generation, perhaps—but someone will break the ground. The entrance of Negroes into national tennis is as inevitable as it has proven to be in baseball, in football, or in boxing; there is no denying so much talent. The committee at Forest Hills has the power to stifle the efforts of one Althea Gibson, who may or may not be the stuff of which champions are made, but eventually she will be succeeded by others of her race who have equal or superior ability. They will knock at the door as she has done. Eventually the tennis world will rise up en masse to protest the injustices perpetrated by our policy-makers. Eventually—why not now?

I am beating no drums for Miss Gibson as a player of outstanding quality. As I said, I have seen her only in the National Indoors, where she obviously did not play her best and was still able to display some lovely shots. To me, she is a fellow tennis player and, as such, deserving of the same chance I had to prove myself. I've never met Miss Gibson but, to me, she is a fellow human being to whom equal privileges ought to be extended.

Speaking for myself, I will be glad to help Althea Gibson in any way I can. If I can improve her game or merely give her the benefit of my own experiences, as I have many other young players, I'll do that. If I can give her an iota more of confidence by rooting my heart out from the gallery, she can take my word for it: I'll be there.—ALICE MARBLE.

As I See It

An Open Letter to Althea Gibson

Alice Marble

DEAR ALTHEA:

The 1950 Nationals are over. As in other years, some of us are elated, some are licking our wounds, and others saying, "I had him in that first set. If only—"

You ought to be in the first-mentioned group, a very proud girl. You made history in your own right, which is quite a burden of honor for twenty-three-year-old shoulders to carry, and you bore your responsibility well. You also played some remarkably good tennis, considering that you had only played on grass three times previous to Forest Hills. Now that you have acquitted yourself well enough to silence your most severe critics, perhaps a little summing up would not be out of order.

Your match with Louise Brough had the fans talking to themselves. Everywhere I turned, I heard them say, "If the rain hadn't started. . . ." Perhaps so. You certainly had the spark that day, and ultimately it might have carried you through to victory. It might also not have been enough, since Miss Brough is a fighter who has never quit in the face of any odds.

The outcome of that match was as it should have been, you know. You had no business to defeat the Wimbledon champion. However, as natural a player as you are, Miss Brough is not without a little talent of her own. Winning Wimbledon three times against very strong fields is scarcely within the realm of coincidence. Moreover, she had had something like ten years' more experience against first-class competition and should have beaten you by that advantage if for no other reason.

I am not minimizing your efforts when I say that Miss Brough did not play against you the quality of tennis which has won her so many championships. Obviously she had trouble with the toss-up on her serve; certainly she made an unaccountable number of errors. She has been plagued by a bad shoulder all year, and anyone who knew her could see that it troubled her the day of your match. Perhaps you could have beaten her with that handicap if the rain had not commenced when it did. Perhaps she would have beaten you in straight sets if she had been at her best. Those big IFs. I hope to see the two of you play again next year or the next, when your game has been strengthened by experience and when Louise is in her usual excellent form, because I feel that today's tennis needs that exciting kind of play. I wanted you to do well this year, but you still had no business to beat the Wimbledon champion in your first appearance at Forest Hills.

I was surprised by the number of persons who erroneously congratulated me after that match. They labored under the delusion that you had performed so brilliantly against Miss

Brough because I coached you, which is ridiculous. The fact that I haven't played competitive tennis against Louise since she was very, very young primarily disqualified me for the job. I did talk to you for some fifteen minutes—including interruptions—the day before you played her, but if my every word had been a gem of wisdom, I could not have prepared you for a game as generally sound as that of Miss Brough in so short a time. To me, the most obvious reason I could not have coached you is that we have never even rallied together, and I demonstrate somewhat better than I talk. It's kind of your fans to include me in your moral triumph, but I can't take any credit for your performance. As Ogden Nash said, I'm a stranger here myself.

Other people talked to me about you during the tournament, Althea, and they were more than fans. They carried a little more weight and their mood was serious, and it was apparent that they thought I knew you better than I do. Mary Hardwick, my erstwhile professional rival and dear personal friend, knows you "quite well." I see by the papers that Sarah Cooke practised you before Forest Hills, so even Sarah must know you better than I, who merely wrote an article for *ALT*. I tried to explain that I had never even met you until the day you played your first-round match in the Nationals. As I pointed out, you had never seen me play; for all you knew, I might have won my championships because tennis was undergoing a few lean years. There was no reason why you should have listened to me.

Nevertheless, your friends seemed to think that you would. A very nice guy named Arnold DeMille, a press photographer, said despairingly, "Miss Marble, she'll listen to you. Can't you tell her about all those people before they ruin her?" A committee member complained that his people couldn't get to you at all. The newspapers made cynical comments. The subjects of all their concern was, of course, the amazing number of "managers" and "advisors" you suddenly acquired when you reached Forest Hills. Perhaps you would have listened to me and perhaps I could have told you—except that I was never able to talk to you again. Too many managers and advisors around you.

You don't need them, Althea. They constitute what Ted Williams, the great ball player, calls the "front runners." They want to get into the act for their sakes, not for yours, now that you and a few others have done the necessary, heartbreaking work to make you a national contender. They weren't willing to go out on limbs to help you achieve what you've done, but now that you have become a national figure, they'd like to get in on the ground floor where a little of the glory might reflect on them. Your colorful tennis might be to your

financial advantage later on, and it's a good idea to cut themselves in for a percentage now.

I repeat, you don't need them. You don't need me. When you go out to play a match, not all the accumulated managers and advisors in the world can win it for you. Nobody but Althea Gibson will be on your side of the net; if you win, it is because you have the ability and the concentration and the will to win. These new-found oracles may distract you and disturb your concentration so that you never reach your peak, if you permit it, but they won't win your matches. If they had your natural ability, they'd be playing at Forest Hills; since they haven't, they should not be allowed to capitalize on yours at the risk of destroying you.

Remember that. Buddy Walker, Mr. Johnson, who taught you, your own Mr. Baker are proven friends. They were your staunch supporters before you arrived; they're the people to whom you should turn, and the sooner you are rid of these others, the better. If the California reporter who's now going to make you the greatest thing since Legen is so influential, why weren't you invited to play out there last season, when you needed the experience?

It isn't easy for a kid of twenty-three, of course. I am long past competitive tennis, and I still don't know who my friends are. I only know, after this year at Forest Hills, who my friends aren't. You see, I encounter the front runners, too. People who fell all over their feet to entertain me when I was champion greeted me very formally this September. People who had called me "Champ" since 1938 suddenly remembered that I was "Miss Marble." People who had taken ostentatious advantage of our kissing acquaintance gave me a chilly handshake or failed to notice my approach, or glared, which was even funnier. Kids I had known as Juniors, whose weak shots I had helped to correct, kids I had plugged as championship material who now have national rankings—they forgot how much more I had done for them than I ever did for you. They only remember a terrible article I wrote, saying that a good tennis player named Gibson ought to play in the Nationals. Things are certainly tough all over, aren't they?

I have no quarrel with the committee at Forest Hills. They accepted your application because you had proven yourself qualified to play, which rested entirely with their judgment. The others, those who made things difficult for you or for me, have no conception of sportsmanship regardless of how many times they walk onto a tennis court. I would not unwrite a word of that controversial article of mine for the company of all the front runners in the world—I'm only glad to know who they

are—and you must not play your tennis any differently because of them.

You will play differently, of course, because you'll learn all the things you need to know to improve your game. You have already encountered the pitfalls of playing on grass. You must have seen the futility of attempted half-volleys from the service line. They can be made on wood or on clay, dangerous as they are, but grass is just too uncertain. Others with your absolute natural ability have tried it . . . Norris Williams, Lili de Alvarez . . . and their percentage of errors was equally high. It's a lovely, daring shot, but if the boys can't do it consistently, neither can you. If you're going to be a champion, you'll have to learn to take your volleys at the net rather than on the service line.

I've never seen a combined service and forehand hit with better style and force than yours, unless it is that of Doris Hart. On the other hand, literally, I think that your backhand could stand quite a bit of attention this winter; from where I sat, it did not look as sound as your other strokes.

So . . . the summing up, Althea. You were blessed with more natural ability than any woman on the courts today; you're a bold player, and you have that rare spark. Without discounting the years you have given to this labor of love, I tell you now that you must work even harder to gain the mechanics, the fundamentals, to harness those assets and direct them into the proper channels in order to become a champion worthy of the name.

Forget the people. Forget your almost-upset of Miss Brough, which is past history. Concentrate on learning and playing the very best tennis of which you are capable—and that's fine tennis, indeed. Don't bother to tell 'em who you are; prove it, instead. See you in 1951. On the center court, I hope.

Sincerely,
ALICE MARBLE.

Dear Miss Marble

Althea Gibson writes in reply
to Alice Marble's open letter.

Your open letter in the November issue of AMERICAN LAWN TENNIS magazine was read with a mixed feeling of sorrow and elation. It gives me an opportunity to clear many angles involving my tennis career and another opportunity to openly thank you for the campaign you made in my cause.

I am elated over the opportunity I had to play at Forest Hills but I am sorry for the slurs you received and the friends you lost. I do believe that you gained more true respectful friends than you lost by writing the very fine article you wrote in my behalf in the Tennis magazine. I believe it was because of this article that the officers thought you had an influence over me. They were right: I would have listened to you, but would the people? It was like mob hysteria. Everybody was surprised and some happy. I am happy that you have no regrets. Again I say I believe the new friends who believe in fair play and democracy will outnumber the few old ones you lost. At least they will have a more intrinsic value.

Miss Marble, I know you were no weak champion. Weak champions run from competition. In the white tournaments I played in last summer I was agreeably surprised at the friendship and courtesies shown me by everybody from ball boys up. I anticipated some resentment from some players but got none. Now when I think of how nice everybody was to me in the tournaments, I can't see why some officials object and try so hard to keep us out of them. I was handicapped by not having my partner to play with, but in each tournament I was fortunate in being teamed with a doubles or mixed doubles partner. Not like playing with your own partner, but the spirit and willingness of the players to play with me was more than I expected.

Miss Marble, if you find things really tough, imagine how I find them. I wanted to play in other tournaments; Mr. Frances and Mr. Baker tried to get applications for me to play in them. Some gave applications, some promised to send them, but either forgot, or, as in one case a committee chairman's wife had to go to the hospital so he forgot to send the application for me to play in the tournament.

My story: My tennis support has been greatly exaggerated and my real supporters have never been given credit for what they have done for me.

Buddy Walker gave me my first tennis racket and started me to hit against a hand-ball court wall. He later introduced me to Mr. Surrolls, a

member of 150th Street Project House Tennis Courts. Mr. Surrolls thought I might develop into a good tennis player and introduced me to Mr. Fred Johnson, a tennis instructor for the Cosmopolitan Tennis Courts. I was about 16 years old when Mr. Johnson started coaching me and with the help of other Cosmopolitan members made it possible for me to join the club. They entered me in my first tournament in 1942 which was the New York State Open. I won the girls' singles championship of New York State meeting Miss Nina Irwin in the finals.

Mr. Fred Johnson, Mrs. Rhoda Smith, Mr. Clifford Blackman and others made it possible for me to play in my first National Tournament at Lincoln University. I lost to Miss Nana Davis in the semi-finals. Fortunately, that was my only defeat in the Girls' division of the A.T.A. In 1946 I was eligible for the Women's division.

From 1942 to 1946 the Cosmopolitan Tennis Club of New York City sent me to the A.T.A. tournaments. At Wilberforce in 1946, I was groomed to win the Nationals Championship in the Women's singles. My New York supporters thought I was a cinch to win. I won the first set from Miss Peters rather easily. To my surprise I lost the second set and before I knew what had happened, I had lost the third set.

Miss Marble, I learned a wonderful lesson from that defeat; I was defeated by experience. That's why I didn't feel bad when Miss Brough defeated me. She used her experience and confidence to out-think and out-play me. I agree Miss Brough had every right to win and I was pulling for her to win the tournament.

After that defeat at Wilberforce I had no "front runners", managers or advisors. The people I had expected sympathy or a kind word from told me they thought I should have won. It was life's darkest moment--I was sitting in the grandstand alone when a man came up to me and asked: "How would you like to play at Forest Hills?" I couldn't believe my ears and naturally thought it was a joke until I looked at the expression on his face, then I knew he meant what he was saying. My answer was, and I'll never forget it: "Of course I would like to play at Forest Hills, but you know that is impossible." He replied: "It is impossible now, but if you are willing to work hard enough, I believe you are the key to unlock the door." I told him I would do anything to be able to play at Forest Hills. I was talking to Dr. R. Walter Johnson of Lynchburg, Virginia. He said the first thing I would have to do was to get some education. He told me he thought he could arrange for me to get some education and play tennis also. Dr. Johnson told me to stay there until he came back. He came back with Dr. Hubert Eaton of Wilmington, North Carolina, and spoke as

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if they had made all of the decisions in fifteen minutes. I was told that I was to go to school in Wilmington, North Carolina during the school months. During the summer months I was to stay with Dr. Johnson. It was all a dream. Miss Marble, can you imagine being picked up out of the "slums" of New York and placed in a home of luxury? Well that happened to me. Mrs. Eaton was very kind and generous. I had no one to help me. Clothes, spending change and everything I needed was given to me by the Eatons and Johnsons. I practiced against Dr. Eaton, who was a former National Intercollegiate champion and until this year was the National Doubles champion with Stewart.

I entered Wilmington High school that winter and each winter until I graduated.

In the spring of 1947 I went to Lynchburg, Virginia and started the most intensive tennis drill of my life. I practiced against back board, Tom Stowe Stroke Developer, Robot Machine, Babe Jones, Bobby Johnson and Dr. Johnson. That summer I played in nine tournaments. I won all singles and with Dr. Johnson we won eight doubles. I almost lost my New York supporters, because Dr. Johnson carried me west to play in Kansas City and Indianapolis tournaments and passed up the New York State Open. He wanted me to play against Lillian Van Burean, Flora Lomax and Mamie Stanfield, our best players. Miss Lomax was a former National champion. That year I won my first National championship. I have played in all tournaments available and lost my first set this summer in U.S.L.T.A. competition. My partner and I have lost only two matches in four years. Each summer for four years I have done my tennis training in Lynchburg at Dr. Johnson's expense. Until recently, rackets, clothes and balls by the gross were furnished by him. When we play in tournaments, we have not received the tournament expenses that your champions and top players receive.

Miss Marble, I have to apologize for the actions of my "publicity seeking" supporters. My partner was not there at Forest Hills; it was all new to me and being without him, I was lost. That will not happen again. Believe me, Miss Marble, I have no manager. Some people think because they gave me some tennis balls eight years ago, they have a right to dictate my future. I am a poor girl from a family not able to support or help me. Naturally I am grateful to anybody who has helped or given me anything. At present, Coach Gaither is my "god-father." He has given me a job that has made it possible for me to go to college. He also gives personal advice and financial aid. This year Dr. Gore, the president of Florida A&M College, has come to my rescue in many ways.

Miss Marble, I believe that most of the colored people watching my match had never attended a tennis match before. It was something new to them. They will not make the same mistake again. And too, Miss Marble, there were a lot of white spectators yelling for me to win as well as one heckler against me.

Last summer Dr. Johnson and his son were the first to ever play in the National Father-Son