

Tilden, William "Big Bill" (1893-1953)

by Jim Provenzano

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One of the best tennis players of all time, William "Big Bill" Tilden achieved spectacular success on the courts only to suffer an equally spectacular fall when his homosexuality and penchant for underage boys became known.



William "Big Bill" Tilden (right) with protege Sandy Weiner (*ca* 1923). Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

William Taten Tilden II was born February 10, 1893 into a wealthy Philadelphia family. Leading a sheltered childhood, he initially disliked athletics. Ultimately, however, he came to dominate the sport of tennis, marking it with his own distinctive grace and style. He eventually became as famous as Babe Ruth.

In 1920, Tilden became the first American to win the men's singles title at Wimbledon and he subsequently won two more Wimbledon singles titles, in 1921 and again in 1930 at the age of 37.

During the 1920s he also won seven U.S. Open championships, seven U.S. clay court titles, and six U.S. doubles championships. He represented the United States on the Davis Cup team every season from 1920 to 1930, leading the team to victories in the first seven years. As an amateur from 1912 to 1930, he won 138 of 192 tournaments and compiled a match record of 907 wins to 62 losses, an astonishing .936 winning percentage.

Tilden turned professional in 1930, on the heels of his final Wimbledon victory. Between 1931 and 1937, he earned more than \$500,000 on the professional tennis tour. Much of this fortune was squandered on bad investments in Broadway plays.

A tall, flamboyant player with a striking personal appearance, he was a showman off the court, as well. An actor, he appeared in several Shakespearean plays and in the title role of a production of *Dracula*.

He moved to Hollywood in the 1930s and became friends with movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Errol Flynn, and Joseph Cotten. He also wrote several forgettable novels, as well as some very successful tennis books, most notably *The Art of Lawn Tennis* (1922), *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball* (1925), and *How to Play Better Tennis* (1950).

As his tennis books attest, Tilden was one of the great theorists of the game. He thought of tennis as both a science and an art. In addition to possessing one of the most effective serves ever witnessed and a powerful backhand, he brought finesse to his game, which was notably balanced in terms of both offensive and defensive skills.

Tilden's homosexuality was an open secret in the tennis world of his day, as was his penchant for underage boys, which would eventually lead to his downfall. In retrospect, the caption of a drawing in the March 17, 1922 issue of *The Denver Times*, depicting Tilden demonstrating tennis moves for a young boy, is somewhat foreboding: "Tilden has taken a keen interest in the boy."

He often traveled the circuit with adolescent ball boys; his flagrant behavior gradually resulted in his

ostracism, banishment from several country and tennis clubs, and exclusion from major tennis tournaments.

In 1946, Tilden was arrested and convicted of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Although the young man--a teenage prostitute--had consented to Tilden's sexual advances, the older man was nevertheless sentenced to prison. He served seven months of a one-year sentence.

In 1949, Tilden was arrested again for approaching a sixteen-year-old hitchhiker and sentenced to another year in prison, of which he served ten months.

His reputation tarnished by scandal and his fortune dissipated by bad investments, Tilden's final years were excruciatingly sad, spent in poverty in a lonely walk-up room in Hollywood.

He died of coronary thrombosis at the age of sixty on June 5, 1953. His net worth was valued at only a few hundred dollars, and two hundred of that was returned to a student who had paid for lessons that were never given. Tilden's body was buried in Philadelphia.

Despite Tilden's spectacular fall from grace, his athletic accomplishments could not be denied. In 1950, at the beginning of the McCarthy era, and soon after his release from his second prison term, Tilden was overwhelmingly voted the greatest tennis player of the first half of the twentieth century in an Associated Press poll.

More recently, in ESPN's Sportzone 1999 poll ranking the twentieth century's top 100 athletes, the tragic tennis star was ranked number 45.

Bibliography

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