

# San Diego's Sweetheart: Maureen Connolly

Joey Seymour

"I've got everything I want. Everything I've had, I got through tennis. It gave me a terribly exciting life. I met so many people in exalted positions. It opened so many doors and it's still opening them. I've had a wonderful life. If I should leave tomorrow, I've had the experience of 20 people."<sup>1</sup> – Maureen Connolly

Maureen Connolly was nationally recognized as a tennis star from San Diego in the 1950s. At age eleven, she was dubbed "Little Mo" by San Diego sports writer Nelson Fisher who claimed that her power forehand and backhand had the same firepower as the big guns of the *USS Missouri*, known as the "Big Mo."<sup>2</sup> The Associated Press named her Female Athlete of the Year for three consecutive years (1952, 1953, and 1954),



Sixteen year-old Maureen Connolly practices at a public tennis court in San Diego, 1951. ©SDHS, UT#84:32877-1, Union-Tribune Collection.

an honor she achieved by developing a particularly aggressive style of play. After her career came to a crashing halt on July 20, 1954, when she was thrown from her horse, "Little Mo" continued to pack a great deal into her life. She frequently told people, "I've lived ten lives." She was a tennis champion, newspaper reporter and author, wife, mother, restaurateur, sporting-goods spokeswoman, television and radio color commentator, philanthropist, and cancer victim, before dying at age thirty-four. The following article provides a retrospective look at the many lives of Maureen Connolly.

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**Joey Seymour**, a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in history at the University of San Diego, plans to continue writing about extraordinary San Diego athletes. He wishes to thank Billie Jean King for her contribution to this article and her friendship. In 2004, Joey published *Tangled* a thriller novel.

## Early Life in San Diego and the Making of a Champion

On September 17, 1934, Jessamine and Martin Connolly awaited the birth of their first child at Mercy Hospital in San Diego. Martin, a lieutenant commander in the Navy, served as an athletic trainer. According to Arthur Voss, "Connolly had been a boxer and played baseball, football, and hockey, but not tennis."<sup>3</sup> Jessamine, who originally had hailed from Helena, Montana, danced and sang. Based on the baby's "lusty heart-beat," the obstetrician had assumed the newborn would be a boy. To everyone's surprise, a little girl—Maureen Catherine Connolly—was born. The new parents brought their baby girl home to their red brick bungalow on Idaho Street in the North Park district of San Diego.

The Connollys divorced when Maureen was only four. "My last memory of my father came when I was ill. He looked down at me, smiled and told me he would buy me a chocolate sundae, topped with nuts, when I recovered. We never heard from him, never knew where he might have gone."<sup>4</sup> Young Maureen was later told that he had died in an accident, a story that turned out to be false.

Maureen's mother, Jessamine, wanted her daughter to become the great musician and dancer that she herself never had the chance to become. According to Beverly Beyette, she was "the antithesis of the stage mother—a vacillating, indecisive woman, a frustrated would-be concert pianist who wound up playing for weddings and found vicarious pleasure in her daughter's triumphs."<sup>5</sup> Maureen attempted ballet, singing, and piano lessons but, "on her way to more tom-boy pursuits on the University Heights Playground," she stumbled across a tennis match being played by two local professionals, Gene Garrett and Arnie Saul. Enthralled by the sport, she soon learned that all she needed was "a racket in my hand to vanquish any little boy or girl in the neighborhood."<sup>6</sup>

Maureen served as a ball girl for the local tennis professional, Wilbur Folsom, who later began instructing the motivated ten year-old. "Folsom taught Maureen the rudiments – how to serve, how to hit the forehand and backhand drives, and how to execute proper footwork."<sup>7</sup> She had an inexpensive tennis racket that cost her mother \$1.50. Unlike most top tennis competitors who trained at private tennis clubs, Maureen played on public courts owned and operated by the City of San Diego. Her home court, the University Heights Playground at 4044 Idaho Street, was renamed the North Park Recreation Center in 1969.

Her tournament career began in 1945 at the La Jolla Playground's annual tennis tournament. Maureen, playing in the thirteen-and-under category, made it to the finals but lost to an older girl named Ann Bissell. With this loss came the development of an angry, competitive streak rarely discussed in articles or remembrances written about "Little Mo." She wrote about it in *Forehand Drive*, an autobiography that she completed shortly after her career-ending accident: "I was no ordinary little girl, and tennis to me, even then, was much more than just a game. Defeat was unendurable; it could not be talked away by the sympathy of an understanding parent. It must be avenged! Beating Ann Bissell became my single goal in life."<sup>8</sup>

Maureen did not love tennis but she hated losing. At ten years old, she feared that if she lost a match, no one would love her. Along with fear came anger. She would build up hatred for her opponent on the court in order to win. It is possible that both the abandonment of her father and the ambition of her mother helped



*A young Maureen Connolly prepares for a match. Courtesy of San Diego Hall of Champions.*

to create this fierce attitude. According to one reporter, “She was like the other girls—small, slender, giggly, bands on the teeth, saying “sir” and “ma’am” when addressed by adults, but on the court, that was something else.”<sup>9</sup>

Maureen’s next tournament took place on her home court at University Heights Playground. Her first tournament victory was soured by the fact that Ann Bissell had not played. It was not until the 1946 Harper Ink Tournament that Maureen got a chance to face Bissell. The two girls competed in the final game of the tournament. The first set was a back-and-forth competition that Connolly eventually won 8-6. Seeking to embarrass her opponent, Little Mo bested Bissell in the next set, winning 6-2.<sup>10</sup>

Maureen won six more tournaments in 1946, competing in both the thirteen-and-under and the fifteen-and-under divisions. In 1947 she captured five more titles to find herself ranked number two among Southern California’s girls under

fifteen-years-old. Wilbur Folsom had tutored Maureen to the best of his ability. She practiced with boys, hitting just as hard and running just as fast as they did. But in order for Maureen's career to soar, she needed a new coach.

Eleanor "Teach" Tennant was known throughout Southern California as one of the best, if not *the* best, tennis instructors in the region. She had coached champions such as Alice Marble, winner of five Grand Slam events between 1936 and 1940, and Bobby Riggs, best known for his Battle of the Sexes exhibition match versus Billie Jean King on September 20, 1973.<sup>11</sup> Born in San Francisco in 1895, Tennant played tennis at the famous Golden Gate Park courts. She later became the resident professional at the upscale Beverly Hills Hotel, teaching some of the biggest names in Hollywood at the time. Carole Lombard gave her the nickname, "Teach."<sup>12</sup>

Tennant met Maureen in 1948 and knew instantly that she had a potential star on her hands. Maureen, eager to learn, demonstrated her talent and dedication. Every weekend, she took the bus from San Diego to Beverly Hills to work with Tennant. However, she occasionally disagreed with, and disobeyed, her demanding teacher. One weekend, after she had received strict orders to practice, she was caught "rallying with actor Gilbert Roland, a friend who once took Maureen to the Tijuana bullfights and found himself with an almost inconsolable child on his hand when a horse was injured." Scolded and sent home to San Diego, Maureen wrote a letter of apology and was immediately forgiven.<sup>13</sup>

Teach became a second mother to Maureen, teaching her about life, dress, and most importantly, tennis. She worked diligently to improve Maureen's game. In 1948, Maureen won an impressive eighteen titles and was ranked as the number one girls singles player in Southern California. Tennant also encouraged the antagonism that Maureen felt for her opponents. She believed that tennis was not a game, but a fight. She would scout and analyze Maureen's opponents. "Eleanor Tennant contributed to my hate complex," she later wrote, "but there was fertile soil for the seed. She believed one should not make friends with opponents, one should remain aloof. I translated this into hating my foes. Miss Tennant, I am positive, had no idea a seed of hatred would flower in my breast with such a dark bloom."<sup>14</sup>

For Maureen, the year 1949 was stellar on the court but difficult at home. She won nine titles, became the youngest girl ever to win the junior national title at the age of fourteen, and played in her first women's tournament. However, her mother remarried a man whom she disliked. Her new stepfather, Auguste Berste, was a local musician who did not appreciate tennis. According to a journalist, "Her mother's second husband opposed her obsession with the game, and the two clashed frequently."<sup>15</sup>

Sports writers loved Maureen, describing her as a "killer in pigtailed." Her infectious smile and dazzling action pictures appeared in the local papers through 1950, when she won the national junior girls singles title and the doubles title with her partner and good friend Patsy Zellmer. She was ranked number nineteen among women players in the United States. The following year, 1951, her career took off.



*Tennis star Maureen Connolly, or "Little Mo," in action. Courtesy of San Diego Hall of Champions.*

## The Championship Years

Maureen Connolly became a national celebrity in the summer of 1951 at Forest Hills, New York, home of the U.S. Open.<sup>16</sup> It was there that Eleanor Tennant concocted a devious ploy to further fuel Maureen's anger at her opponents. Maureen was facing Doris Hart, her idol and one of the great tennis legends, in the semi-finals. Tennant feared that Maureen did not have a chance, so she told her that she had overheard Doris call her "a spoiled brat" and say that she was "gunning for her." It was a lie, but it did the trick.<sup>17</sup>

It was an overcast New York day with a light drizzle. When the match on Center Court began, Maureen looked nothing like a champion. She later wrote, "I never hated anyone more in my life! I turned on her like a tiger, but despite my fury—I tried to knock the cover off the ball—I managed to lose the first four games."<sup>18</sup> But Little Mo's rage and desire to destroy her opponent led to an epic comeback. Maureen won the next six games in a row, taking the set 6-4. In an exciting second set which saw Maureen take a 5-1 and seemingly insurmountable lead, Hart came roaring back to make it 5-4. Still, this was Little Mo's moment and no one was going to stop her. She won the next game and the match.

Sixteen-year-old Maureen made it to the finals of the U.S. Open where she

faced Shirley Fry, Hart's best friend on the tour and a formidable opponent in her own right. Shirley wanted to avenge the loss of her friend and take the title. Connolly wanted it just a bit more—and so did Tennant. The opening two sets went smoothly. In the first set, Maureen dominated Shirley 6-3. Shirley returned to defeat Maureen 6-1. During the ten-minute break between sets, Tennant looked sternly into Maureen's eyes. "You will have to control your hitting. To do that you'll have to move faster and you'll have to do it even if it kills you to win this set. Forget you're tired. You're in the big leagues now. You can't submit to fatigue. Concentrate on your game...you must win!"<sup>19</sup> And win she did. Maureen battled Fry and, at match point, rejoiced as Fry's backhand return sailed out.

Maureen was now the youngest U.S. Open Champion in history. Associated Press voted her Female Athlete of the Year and she was ranked as the number one women's tennis player in the United States.<sup>20</sup> On September 17, 1951, *Time Magazine* noted that even though "women's tennis had been in the doldrums since 1941, when Alice Marble left the scene, a Forest Hills gallery last week stood up and cheered with new hope for a sturdy, rosy-cheeked girl who will not turn 17 until next week. Maureen Connolly clearly was a good notch above her tournament competition."<sup>21</sup>

The year 1952 brought joy as well as sadness as "Little Mo" became an international star. She defeated archrival Doris Hart for her second consecutive U.S. Open title before venturing to London to play in the Wimbledon Championships. However, before she took her first step on the famous grass courts at the All England Lawn Tennis Club, she parted ways with Tennant over a medical diagnosis. After feeling a slight pain in her shoulder, Maureen visited a local trainer who had said she had a bit of bursitis and that a simple ointment would help. Tennant wanted another opinion. The two visited a chiropractor who claimed that Maureen had a torn muscle. Teach, not wanting her star pupil to risk further damage, told the press that Maureen would default the tournament. Maureen disagreed and, in an unprecedented move, called a press conference and told journalists, "Miss Tennant no longer represents my views."<sup>22</sup> Her daughter, Cindy Brinker Simmons, later wrote that this was a "first" in Wimbledon history: "No player had ever done this before. The press adored Mom, so when 'Little Mo' spoke, everybody came running."<sup>23</sup>

She played brilliantly and disposed of her early round opponents only to find herself pitted against three-time Wimbledon champion, Louise Brough. She wrote, "I was nervous against Louise. I had beaten her at La Jolla, but before coming to Wimbledon she had trimmed me 5-8, 6-2, and 6-2, at the Southern California Tennis Championships in Los Angeles."<sup>24</sup> Little Mo had nothing to be nervous about for, after a spirited effort in the first set, Brough's nerves got the best of her. Connolly became the world's champion with a 7-5, 6-3 victory. However, by dismissing Tennant, she had lost an important and valuable figure in her life. She wrote, "Our quarrel on the eve of Wimbledon left me emotionally torn. It was difficult for a young girl to draw charity's veil over bitterness, to rationalize, compensate and reconcile."<sup>25</sup> Maureen apologized to Teach in her autobiography but, according to Brinker, "they never spoke again. Still, all her life, Mom regretted the incident and its outcome."<sup>26</sup>

Maureen met her next coach, Henry "Harry" Hopman, after her victory at Wimbledon. Captain-coach of twenty-two Australian Davis Cup teams between



*"Little Mo" arrives home victorious from her third Wimbledon, 1954.*  
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1939 and 1967, he would guide her through the next two years of her career. He and his wife helped her to change her attitude towards her opponents. Nell Hopman sat her down before an exhibition match in Australia and explained that her "tennis would not suffer if she cast off hate and fear." Maureen disagreed since "this would be throwing away my two most potent weapons."<sup>27</sup> However, when matched against friend Julie Sampson, she found that she could no longer hate her opponent across the net. Instead, she focused only on her instincts and reflexes. For the first time in her career, Maureen Connolly enjoyed herself while competing on the tennis court.

Maureen's success in 1952 was impressive. She won two of the four major

tournaments, Wimbledon and the U.S. Open, and the Associated Press once again voted her Female Athlete of the Year.<sup>28</sup>

San Diego, proud of its native daughter, welcomed her home with a parade, an honor, and a gift. An estimated fifteen thousand people lined Broadway in downtown San Diego to see the tennis star. Maureen, wearing a white dress, rode in the back of a white convertible. Mayor John D. Butler declared September 9, 1952 to be "Maureen Connolly Day" in San Diego. Supporters organized a Maureen Connolly Appreciation Fund with five hundred and sixty four contributors. She received a horse as a token of appreciation for "what she had done for the town, for the way she has made it a big name in the world."<sup>29</sup> Maureen selected a majestic Tennessee walking horse named Colonel Merryboy.

In 1953, Maureen became engaged to Norman Brinker who, at that time, served in the U.S. Navy. According to one journalist, "The courtship was marked by partings and reunions—when he came home from the Western Pacific during the Korean War, when she came back from the European tournament circuit. There was a religious conflict; she was Roman Catholic, he a Methodist. But when she returned, triumphant, from her 1953 victory at Wimbledon, they drove to Balboa Park one night and he slipped a diamond ring on her finger."<sup>30</sup> The couple decided

to make a formal announcement after she returned from Europe.

Maureen's games at the Australian Championship, where she defeated Julie Sampson 6-3, 6-2, and French Open revealed her to be an accomplished player and a mature woman. In Paris, she faced Doris Hart, her former foe and now friend, whom she defeated 6-2, 6-4. She then traveled to London to defend the Wimbledon title. On January 6, 1953, she again played Hart in the finals match. The two competed in what the press described as an emotional war. Doris was determined not to allow Maureen to defeat her this time. Maureen recalled that they both "went for broke." She took the first set 8-6 with only one point, set point, separating their point total. The second set would be the same. Maureen won the set 7-5, once again with only one point, championship point, being the difference. As the two champions walked off the court, Doris leaned over to Maureen and said, "this is the first time in my life I have lost a match and still felt as though I had won it."<sup>31</sup>

The Connolly-Hart match was described as one of the greatest women's finals ever played at Wimbledon. Neville Deed writing for *The Racquet*, stated: "The all-American final will go down in history as one of the best women's matches ever played anywhere. In any experience, which goes back to the 1910 Wimbledon, I do not remember there to have been a better one. It was the perfect pattern of how the game should be played."<sup>32</sup> English footballer David Jack told the *Empire News*: "It was a privilege to be a spectator...it must have been one of the greatest women's matches ever played."<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, Maureen's joy did not last long. She received a telephone call from her good friend, *San Diego Union* sportswriter Nelson Fisher, who informed her that her fiancé Norman Brinker was being shipped-out to Korea. She broke down and wept.

Maureen returned to San Diego to prepare for the U.S. Open. She found, to her surprise that Norman had not yet shipped out. They had only a few hours but their time together gave her renewed confidence. At the U.S. Open, Maureen faced a newcomer on the circuit, Althea Gibson, the first African American woman to play at the tournament. Maureen wrote, "It is my conviction that any championship tournament would become a travesty if a great player were barred for reasons of color or race. I liked Althea and our relationship had been friendly."<sup>34</sup> In the final, she faced a familiar rival, Doris Hart, to capture the title 6-2, 6-4. She became the first woman to win the Calendar Year Grand Slam of Tennis after taking the title at the Australian Championships, French Open, Wimbledon, and the U.S. Open and the only one to do it without losing a single set.<sup>35</sup> She captured fourteen titles in 1953 while still just eighteen-years-old.

On learning that the Associated Press, once again, voted her Female Athlete of the Year, Maureen said, "I am very, very grateful to those who voted for me and I shall try to deserve it by playing my best in 1954."<sup>36</sup> The year started out well. She won all ten tournaments in which she played, including the 1954 Wimbledon Championship defeating Louise Brough 6-2, 7-5. It was her third consecutive Wimbledon title. Jack Murphy, writing for the *San Diego Union*, noted: "Little Mo gave another fine exhibition of controlled tennis, almost mechanical in its efficiency, to overcome her 31-year old opponent."<sup>37</sup> Maureen was ranked number one in the world and nothing would bring her down—nothing except a horse and a cement truck driver.



## The Accident

Sports writer Nelson Fisher reported on July 21, 1954:

Little Mo, a columnist for the *San Diego Union*, had returned home Monday morning after winning her second National Clay Court title and her third Wimbledon crown. Almost the first thing she did was to ride her horse, Colonel Merryboy, which was given to her two years ago after she won her first Wimbledon title. In an interview before she went into surgery, Little Mo said: 'We were riding along the road (on Friars Road in Mission Valley). We stopped our horses as the truck approached. Colonel Merryboy shied and whirled into the truck. My leg was caught between my horse and the truck.'<sup>38</sup>



*Connolly testifies during her trial vs. the Cement Mixing company whose truck driver caused her career-ending accident. Pictured with Maureen is her attorney, Melvin H. Belli. Courtesy of San Diego Hall of Champions.*

Maureen broke her fibula and tore some muscles in the accident, which took place at 1:30 p.m. on July 20. A nurse, Kathryn Walker, who happened to be on her way to work, watched the scene unfold and rushed to aid the fallen tennis star.

Maureen was taken to Mercy Hospital and was operated on by Dr. Bruce Kimball. After the surgery, Kimball told reporters that Maureen would not be able to play for a month. However, he did not feel the injury would cost her career.<sup>39</sup>

Among all the well-wishers who visited the hospital was her father. She recalled, "A well-set-up man, with short grey hair, wearing a neat brown suit, came into my room. We looked at each other for a moment, then I was in my father's arms. Only because of my accident had he stepped across the chasm of years. It was a joyous reunion, the beginning of a new and wonderful relationship."<sup>40</sup> She did not hear from her fiancé, Norman Brinker, who was overseas and had not yet learned of the accident.

Although Maureen had all the ambition and willpower necessary to rehabilitate herself, she could not overcome her injuries. She took ballet lessons to help regain her strength and agility. She also returned to the tennis court in order to preserve her powerful back and forehand, though she avoided running. She thought that she might return to competition until, in an exhibition match with Les Stofen in January 1955, she attempted to reach a tricky drop shot and felt shooting pains through her right leg. She knew the result. Soon afterward, she announced with sadness that her career was over. Billie Jean King noted, "It was sad she had to retire so early because we don't know how many more major titles she could have won. It would have been great to see her compete against Tracy Austin or Chris Evert, or even at the other end of the spectrum against Martina Navratilova."<sup>41</sup> Instead, she found a new life as a wife, mother, sportswriter, and entrepreneur.



*Maureen Connolly married Norman Brinker on June 11, 1955. ©SDHS UT #84:3222-1, Union-Tribune Collection.*

## Life After Tennis

Maureen's fiancé, Norman Brinker, also suffered a serious accident while horseback riding. After his discharge from the service, he had traveled to Hungary with the United States Modern Pentathlon team. While he had been chosen for his horsemanship, he also proved to be a strong runner, swimmer, shooter, and fencer. During the competition, Norman was on his horse preparing for the first jump. "I was low, but as we approached the jump, my horse flattened out a bit, and when he leaped he miscalculated, making his jump too soon. He hit the top of the logs, fell and slid...as we slid along the horse's head hit my shoulder and shattered it."<sup>42</sup> Norman, then twenty-three years old, was laid up in bed. He became a minor celebrity in Hungary.

When Maureen heard the news of Norman's accident while at her desk at the *San Diego Union*, she wrote to him at once and professed her love. When he returned home, they renewed their faltering romance and married on June 11, 1955. Teddy Tinling, who had created most of her tennis outfits, designed her wedding gown. Maureen recalled, "The bishop deviated from the usual marriage ceremony by giving a short talk about Norman and me as an ideal young couple – both accomplished athletes, each a credit to the world of sport. It was not planned; it flowed from his heart."<sup>43</sup> Their honeymoon took them to Europe where Maureen was beginning her career as a reporter. She wrote about the 1955 Wimbledon championship for the *London Daily Mail*. She felt strange not to be playing, but she described herself as happy with her new life.

Maureen's accident did not defeat her. She believed that her post-tennis career and family life gave her the satisfaction of a life lived by "ten people." Soon after her marriage, Little Mo became "Little Mom" with two daughters, Cindy and Brenda. She also wrote sports columns and served on the board of Wilson Sporting Goods Company. Her husband, meanwhile, operated several successful "Jack-in-the-Box" restaurants.<sup>44</sup>

Although her injuries did not allow her to play competitive tennis, she was able to play in one-set exhibition matches. Crowds turned out to get a glimpse of Little Mo. According to one writer, "Even after her retirement, when hobbled by injury, Maureen fascinated San Diego's Community Concourse. She made believers out of persons to whom she was only a legend. In the concourse, she routed Nancy Kiner, 8-2, on a slick wood surface, which was expected to favor Nancy, who had won three indoor titles on that type of footing years previously. Nancy was more impressed than anybody. 'Once you've got it, you never lose it,' Nancy gasped."<sup>45</sup>

Maureen also served as a radio and television commentator. Billie Jean King remembered her "as being such a winner" and "also very smart. I liked the fact that she came from a public park background. As a player she was extremely tenacious and a great striker of the ball. Years later I learned that the first year I won Wimbledon in singles (1966) she was the commentator for BBC. That was a great moment for me when I heard her voice on tape as we were going through video for the HBO documentary *Portrait of a Pioneer*."<sup>46</sup>

In 1958, Maureen won a settlement against the company that operated the cement-mixer truck, which prematurely ended her career. The case went through several appeals before the California Supreme Court finally awarded Maureen \$110,734, the largest personal injury award ever granted, up to that time, in San



"Little Mo" becomes "Little Mom." Pictured are Maureen Connolly-Brinker, Norman Brinker, and newborn Cindy Brinker, 1957. ©SDHS, UT #84:1584-5, Union Tribune Collection.

Diego. Unfortunately, the result was a great deal of negative publicity for Maureen. The citizens who had given her the horse now attacked her for riding it. She wrote, "Many people could not understand why I should have won an award in court. I had not been crippled. On the surface, at least, I appeared quite normal. 'What was she doing on a horse?' was the comment of some."<sup>47</sup> She was devastated by the popular reaction, particularly since she had done so much to promote the image of the city.

Soon afterward, the Brinker family moved to Dallas, Texas, where Maureen turned her attention to education. She became an undergraduate at Southern Methodist University in 1964. Her husband recalled, "Maureen was not able to get a college degree because of her tennis career. So when she finally went, she was a student *par excellence*. She managed to complete about two years worth of courses at SMU, going mainly at night, before her health deteriorated too far. She attacked college with the same concentration she displayed on the tennis courts."<sup>48</sup>

She also helped her husband with his new business, Brinks Coffee Shop in Dallas. A journalist noted, "Now Maureen is lending a helping hand in the opening of a fancy coffee shop, the family's first venture into business for themselves and one they hope to make the first of a chain of moderate priced restaurants in and out of Dallas."<sup>49</sup> Later, Norman created the Steak & Ale Restaurant and Bennigan's Grill & Tavern, both of which became successful chains. During this time, Maureen gave tennis lessons to youngsters. She enjoyed teaching and worked with her daughter, Cindy, who would later become a ranked collegiate player.



*The Brinker family visited Sea World prior to one of Maureen's final exhibition matches, 1968. Pictured are Maureen Connolly-Brinker, Norman Brinker, Cindy Brinker, and Brenda Brinker. ©SDHS, UT #85:H689-1, Union-Tribune Collection.*

In 1968, she co-founded the Maureen Connolly Brinker Tennis Foundation to provide funds for tennis clinics and to aid juniors who could not afford to compete nationally. Her good friend, Nancy Jeffett, became her partner in this venture and continues to serve as co-founder and chairman emeritus.<sup>50</sup> Every year, the foundation sponsors six junior tournaments and three tournaments for women. Billie Jean King said of the foundation, "Her legacy continues through the Maureen Connolly Brinker Foundation. Nancy Jeffett and everyone at the foundation have done a great job to ensure that girls have an opportunity to compete in our sport at the highest levels. The foundation is definitely one of a kind and a great reflection on Maureen's contribution to tennis."<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, Little Mo did not live to see her foundation thrive. On May 21, 1969, Maureen Connolly lost her battle with cancer. She was thirty-four years old. At her funeral service, Reverend Robert N. Watkin, Jr. remarked, "It takes courage to come back from an 0-5 set on the tennis courts. It takes courage to come back from a terrible horseback riding accident to lead a full life. And it takes courage to face almost certain death with her chin held high. She had the courage."<sup>52</sup> A year before she died, knowing that her cancer was inoperable, she went to the bedside of her childhood friend and former doubles partner, Patsy Zellmer, who also was

dying of cancer. According to one author, "She had the guts to go and try to cheer her up. That was the only experience that unnerved her a little."<sup>53</sup>

Maureen's tombstone reads, "Wife, Mother, Champion," but she was much more than that. She was a complicated and hurt girl who used her inner rage to propel her to greatness in the tennis world; a mature champion who was able to let go of the pain, anger, hatred, and fear; a wife who helped her husband to create successful businesses; a mother who nurtured and educated her young daughters; a businesswoman; a respected television and radio personality; an author who published two books and wrote numerous articles, and the co-founder of a foundation that continues to help young players today. This was San Diego's sweetheart. This was Maureen Connolly.

## NOTES

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20. Norman Bell, "Li'l Mo Wins Third Female Athlete of the Year, Flo 2nd Again," *San Diego Union*, January 9, 1954.
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22. Voss, "Give 'Em Hell, Mo!"
23. Cindy Brinker-Simmons, *Little Mo's Legacy: A Mother's Lessons. A Daughter's Story* (Irving, Texas: Tapestry Press, 2001), 100.
24. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 61.
25. Ibid., 17.
26. Brinker-Simmons, *Little Mo's Legacy: A Mother's Lessons. A Daughter's Story*, 100.
27. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 78.
28. A History of Women in Sports Timeline giving all Associated Press women athletes of the year beginning in 1931 can be accessed at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associated\\_Press\\_Athlete\\_of\\_the\\_Year](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associated_Press_Athlete_of_the_Year)
29. Voss, "Give 'Em Hell, Mo!"
30. Beyette, "The Legend of Little Mo."
31. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 84.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 88.
35. Margaret Smith Court won the calendar year grand slam in 1970, but lost a set to Rosemary Casals at the U.S. Open and Stefi Graf accomplish the slam in 1988, but lost a set to Martina Navratilova at Wimbledon and another to Gabriela Sabatini at the U.S. Open. However, Graf is the only player to win the Golden Slam, by adding a Gold Medal from the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea.
36. Bell, "Li'l Mo Wins Third Female Athlete of the Year, Flo 2nd Again," *San Diego Union*, January 9, 1954.
37. Jack Murphy, "Maureen Annexes 3rd Wimbledon Net Crown," *San Diego Union*, July 4, 1954.
38. Nelson Fisher, "Maureen Connolly Injured on Horse," *San Diego Union*, July 21, 1954.
39. Ibid.
40. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 101.
41. Billie Jean King, interviewed by author, Newport Beach, CA, October 10, 2007. Billie Jean King, a legend in the world of tennis, won twelve Grand Slam titles during her reign on the tennis courts from 1966 to 1975. She defeated Bobby Riggs in the famous "Battle of the Sexes" match on September 20, 1973. Today she runs the World Team Tennis league and participates in many philanthropic endeavors.
42. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 104.
43. Ibid., 110.
44. Beyette, "Legend of Little Mo."
45. Gallup, "Tennis Great 'Mo' Connolly Dies in Dallas."
46. Billie Jean King, interviewed by author, Newport Beach, CA, October 10, 2007.
47. Connolly, *Forehand Drive*, 113.
48. Brinker-Simmons, *Little Mo's Legacy: A Mother's Lesson's. A Daughter's Story*, 57.
49. "Little Mo Goes to College," *San Diego Union*, May 28, 1964.
50. Maureen Connolly Brinker Tennis Foundation, <http://www.mcbtennis.org/> (accessed February 21, 2008).
51. Billie Jean King, interviewed by author, Newport Beach, CA, October 10, 2007.
52. "Funeral Rites Salute 'Little Mo,'" *San Diego Union*, May 22 1969.
53. Beyette, "Legend of Little Mo."