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“A Mad Woman, or a French Woman”

CHANNELING SUZANNE LENGLEN



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"There Will Always Be Doubt"

FOREST HILLS, 1921

In August 1921, at Forest Hills Stadium in New York, the best lawn tennis player in the world double-faulted, gave up the match, and left the court in tears. Suzanne Lenglen had floated across the Atlantic Ocean to play the U.S. championships, where the American champion, Molla Mallory, was waiting for her. Lenglen coughed her way through the first set and lost it 6-2. Losing was unfamiliar to Lenglen as she had not lost in well over a hundred previous matches, depending on the source, and had not lost a completed singles match since 1914 (which happened to be the year she became the youngest major champion in tennis history, winning the World Hard Court singles championship). But, on this day, she double-faulted and then forfeited the match to Mallory, saying she was too ill to go on, and was led sobbing from the court with a towel held to her mouth while spectators booed.

Lenglen's record is stunning. She never lost a completed singles match after Mallory either. Forest Hills was her only singles loss after the war. Over her career, she would win the Wimbledon singles title six times, and she had already won two gold medals at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp (Pileggi, 1982, p. 64). The loss was exceptionally newsworthy, covered with vim and vigor internationally. Not only did she forfeit, but did so after a double fault (Abbott, 1921)—two missed serves in a row—the loneliest way to lose a point in tennis, since no one else touches the ball. It is how Lenglen ended her American debut.

As I played mediocre recreational tennis 105 years later under pellucid baby blue skies on a Central Florida public court, I channeled Suzanne Lenglen. I moved my feet against natural inclination to stand still, and I reached out with my whole body, arms wide, shuffling sideways across the court. I can't yet leap and dance, but I didn't double-fault.

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