Helen Wills Moody: America’s Tennis Champion

by Martina Williams

Genre
- Biography
Build Background
- Tennis
- Women Athletes
- Championships
Access Content
- Captions and Labels
- Fact Box
- Definitions
Extend Language
- Tennis Terms
- The Suffix -ship
Question of the Week
What unique traits does it take to be the first to do something?

Key Comprehension Skill
Fact and Opinion

Concept Words
famous champion coach rank
in a row fashion retired

Learning Goals
• You must work hard to be the first to do something.
• Helen Wills was a famous tennis player.
• Helen Wills worked hard to become the best player.

by Martina Williams
Helen Wills was born in California in 1905. Helen loved two activities: painting and tennis. Helen was a very good painter. In fact, she sold some of her paintings in New York City. But painting didn’t make Helen famous. Helen would grow up to become the most successful tennis champion of the time.

Helen’s father was a doctor. He and Helen played tennis together at a tennis club in Berkeley, California. One day, a famous tennis player named Hazel Wightman visited Helen’s tennis club. She watched 14-year-old Helen playing with her father. She was surprised by how well Helen played. Hazel Wightman thought that Helen could become a tennis champion.
Hazel Wightman became Helen’s coach. Helen and Hazel played tennis together four days a week. Wightman helped Helen improve her different tennis strokes. Helen was an excellent student. In 1921, Helen won the California State Women’s Championship. She was 16 years old.

Helen wanted to become an even better player. She practiced against male players who were stronger and could hit the ball harder than her.

Every year experts rank the best tennis players. In 1922, Helen was ranked the third best female tennis player in the U.S.

**rank:** to put in order

---

**Extend Language Tennis Strokes**

A *backhand* is made with the back of the hand facing forward.

A *forehand* is made with the palm of the hand facing forward.

**coach:** trainer
In 1923, Helen played in an important match called the U.S. Open Tennis Championships, in New York. She played against Molla Mallory. Mallory was ranked as the best player in the world. Experts expected Mallory to easily win the match. The experts were wrong. Wills beat Mallory in only 33 minutes!

Helen’s victory at the U.S. Open was just the beginning. From then on, she won almost every match she played. In 1924, Helen won the gold medal for tennis at the Olympics. From 1927 to 1933, Helen won 180 matches in a row.

In 1928, Helen married Frederick Moody and changed her name to Helen Wills Moody.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tournament</th>
<th>Years Won</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wimbledon Championship</td>
<td>1927 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1929 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1932 1933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1935 1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Championship</td>
<td>1923 1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1925 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1928 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Championship</td>
<td>1923 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1930 1932</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in a row: one after the other
Helen did more than win championships. She also changed tennis fashion. In the 1920s, women played tennis in long skirts. The skirts made it difficult to run. Helen decided that she would play in a short skirt. Other tennis players decided to do the same.

In 1938, after winning Wimbledon, Helen Wills Moody retired. She was 33 years old. In 1969, Helen was elected to the Tennis Hall of Fame.

Talk About It
1. How did Helen practice to become a better player?
2. What kind of a person do you think Helen was? Give details that support your answer.

Write About It
3. On a separate sheet of paper, write three facts and two opinions about Helen Wills Moody. Look in the selection for facts. The opinions can be your own.

Extend Language
The words friend and friendship are related. Friendship is shared by friends. What is the word in this story that is related to the word champion?

Photographs
Every effort has been made to secure permission and provide appropriate credit for photographic material. The publisher deeply regrets any omission and pledges to correct errors called to its attention in subsequent editions.

Cover ©Bettmann/Corbis; 1 ©Underwood & Underwood/Corbis; 4 (TL) ©Bettmann/Corbis, (TR) ©Underwood & Underwood/Corbis; 5 ©Bettmann/Corbis; 6 ©Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis; 8 ©Bettmann/Corbis.