

NorCal Hall of Famer DuPont, dies at 94

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Margaret Osborne Dupont

Margaret Osborne duPont, a tenacious and durable American tennis champion who won six Grand Slam singles titles in the middle decades of the 20th century while becoming one of the most dominant doubles players of her era, died Wednesday at her home in El Paso. She was 94. She began her tennis career at age 11 on the public courts in Golden Gate Park.

Her death was confirmed on Thursday by Leigh Bloss, the son of the former tennis, badminton and squash star Margaret Varner Bloss, a friend and business partner of duPont's who lived with her for much of her life.

A fixture in women's tennis for almost a quarter century, duPont won 37 Grand Slam titles, 31 of them in doubles play, placing her fourth on the list of players with the most Grand Slam laurels. Her last, in mixed doubles at Wimbledon in 1962, came at the age of 44.

DuPont was ranked No. 1 in the world among women at year's end from 1947 through 1950 and among the top 10 American women in the sport for the better part of 20 years, starting as an already cosmopolitan 20-year-old in San Francisco and still holding steady among the elite at 40.

It was a celebrated run of endurance and high-caliber play by a competitor who was renowned for refusing to wilt under pressure. When she lost, it was rarely in straight sets. Several of her matches set longevity records.

One was in 1948, at the United States national championships at Forest Hills, Queens. Over two days, she and Bill Talbert outlasted Gussie Moran and Bob Falkenberg in an epic 71-game mixed doubles semifinal, a record that stood for more than 40 years. In the same tournament, vying for the singles title, duPont came from behind to defeat Louise Brough, her friend and doubles partner, in 48 games, winning the last set by 15-13. It was the longest women's final at Forest Hills.

A poised and canny playmaker, DuPont wielded a dazzling arsenal of shots, including low-flying spin volleys and gravity-defying lobs, often executed in sensible shorts rather than the billowy tennis skirts customary in her day.

She interrupted her career only twice: in 1947, to become, at 29, the second wife of William duPont Jr., a 51-year-old tennis-loving, fox hunting heir to the chemical company fortune; and in 1952, to give birth to their son, William III.

She had met her husband in California, where on yearly visits he liked to watch and play tennis. "He wasn't very good, but he sure loved to play," duPont told The El Paso Times in 2011.

She lived in splendor at Bellevue Hall, her husband's Delaware estate outside Wilmington, socializing with the rich and famous and practicing her game on the grounds.

DuPont's concession to becoming a wife was a career-long absence from the Australian Championships, held in the winter. Her husband, an otherwise enthusiastic supporter of her career, insisted on wintering in California for his health and threatened divorce if she went to Australia, she said. Many believe she would have exceeded Billie Jean King's 39 Slam titles if she had competed in Australia. (Margaret Court had 62, the record.)

The couple did divorce, amicably, in 1964, and duPont lived for the rest of her life in Texas with Bloss, who survives her, as do DuPont's son, William, a former owner of the Orlando Magic, and four grandchildren.

Motherhood did not distract her. DuPont continued to accumulate Grand Slam titles, becoming one of only a handful of women to do so after giving birth. Her singles titles came at Wimbledon (1947), the French Open (1946 and '49) and the United States national championships (1948-50). DuPont shared her doubles success with both men and women. From 1943 to 1960, she won nine mixed doubles championships at Forest Hills alongside four different partners.

Her most successful collaboration was with Brough. Together they held the record for most Grand Slam doubles titles, 20, until Martina Navratilova and Pam Shriver tied it in 1989. DuPont and Brough also had an eight-year unbeaten streak, from

1942 to 1950, and held a virtual monopoly on the Forest Hills doubles crown, winning it 12 times in 14 tries. Her distinction as the oldest woman to win a Wimbledon title lasted 41 years, until Navratilova won in 2003 in mixed doubles at 46.

One of duPont's most important partnerships on the court and off was with Margaret Bloss. When not competing in tennis, badminton and squash, Bloss, nine years' duPont's junior, was social secretary to William duPont and tutor to the duPonts' son.

She and Margaret duPont reached the women's doubles final at Wimbledon in 1958, losing to Althea Gibson and Maria Bueno. In 1962, as duPont's career wound down, the two defeated Britain in the Wightman Cup doubles competition. DuPont had an unblemished record, 19-0, in Wightman Cup play, a now discontinued British competition.

After duPont and her husband divorced, she remained in the East so that her son would be near his father. But after William duPont died in 1965, she moved with her son and Leigh Bloss to Texas to breed thoroughbred horses near El Paso, Bloss's hometown, and share a home.

For duPont, the daughter of a rancher, the DuPont-Bloss Stables melded two pieces of her past, producing horses with names like Tennis Star, A Smash, Super Set, Court Shot and Net Effect.

She had no regrets about leaving Delaware, she told The El Paso Herald Post in 1998: "I was never impressed by the duPont name. I'm still not."

Margaret Evelyn Osborne was born on March 4, 1918, in Joseph, Ore., the daughter of St. Lawrence and Eva Jane Osborne. She spent her earliest years on a modest ranch tended by her parents, riding to and from school on horseback and playing baseball with her brother on a backyard lot.

"I had quite a bit of natural athletic ability," she recalled in 1998. "My brother, Charles, and I played baseball, and I could throw the ball like a boy."

Margaret began playing tennis at 9 after the family moved to Spokane, Wash., her father having been unable to continue to do farm labor for health reasons. Two years later they moved to San Francisco, where her father found work as a car mechanic. Margaret, at 11, began playing at the Golden Gate public courts, competing in tournaments and writing freelance articles for American Lawn Tennis Magazine.

After graduating from the High School of Commerce in 1936, and unable to afford college, duPont decided on a tennis career, starting at 18 by taking the train to Philadelphia and winning the junior nationals singles and double titles and training for a year with the renowned coach Tom Stow.

She also found work writing and working for the Northern California Tennis Association as its secretary-treasurer, and during World War II she worked in a marine shipbuilding plant. Her father died in 1948 at age 60 when a young woman drove her car through a red light in San Francisco and hit him.

DuPont was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1967 alongside Bobby Riggs, Brough and Talbert, with whom she won a record four consecutive United States mixed doubles championships, from 1943-46. She was a member of the founding class of the USTA Northern California Hall of Fame in 1974.

Tennis then was so unlike today's game, she said in an interview with the Hall of Fame. "We played with wooden rackets, and the balls are much harder now," she said. "Our game was more about finesse, not so much power as today." And because the stars of her day were not paid, she said, they played for one reason: "For the love of the game."