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Legendary Hotchkiss Wightman Revolutionized Game (Tennis)

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Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman played at Cal when it was a hotbed of women's tennis.

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Legendary Hotchkiss Wightman Revolutionized Game

Former Golden Bear Was A Pioneer for Women's Tennis, Class of 1911

The University of California was a hotbed of women's tennis in the early 20th century, with several legendary players attending Cal well before the creation of the varsity women's tennis program in 1973.

The first of these iconic women to grace the Berkeley campus and reach national fame was the late Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman, CBE, who graduated from Cal in 1911.

From 1909-24, Wightman won 17 Grand Slam titles, including a doubles crown at Wimbledon and 16 titles from the U.S. National Championships, the precursor to the US Open. She also won two Olympic gold medals and founded the Wightman Cup, an annual tournament between American and British women's players that ran from 1923-1989 and inspired the creation of the Federation Cup. In 1973, Queen Elizabeth II named Wightman an honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

Wightman coached two other legendary women who attended Cal in [Helen Wills Moody Roark](#), a 31-time Grand Slam champion, and [Helen Hull Jacobs](#), who won 14 Grand Slams. All three

competed at the Berkeley Tennis Club, earned induction into the International Tennis Hall of Fame - with Wightman joining that august organization in 1957 - and earned induction into the Cal Athletics Hall of Fame. The three – along with fellow Cal products Anna McCune Harper and Don Budge – were also members of the first USTA NorCal Hall of Fame class in 1974. Wightman and Wills Moody Roark entered Cal's Hall of Fame as its first female members in 1978.

A prolific champion who won more than 40 U.S. titles and a coach of several notable players, Wightman passed away on Dec. 5, 1974, at the age of 87.

Born Hazel Virginia Hotchkiss on Dec. 20, 1886, in Healdsburg, California – located about one and a half hours north of San Francisco – Wightman and her family moved from their Healdsburg ranch to a home in Berkeley in 1900. Small and frail as a child, Hazel took up tennis when a doctor suggested she participate in outdoor activities to improve her health, and so she began playing a variety of sports including tennis with her four brothers - Miller, Homer, Marius and Linville.

Several factors influenced her style of play. She fell in love with the game when she attended the 1902 Pacific Coast Championships and watched a match featuring future rival and five-time Grand Slam champ May Sutton, but Wightman found the typically long points from the women's baseline match boring. Instead, she preferred the volley and net play she saw in the men's game.

Additionally, the Hotchkiss siblings often played on an uneven home court in their early years – with a rope strung across the backyard serving as a net – and had to volley to keep the ball from taking a bad bounce off the gravel surface.

The serve and volley game was uncommon among women's players in the early 1900s. But it suited the diminutive Wightman, who at barely five-feet tall was mobile and could track down most shots, and distinguished her from Sutton and other strong baseline players of the time. Women's tennis attire – with long sleeves and dresses that almost reached the ground – did not quite suit her game, though, and Wightman began playing with sleeveless dresses, which were still regulation length.

When the young Wightman wasn't playing at home, she had to start her day early to play on the only other available Berkeley court – located at the Faculty Club on the UC campus – because girls were not allowed to play on the court after 8 a.m. Her options increased a few years later, in 1906, when Wightman joined the Berkeley Tennis Club, which opened with two courts.

In 1902, six months after she started playing tennis, Wightman went on to win a title in her first tournament, partnering with Mary Radcliffe to capture the Bay Counties Women's Doubles Championship in San Francisco.

Wightman matriculated at the University of California in 1908 and began her rise to prominence in the summer of 1909 when she became the first woman to win the singles, doubles and mixed doubles titles in one tournament at the U.S. National Championships. She repeated that feat in

1910 and 1911, with Wightman collecting all three titles in one day in 1911. In the 1911 singles final, Wightman trailed Florence Sutton – one of May's sisters – early before prevailing, 8-10, 6-1, 9-7.

Wightman also faced May Sutton in a memorable singles final in 1911, in the Lake Niagara Tennis Tournament in Ontario, Canada. Sutton led 6-0, 5-1, before Wightman roared back to win, 0-6, 7-5 6-0.

The former Hazel Hotchkiss married George Wightman in 1912, moved to Boston and had five children – George, Jr., Virginia, Hazel, Dorothy and William – before divorcing in 1940. Her growing family did not slow her down, with Wightman winning seven of her U.S. national championships after the birth of George, her oldest child, in 1913. She returned to the national scene in 1915, when Wightman became the first mother to win a U.S. title when she won the national doubles championship and was also the U.S. singles runner-up.

In 1920, Wightman met the then-Helen Wills at the Berkeley Tennis Club when the latter was 14. Wills, according to *Readers' Digest*, called her meeting with Wightman – who had won 13 U.S. national titles by that point – life changing. Wightman later mentored Wills as well as played doubles with her protégé. Wightman opened her home in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, to players she would go on to coach, including Wills, Hull Jacobs and Sarah Palfrey, an 18-time Grand Slam champion.

A staunch advocate for women's tennis, Wightman co-founded the Ladies International Tennis Challenge to give women's players a high-caliber international tournament similar to the men's Davis Cup. The annual series of matches between American and British players later became known as the Wightman Cup after she donated a silver vase to serve as the trophy for the winners. Wightman competed on U.S. teams in 1923, 1924, 1927, 1929 and 1931, and was a non-playing captain for the U.S. 13 times.

A talented all-around athlete, Wightman won the 1927 U.S. national squash championship in singles and a Massachusetts state ping-pong crown, along with her tennis titles. She also excelled in badminton. In 1933, Wightman authored *Better Tennis*, a book aimed at younger readers.

Wightman remained at the top of her game despite her burgeoning interests, capturing both of her Olympic gold medals in the 1924 Summer Games in Paris. She teamed with Titanic survivor Richard Norris Williams to win mixed doubles, despite Williams ailing from an Achilles injury in the final, and partnered Wills Moody Roark to take doubles gold. That triumphant year also featured Wightman's lone Wimbledon title, as the 37-year-old teamed with Wills Moody Roark to win in doubles.

Between 1948 and 1954 Wightman won 11 titles at the U.S. Grasscourt Senior Doubles Championships, with her last career championship coming at the age of 68.

About two weeks before her 88th birthday, Wightman – the pioneer and championship player and coach – passed away at her home in Chestnut Hill.

Taken from the Cal Athletics 150w website.