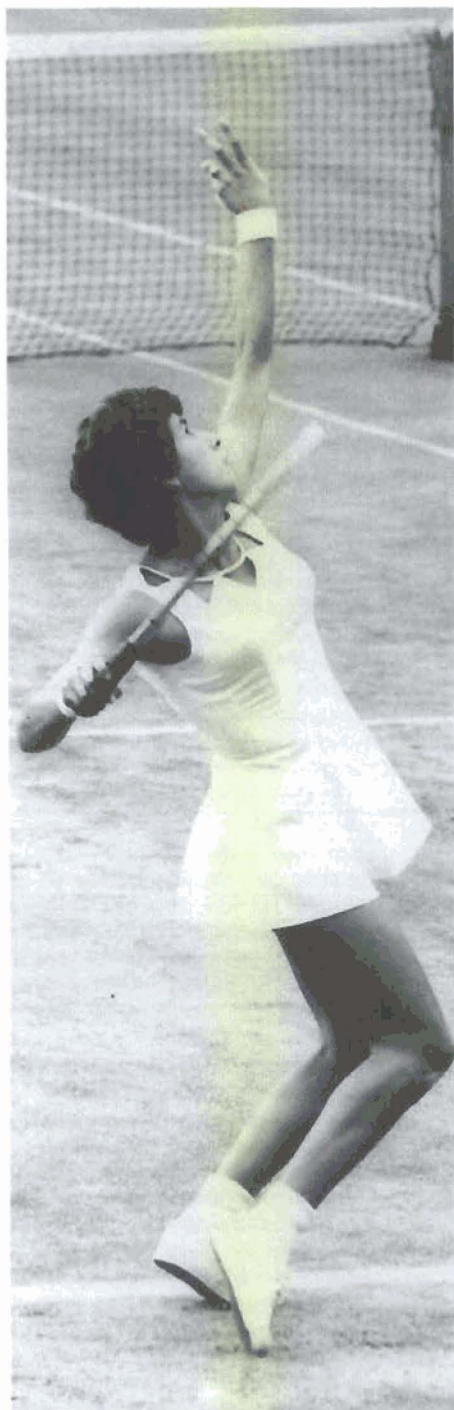


Still a champion



Miss Bueno swings into action.

There are plenty of Wimbledon champions who command respect but there is one who stands head-and-shoulders above the majority in terms of fans' affection, even more so amongst those who witnessed her various successes at The Championships. Here she provides Henry Wancke with an insight of what she has experienced during the ensuing years.

Once seen, never forgotten, that is how many will remember the graceful Maria Bueno in her Wimbledon heyday. These days the Wimbledon champion still plays and, at 66 years of age, it is in fact, difficult to keep her off court.

Even now the elegant Brazilian brings a sense of ballet to the court, much as she did when she was contesting the major titles around the world. Her grace and fiery style then made her a favourite amongst spectators and brought her numerous titles, including three at Wimbledon and four at the US Open. Her doubles record was also way above the ordinary – champion of France, Australia, four times at the US Open and five times at Wimbledon.

And she competed at a time when the game was dominated by American and Australian players, led respectively by Billie-Jean (Moffitt) King and Margaret (Smith) Court. Both were to end their careers with a greater number of majors but that has not minimised Miss Bueno's contribution to the game and her place as an all-time great.

She was a naturally gifted player having never had a formal tennis lesson but her artistry overshadowed her two main rivals, Court being the more powerful and King the better athlete of the three. Physically she was the frailest of the trio but her game was effortless and exciting.

That frailty became evident when she started to pick up injuries which forced her off the circuit for several years. But comeback she did. "I put myself in a very difficult position by trying to come back," she recollected at Wimbledon this year. "People I would normally beat one-and-two, I was lucky to beat in three sets. It was more of a personal victory for me to have gotten back.

"In 1976 I played again at Wimbledon but it was only possible because of the cortisone shots [I took] after every match. I could only play for one hour at a time but even so, I made it through to the last 16 where I lost to Sue Barker on Centre Court in three sets [2-6, 6-2, 6-1]. I watched that match only the other day and you can see my arm wasn't working at all!"

She realised after a few more events she entered, that she was playing well below her capabilities and felt it best to bring that period of her career to an



Maria Bueno was amongst the group honoured at this year's Championships when, on the middle Saturday, they were presented in the Royal Box with a Waterford Crystal bowl by the Duchess of Gloucester. The group, who had amassed between them over 200 Grand Slam titles, were, from left to right, Martina Navratilova, Billie-Jean King, Steffi Graf, Margaret Court and 'La Bueno'.

Picture: David Musgrove.

end. However, she did play the Wimbledon mixed with Victor Pecci in 1981 and, for a few years, the senior doubles both at Wimbledon and the US Open, but as she explained: "My hip was already getting bad so I gave up playing tournaments because it became physically impossible. It was hard to have to give up playing matches but I still play tennis. I hit three or four times a week for an hour or so and that allows me to stay in shape so I can do demonstrations and take clinics which I still conduct around the world."

She has been beset by injuries and in many ways, epitomises a player intoxicated by the sport for she has never allowed herself to accept a quiet retirement away from the physical side of the game.

"Most people get injured at some stage or another but as you get older these became more acute," she commented as she went on to include the vast numbers who have approached their injuries in a similar manner. "It doesn't seem to slow a lot of us down though. You see players continuing to

play wrapped in bandages and all sorts of supports, because they want to keep playing despite their physical problems."

She added: "It's a credit to the game and the people who play it that you can play it throughout your life. My father carried on playing until he was 86! In other sports, you have to quit, but tennis players keep trying like hell to still keep on playing. Amazing really!"

She continued: "I've been told many times that I would never play again but I refused to give up hope. At one point I couldn't use my right arm at all so I played left-handed – just hitting really, and it was the most frustrating thing I've ever done!"

"I don't really talk about this much because it's all a bit miserable but I simply would not accept that I would never use my arm again after 12 surgeries. I began doing exercises, starting with five minutes every hour, working up to half an hour every hour, with weights and so on, for a full year. Finally I got to play on court again for fifteen-minutes and then it all went bad again and I was back in surgery. To put it mildly, I was devastated.

"But I still wouldn't give up hope and after ten years of trying everything possible – surgeries, faith-healing, cortisone shots and so on – I finally managed to rehabilitate myself and got back onto court again."

That was just one aspect of her problems following her retirement from the circuit. The other was those hips which, fortunately, did not cause her the same problems. In fact her recovery from surgery on this occasion was remarkable though it isn't something she has publicised.

"Doctors say you shouldn't play after hip surgery but many people do, including me! It's not something to take lightly and you need to seek good medical advice about what your options are. Anyone considering surgery should listen carefully because it is a miraculous surgery that transforms your life and gets rid of that indescribable pain that only someone who has experienced it, knows.

"I've had both hips successfully replaced and had to make adjustments. You have to come to terms with your limitations and be sensible about still being active. It's about striking a balance between leading the life you want and saving your artificial hips in the long term.

"After all that, hip surgery is relatively straight-forward, even if it's a bit scary!"

Maria Bueno never competed as a 'Veteran' though she is very much a part of the Veteran game with a major competition having been named after her, thanks to a local fan as she explains. "Everything happened because

of Yone Borba Diaz, a Brazilian lady who is a huge fan of mine and of tennis. She has played her entire life and dedicates most of her time these days organising veteran tournaments back home and around South America.

"She first suggested having a cup in my name and fought hard for it to happen, finally persuading the CBT (Confederação Brasileira de Tennis) to present the trophy she donated, to the ITF.

That was in 1983 and was the first of the veteran team competitions, for women over 50.

"I don't remember the year but I think the first event I went to was in Brazil in Itaparica, where I presented the prizes. There weren't that many teams but it was a huge success and has been growing ever since.

"I also attended the events in Barcelona, Bournemouth at the West Hants Club and more recently, in my home town of São Paulo when some 19 countries played."

Her own lack of Veteran participation can be blamed on the various injuries she had but she did follow and support her brother Pedro who reached 15 on the ITF rankings for his age group. Unfortunately he has now retired with his own hip problems.

But Maria Bueno, who continues to travel around the world doing clinics and making personal appearances, is not surprised that veteran tennis has grown over the last decades. "If we think the juniors are competitive, full of on-court disputes, the veterans are even worse!" she declares. "It's funny to see how the competitive spirit is sustained as players get older. Senior players still have that will to win and are pretty feisty, right down to making tight line calls. The difference is once the match is over, they shake hands and go off to have a drink or go out dancing together..."

She adds, "The expectation is to play a nice sedate game as we get older but the reality is we all still want to win at all costs. That doesn't diminish!" And you would expect nothing more from a player who still hates to lose and can't tear herself away from the sport. "Tennis continues to be my life and I keep an active interest in everything that is going on. Above all, it is still a lot of fun!"

Editor's note – Maria Bueno will be launching her own website shortly and



The Brazilian holds the Venus Rosewater dish following her victory over Margaret Court in 1964.



Maria with her brother Pedro.