

MARIA BUENO



Lance Tingay.

When the 1958 season was beginning to stir there were murmurs from the United States that the world game was about to see something extra special. There was a Brazilian lass, Maria Esther Bueno, born on October 11th 1939 in Sao Paulo and therefore 18 years old, who promised fine things. One should watch her, it was said. I did so for the first time at her European debut, the Italian Championships at the Foro Italico in Rome in the spring. I went to record Shirley Bloomer's defence of the title. The Grimsby girl (now Mrs Chris Brasher) had patiently and doughtily taken the championship for Britain the year before.

The novice Miss Bueno was impressive at first sight. She had a perfect physique for the game, she moved beautifully and she had a personality which gave her an imperious approach to her matches, as though she was the one entitled to command. And she was very aggressive, even on a slow hard court.

But—and it seemed a very real but—her splendid fluency of style was translated into shots where she projected the ball without any hint of controlling spin. If she hit the ball perfectly she was likely to project a fast winner, apparently without effort. But if she did not middle the ball it was liable to go anywhere. How could so dangerous a game take its owner to the top? She was the sort of player who need not be beaten but beat herself.

Miss Bueno and Miss Bloomer met in the semi-final and I watched a striking British defeat. The Brazilian was match points down and yet won—1-6, 9-7, 8-6 was the score, a long, wavering affair in exhausting heat. Then Miss Bueno beat the Australian Lorraine Coghlan in the final and she had begun her career in triumph.

In a week she had translated promise into achievement. For the next year she served her apprenticeship as a great champion. The really big successes were just around the corner. Or were they?

In the French Championships she had to let the consistency of Miss Bloomer thwart her more sparkling brilliance. That was in the semi-final. At her first Wimbledon she reached the quarter-final where the combination of Ann Haydon's guile and a wet day was too much. At the same stage in the US meeting Beverley Fleitz, that superb ambidexterous player, brought her down.

Her second attempt at Wimbledon in 1959 proved that she was not always destined



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Poetry in motion on court, recalls Lance Tingay.

to beat herself. She was 19 and she won not only Wimbledon but Forest Hills as well.

With what majesty did she not rule the courts of the world for the next seven years. She was a long way short of being invincible. There was frailty in the perfection of her game. When she was good she was very, very good. When she was bad she was—well, not horrid but certainly vulnerable.

She and Margaret Smith (later Mrs Court) provided a moving motif to the game in those years. What a rivalry that was. The Australian was an athlete through and through. The Brazilian was the artist. Miss Bueno had the best of their first clash, which was in Adelaide in 1960. But the more rugged Miss Smith had the margin overall and their lifetime rivalry resolved when in San Francisco in 1968 (with Miss Bueno clearly beyond her best) the Australian won 6-4, 7-5 to record her 16th win out of 22 meetings.

Their most stirring clash was one of the most dramatic women's contests I have seen. It was the final of the Italian Championship in 1962 and extraneous values intruded on their personal ambitions. As the world well knows

non-playing captains are not permitted in ordinary tournaments. None the less a leading Brazilian administrator, Sylva da Costa, sat near the court to give Miss Bueno every help in his power. The Stadium Court in the Foro Italico is so set that there is an enclosure behind the umpire's chair which is technically not part of the court.

The Australian men's captain, dear old Alf Chave, was incensed by all this. Why should Miss Bueno have all the moral advantage of such assistance, doubtful though its legality was? So he went down and sat in the same enclosure to aid and abet his Miss Smith.

(There was a punch line to all this. Margaret Smith was that year on her own. The Australian Association had, in their wisdom—for you can have no idea how idiotic they could be in those days—strictly forbidden Alf Chave to associate with Miss Smith in any way whatsoever. Of course he said, “—s” to the LTA of Australia and in fact got into hot water with them on the story being reported.) But with the illicit presence of a Brazilian captain and with the twice illicit presence of an Australian captain two outstanding players fought a tremendous match.

Under the burning sun and before a frenzied crowd—that wanted their fellow Latin to win—Margaret Smith won a famous victory. The score was 8-6, 5-7, 6-4. The loser acquired honours aplenty. In her own country Maria Bueno had acclaim rare for a sportswoman. They put up a statue to her. They issued a postage stamp with her portrait. In a sense she was the queen of Brazil.

Her career was interrupted by jaundice and she was out of the game for about a year. She won Wimbledon three times, 1959, 1960 and 1964. The US singles she took four times, 1959, 1963, 1964 and 1966. Her doubles partnership with the American Darlene Hard was famous for its effectiveness and the accord of the partners. They won Wimbledon twice and twice also the US title as well as the French. But she also won Wimbledon with Althea Gibson, with Billie Jean King and Nancy Gunter, the US championship with Mrs Gunter and Margaret Court as well. Her British connection was the Australian doubles with Christine Janes in 1960. Maria Bueno in full cry on the court transcended normal sporting values. It was poetry in motion, a web of beauty, even though the web was sometimes fragile.