



# Remembering Maria

Jean Rafferty talked to the legendary Brazilian star during her visit to England this summer.

**M**aria Bueno was always a tigress, a panther, even — when they remember her Brazilian origins — a jaguar. Her grace and fiery style made her a media darling as well as a three time winner at Wimbledon and four time winner at the US Open. Her doubles record was even more dazzling — champion of France, Australia, four times at the US Open and five times a winner at Wimbledon. She still plays a little doubles but her partners now are not the glittering stars she once played with. No longer does she team up with top class women like Darlene Hard, Nancy Richey, Billie Jean King or Margaret Court. At Beckenham, her partner was Penny Johnson, a young American who does not even get into the Avon Futures without qualifying.

Nowadays Maria Bueno's involvement with tennis is less as a player than as a writer and spectator. She still plays exhibition matches in Brazil and some doubles, but her singles career is over and has been for two years. For the past year she has been writing tennis articles and now she is helping set up a new tennis magazine in Sao Paulo, her home town. She grew up in an apartment opposite the tennis club there. A nomad who came early into the roaming life of a tennis

player and has never kicked the habit, she still spends much of her time travelling, this year making contacts for the magazine. 'It's hard to be in one place for a long time,' she says, a little bleakly.

At 40 she is as graceful as ever, just not as fast or as strong. Playing with girls approximately half her age at Beckenham she was still the one you watched. Her stroke-making goes beyond mere efficiency to become a thing of beauty in itself, which is all the more remarkable as she never had a formal tennis lesson in her life. Margaret Court may have been more powerful, Billie Jean more athletic, but Bueno was the one who could make you feel that tennis was the most natural activity in the world. In the end both became more successful but in her heyday Bueno was the one all the little girls wanted to be.

Now most of them, even the grown-up little girls like Austin and Jaeger, seem to want to be Chris Evert, a player whose baseline style is a million miles away from the explosive artistry of Bueno's game. It is a bit surprising then to hear her applaud both Evert and Bjorn Borg for their consistency. 'Chris Evert has been playing very well for so long. She's really stayed at the top. I don't know anybody as consistent as she is. She and Bjorn Borg are the only two that you can say

have been winning all the time. Martina and Tracy have ups and downs.'

Bueno's own career had as many ups and downs as a roller coaster. Although she won Wimbledon two years in a row, in 1959 and 1960, she never achieved the complete domination of the game that Evert enjoyed for so long. Illness and then Court and King intervened. In 1961 and 62 jaundice forced her out of the game. Later it was to be arm and shoulder injuries that made her appearance in the operating theatre more frequent than those on the Centre Court. Her temperament too occasionally got in the way, standard Latin issue. Her career was often over-littered with tears and tantrums, but these outbursts were probably a companion to her fragile self-esteem. Beaten by Margaret Smith, then 17, in the quarter-finals of the Australian Open in 1960, Maria left the court sobbing and the two didn't speak to each other for months. Their ensuing rivalry was not friendly.

When you ask Maria for her feelings on the sad curtailment of a career, the words do not begin to match what she must have felt. 'It's very disappointing,' she says carefully, 'When you have to stop playing and doing the things that you like to do and you know how to do well. I really enjoyed playing and I was still in very

good shape then'. Her enjoyment is problematical because although her game looked so physically effortless, she always seemed to play under great mental stress. Billie Jean King, in her autobiography, recalls her 1966 Wimbledon final against Bueno. 'Maria always played tense anyway, but if she was able to keep her tenseness and lose her nervousness at the same time, she was great.' On that day, when King took her first Wimbledon title, she remembers that Bueno kept both nervousness and tenseness throughout the entire match. She played not so great.

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Looking back now Maria herself says, 'I think the pressure's the same, whether you're playing for money or whatever we were playing for before. We had our glory. That was the only thing we were fighting for. Now there's a lot of money. Pressure is always the same.' And when you ask if there is any way of dealing with pressure she just smiles and shakes her head. In her peak years too, many found Maria to be remote and aloof. Billie Jean again: 'She usually kept to herself and rarely socialized or even talked to other players. She wasn't unpopular but she wasn't popular either. Everybody always seemed to take a neutral attitude toward her and maybe they were just a bit wary too'. Nancy Richey, once her doubles partner, just says 'I didn't know Maria very well. I don't think anyone really knew her. She didn't seem to want people to know her'. Nowadays she's friendly and mellow, not aloof so much as self-contained, life, you feel, has relaxed around her.

It would be easy for Maria to be bitter. Her whole career was punctuated by illness and over the years she has suffered a great deal of pain. She did indeed have plenty of glory in her day - after her 1959 Wimbledon victory she was given a motorcade in Rio and a special mass in Sao Paulo's cathedral. Brazil issued a postage stamp with her picture on it and a statue of her 60 feet high was put up in Sao Paulo. Her fellow citizens had wanted to name a street after her only to discover they could only do so posthumously. Not even Chris Evert had so much honour. But she gained little financially from tennis. Her career was effectively over before big money came into the game. She shrugs the money off with typical understatement — 'it would have been nice.' But she does admit to finding today's women players dull. 'I don't think it's interesting at all,' she says. 'It's very boring and tiring, just staying back and hitting with a lot of spin. Not anything creative. It's just a matter of seeing who hits hardest the longest. Maybe Martina varies her game more. She has more shots. I suppose everybody's trying to be like Borg.'

It is ironic that her own tennis was so much more entertaining to watch and yet so poorly rewarded in comparison. Her serve was one of the best ever seen in women's tennis and in spite of countless operations she has had on her arm the action is still fluid, so smooth that the power seems to come from nowhere. Her visual elegance was always combined with

artistry and audaciousness. She was one of those players who pulled off the impossible, and the crowds loved her for it. Poor Margaret Court, never much loved by anybody in spite of being such a great champion, remembers having to play the crowd as well whenever she played Maria. It must have given her great satisfaction that she won 16 of their 23 matches. Billie Jean, never quite as gracious as Court, says simply: 'I always felt people made too much of Maria's style.'

By the time Court and King reached maturity Maria had been competing at top-class level for many years. At the age of 11 she was already playing in women's events in her native Brazil, while at 14 she took a set off the then World number 6 player, Shirley Fry. At 19 she was the second youngest player to win Wimbledon in modern times. Only Maureen Connolly was younger, though since then both Goolagong and Evert have won the title at the same age. Bueno's career was similar in many ways to today's youngsters, who start playing well at a very young age and are driven on to succeed by parental pressures. Before her first world tour in 1958 she embarked on a programme of tennis and study so that she could please her father by gaining a teacher's certificate before she left. That month she lost 17½ pounds in weight.

'I played very well when I was 17,' recalls Maria. 'And when I won Wimbledon in 1959 I did expect to win. The year before I had won the Italian and then got to the semis in Paris, where I lost a match I was expected to win. Everybody thought I would at least get to the Wimbledon finals. I wasn't really planning on doing anything, but it just happened and it was a great feeling. But I hadn't any sense — it has to be now.'

Looking back on her career she feels proudest of the way she won on different surfaces. 'Today,' she says, 'Borg is the only one that wins on grass and cement and clay. Laver Emerson, Court and myself — won singles and doubles on every surface. I'm not taking anything from anybody when I say that.' Certainly she is careful not to say that the standards of her day were better, though for many people that time, with herself, Court and King all playing, was something of a golden age. 'There are always four or five at the end now and there were before too. You've got a hundred players and you come down to the same four. Before we had 50 and we came down to the same four.'

Of the last four of her era only Billie Jean has the remotest chance of appearing in the last four today. At Wimbledon while Billie Jean was seeded in the singles Maria Bueno was planning to struggle through a round or two of the doubles, showing only in flashes the brilliance of the player she once was. 'Tennis-wise I think I've done everything that could be done,' says Maria. 'I've won everything there was to win and done everything I wanted to do. There hasn't been any woman in South America who's done anything since. In Brazil they always know who you are.'

Pedants may point out that she never won the French, or that Court and King won even more than she did. But people looking back on those days won't be counting. *Pace*, Billie Jean, they will still be telling stories about Maria Bueno's magical style ●

## The Bueno Style

Grace, inherent ball sense and superbly related rhythm and timing characterised Maria Bueno's technique. Although she learned tennis on Brazilian clay courts, her game was never defensive. She used one grip for all her strokes, a shortish swing, and was supreme in her generation for hitting the ball early. Her flat hit strokes off both wings imposed ceaseless pressure on opponents because of this ability to strike the ball while it was rising. Fast and precise footwork enabled Maria to hit most of her shots on the move — contrary to the static style of Chris Lloyd and Tracy Austin. She volleyed with a fluency which delighted spectators and depressed opponents, and unusually elastic shoulder and arm muscles gave her serve deceptive power. Tactically Miss Bueno was not the equal of her great rivals Margaret Court or Billie Jean King, for her margin of safety was dangerously small. In match play these factors limited her options and accounted for many defeats. Maria was a classical player; she seldom used spin, except on her serve. Among present day competitors probably Evonne Cawley comes closest to Maria's inimitable style.

C.M. Jones.

## Maria Bueno's Career Highlights.

**Wimbledon** — singles winner 1959, 60, 64; runner-up 1965, 66; doubles winner 1958, 60, 63, 65, 66; runner-up 1967; mixed doubles runner-up 1959, 60, 67.

**United States** — singles winner 1959, 63, 64, 66; runner-up 1960; doubles winner 1960, 62, 66, 68.

**French** — singles runner-up 1964; doubles winner 1960; mixed doubles winner 1960.

**Australian** — singles runner-up 1965; doubles winner 1960.

**Italian** — singles winner 1958, 61, 65.



Maria in 1959