

REWIND FEATURE

Starting this month Tennis Threads will be featuring Champions of the Past in order that they should not be forgotten. Many writers make comparisons with names from previous generations but few actually remember what they have achieved!

THE SAO PAULO SWALLOW

A regular in the Royal Box at Wimbledon, Maria Esther Bueno is the Brazilian who put women's tennis on the map and became the first South American superstar of the game. She was the Queen of the Courts in the early sixties and in later years became a close friend to Princess Diana as recollected in an interview with CNN. "She was fabulous," Bueno recalled the time she was called to play with the British royals on the day that Diana and her children William and Harry, turned up at the Harbour Club in London.

MARIA BUENO

attends the Women's Sports Foundation 25th annual awards dinner on October 18, 2004 in New York City.



"She was so nice and so were the kids," Bueno told CNN's Open Court show.

"They played -- it was something that I didn't expect. It was a coincidence that I was there and I got to know them very well."

A seat in the Royal Box alongside celebrities and royalty is now a familiar environment for one of the youngest of Wimbledon champions in her day, who from the outset was rubbing shoulders with the residents of Buckingham Palace.

"I had a special dinner with the Duke of Edinburgh and for 20 days beforehand I had protocol telling me what I should do," she remembered. "I was so late for the dinner because of the traffic, so I asked what I should do and someone said I should go in and apologise."

"I did and tapped on the Duke's shoulder -- one of the biggest sins!"

"He just said, 'Ah, sit down,' and he was really funny -- he couldn't care less whether I was late or early, and we had a wonderful time."

"But then I had to write a lot of letters to apologise to Buckingham Palace and Wimbledon for being late."

While she might have flouted protocol then, there were no such problems with Princess Diana, who dispensed with such formalities.

"She made sure that nobody else did anything when she was there. She wanted to be treated like everybody would. She was fantastic with that."

As regard's Maria Bueno's earlier career, she had no formal coaching often practising with her late brother Pedro.

Living in a house just across the street from the Clube de Regatas Tiete in São Paulo, the Bueno family spent most of their spare time there, so it was inevitable that baby Maria would grow accustomed to the sound of bouncing tennis balls.

It was only a matter of time before Pedro and then, a little later, Maria were playing with tennis balls and wielding rackets themselves. A close unit, the



Bueno family supported each other throughout their lives.

Rackets were handed down the line from father to mother, mother to brother and finally to the youngest, Maria, who learnt to hit the ball solidly with an extremely heavy racket for her age and build.

She was a net-charger with an almost impatient, aggressive game that was honed into a variety of killer shots. Modelling her service action from a picture of Bill Tilden in a book, Bueno used her eyes well to observe how all the good players hit the ball. She taught herself, using her natural ability and extraordinary talent to play her way up through the club leagues and attain the top spot on the number one court at her home club as a junior.

Having won all the various age groups at the Brazilian Nationals she rose to the top of the world game in the late

fifties starting in Florida where, as an unchaperoned 17-year-old, she won the prestigious Orange Bowl Championships.

She had travelled alone on a one-way ticket donated by the club to get there.

As she burst onto the international circuit experts whispered words like 'genius' while others, less charitable, said 'lucky to be born with such abundant talent'; but, according to Jimmy Jones in Lawn Tennis Magazine, the truth lay elsewhere – remembering the truism 'genius is 10 per cent inspiration, 90 per cent perspiration'.

It wasn't long before she was in Europe to take the Wimbledon Championships by storm collecting the first of her three singles titles in 1959 and establishing herself as an icon of the game with her fluid style, vast repertoire of shots and grace which set her apart from many of her contemporaries. A year earlier, aged 17, she won the Wimbledon Women's

Double's title in partnership with another all-time great, Althea Gibson.

She had won the Italian Championships at her first attempt, causing a stir in Rome more akin with Hollywood stardom than the tennis court. Not since the days of Suzanne Lenglen was the public's adoration captured in quite the same way.

These were the days when women's matches were allocated to the back courts, but Bueno's were always centre stage at the Foro Italico, set in front of a capacity crowd. Even the men's

FORMER WIMBLEDON CHAMPIONS

(from L-R) Martina Navratilova, Billie Jean King, Steffi Graf, Margaret Court and Maria Bueno stand in the Royal Box after being presented with an inscribed crystal bowl from the HRH Duchess of Gloucester on July 1, 2006 in honour of their successes at The Championships.



locker room would empty as players abandoned their card games to watch her.

It was where her power and style of play was first noted, at that 1958 Italian Open which she also won in 1961 and 1965, where she beat Britain's best, Shirley Bloomer and then Australia's best, Lorraine Coughlin, to claim the title. Following that win she was reported as hitting 'the ball with the power of a man ... serves hard and rushes the net at every opportunity.'

Writing in 1960, Sports Illustrated's Herbert Warren Wind said: "If you like graceful women and good tennis, you can watch Maria Bueno all day."

She was born in Sao Paulo on the 11th October 1939 and in recognition of her 'swooping' style at the net where she delivered piercing volleys, she was dubbed the 'The Sao Paulo Swallow'.

She stood 5'6" in her tennis shoes, was slim with dark hair and epitomised the glamour of Latin America and was quickly picked up by Teddy Tinling, couturier to the tennis stars, who provided her with dresses which enhanced her movement and grace about the court. She was regularly compared to the legendary Suzanne Lenglen and later the effervescent Evonne Goolagong (Cawley), the only players who came near to matching her balletic play.

It was her elegance and artistry which captured not only the public's imagination, but that of the press. In his 'Tennis Encyclopaedia', the late American Bud Collin remembered her as "... the incomparably balletic and flamboyant Bueno. Volleying beautifully, playing with

breath-taking boldness and panache, the lithe Brazilian became the first South American woman to win the Wimbledon singles" while Gwen Robyns wrote, "She looked like an exotic Siamese cat as she roamed the court. Maria was sinuous, sensuous and feminine. They called her the Queen of Wimbledon."

In his book '100 Wimbledon Championships. A Celebration', John Barrett was even more poetical. "Between 1959 and 1964 we were treated to three regal wins from the artistic racket of the elegant queen of Brazilian tennis, Maria Bueno. Here was poetry in motion whose every movement combined the grace of a ballet dancer with the controlled power of a top gymnast."

She retained her Wimbledon title in 1960 and won it again in 1964 and the US title in 1959, 1963-64 and 1966. Her 1959 successes prompted a ticker-tape homecoming and the Brazilian Post Office to issue in that year, a stamp in honour of their history-making heroine – the first non-American to win both Wimbledon and the US Nationals at Forest Hills (now the Open) in the same year.

In total Bueno won 19 of 35 major singles, doubles, and mixed doubles titles. In tennis history, only nine women players, including Maria Bueno, have won three Wimbledon and US Championships during their career which also saw her declared the top woman player in the world before computer rankings were introduced. She was 'ranked' No.1 in 1959, 1960, 1964, and 1966.

She is 12th on the All-time list of Grand Slam champions, sharing that spot with Dorothea Lambert Chambers,



Picture © Douglas Miller/Keystone/Getty Images

MARIA BUENO

holds up the trophy after she won the Wimbledon Women's Singles Finals for a third time by beating Margaret Smith (Court.) of Australia.

Evonne Goolagong, Justine Henin and Venus Williams, all having won 7 major singles titles.

In addition, Bueno won 12 doubles and mixed doubles titles with six different partners and was the first woman to capture a doubles calendar Grand Slam in 1960.

During those years she maintained an exhausting schedule, reaching the quarter-finals of the first 26 majors she played and competing in all corners of the world to garner 598 titles in total!

But it was her performances at Grand Slam level which carved her name in the history books. Only once was she extended to three sets in a Championship round and that was against Margaret Smith Court in her third Wimbledon final, 1964, which she won 6-4 7-9 6-3. That was her last triumph at SW19 though she was a finalist in 1965 and '66 losing to Court and Billie Jean King respectively.

She beat the American Darlene Hard 6-4 6-3 to win her first in '59 and recalls: "Winning Wimbledon in 1959 was the greatest moment of my career. It was a bit unexpected as I was very young – 17 years old. Coming from Brazil where we only had clay courts, we didn't have the chance to really play on grass, so winning the first time was huge and a big surprise."

A few months later she was in Forest Hills and reached the final of the US Nationals (now Open) where she faced and dismantled Britain's No.1 Christine Truman, 6-1 6-4.

On her return to Wimbledon the following year she stormed through the draw as the top seed to successfully defend her title against the South African Sandra Reynolds Price, who did provide her with a challenge in the opening set but then faded away 8-6 6-0.

As at Wimbledon, Bueno was ever present at the US Nationals, contesting five championship matches to claim four titles. In 1960 Hard won 6-4

10-12 6-4, then Bueno won back-to-back titles on 1963 and '64 beating respectively Court (7-5 6-4) and Carole Graebner (6-1 6-0) making her last appearance in 1966 when she dismantled Nancy Richey (6-3 6-1).

She was ranked in the world's top ten from 1958 to 1968 when the game went Open but was unable to take advantage of the professional game as illness and various injuries disrupted her career.

In 1961 she contracted hepatitis and was confined to bed for eight months, during which her weight dropped by 24 lbs, and in 1965 endured knee surgery.

It was a wet Wimbledon in 1967 that demanded Bueno played matches back to back and a total of 120 games in just one day that destroyed her arm and her career, causing her to later withdraw from Forest Hills. Although the fundamental physical damage had been done, she continued to play for another season with some considerable success.

Ironically, she was stopped at the 1968 Wimbledon in the quarters by Nancy Richey while suffering from a bad leg but went on to New York to defeat Margaret Court in three sets in the quarter-finals before losing to King by a similar score.

She claimed her final Grand Slam title by winning the doubles with Court, beating the top seeded pair of King and Casals 4-6 9-7 8-6, her fifth US doubles crown.

Bueno was finally forced to retire in early 1969 during the Caribbean Circuit in Caracas when she was



MARIA BUENO
with all the grace of a
ballerina, in action in
NSW Australia 1959

unable to use her playing arm even to pick up a glass. Doctors told her the damage was so severe she would never play again.

Several operations virtually rebuilt her arm and shoulder and it is a credit to Bueno's strength of resolve that she rehabilitated herself for a third time over a long and difficult seven years of recovery, proving the medics wrong and making a remarkable come-back in the mid-seventies, winning the Japan Open and her biggest pay-check



Picture © Keystone/Getty Images

of \$6,000 in 1974, and once again gracing Wimbledon in 1976 and 1977. Bueno's popularity was as great as ever but her adoring public had little idea of the sacrifices she was making to play again in the one place she loved the most – the Centre Court.

Having to restrict her play to just one hour a day to help save the arm, and with the aid of Cortisone injections to reduce the inflammation, Bueno made it through the draw to meet Britain's Sue Barker in the quarter-finals.

It was a nostalgic match that started with Bueno dominating to win the first set with the style which her many fans had so admired. Barker's fight-back to snatch the second took the match well beyond the hour the Brazilian needed to complete the proceedings and, with each passing minute, her chances of securing the win, or even being able to play the following day, diminished.

After that loss Bueno decided that she could not continue to pursue a singles career to the heights she sought without

placing herself at risk. She had proved her point, mostly to herself, and had already in a sense succeeded against the odds.

She did make further appearances in the doubles, playing her last open event at Wimbledon in 1980 and her immortality in Brazil endures forever, with an airmail postage stamp, three statues, a mural and a sculpture in her name.

Bueno was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1978 and named the Best Latin American Tennis Player of the 20th Century in celebration of the Millennium.

She has honed her commentating skills on SporTV, Globo's sports channel that is aired in Brazil via cable and satellite, and viewing figures spike when she is on air.

"I'm enjoying the challenge," Maria said when she first started her new career. "I try to give viewers some insight into the background of the players,

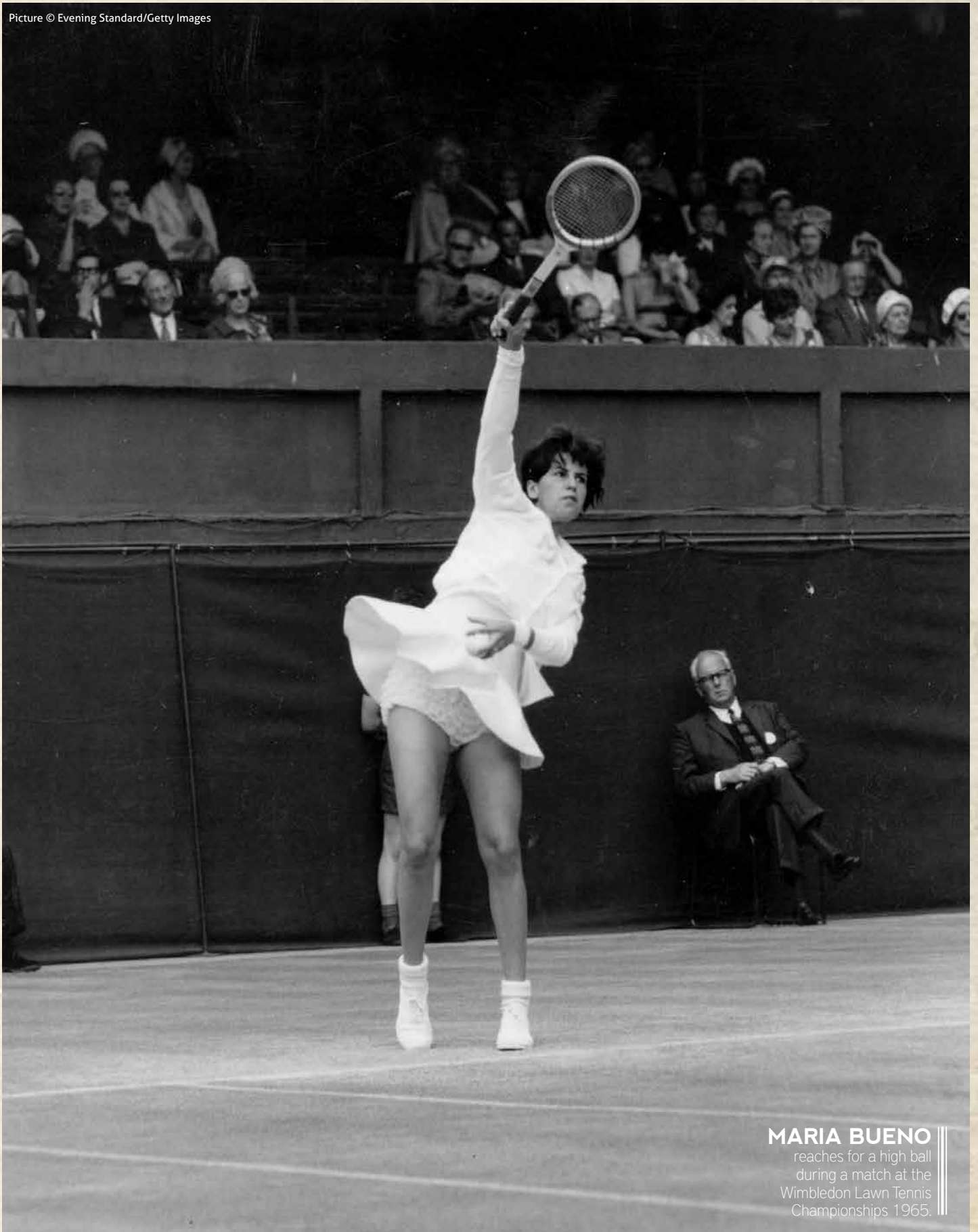
MARIA BUENO
in action against Billie Jean
Moffitt (Billie Jean King) of the
USA at Wimbledon 1963.

the event and the setting rather than a point by point account of the match. After all, they can see what is happening on the screen, can't they?"

She has since become a regular contributor for Wimbledon, the US Open and other major tennis events as well as covering the 2012 London and the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, where the main tennis stadium proudly bears her name.

Maria Esther Bueno is, without question, one of the greatest legendary players of all time, still held in great affection by legions of admirers around the world and who remains a superstar in her own country to this day.

Picture © Evening Standard/Getty Images



MARIA BUENO
reaches for a high ball
during a match at the
Wimbledon Lawn Tennis
Championships 1965.