

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0179

Court, Margaret Jean

(1942 -)

Born 16 July, 1942, Albury New South Wales Australia

Occupation Minister, Tennis player

Summary

Margaret Court was one of Australia's greatest sportswomen. She won 62 grand slam titles and, in 1970, was the second woman in history to win the Australian, French, U.S. and Wimbledon titles in a calendar year.

Winner of the ABC Sportsman of the Year Award in 1963 and 1970, Margaret Court was appointed to the Order of the British Empire – Member (Civil) on 1 January 1967 for services to sport and international relations. In 1970 she also won the Walter Lindrum Award.

In January 2003, Tennis Australia renamed Melbourne Park’s Show Court One to the Margaret Court Arena. She was the recipient of the 2003 Australia Post Australian Legends Award, and featured on a special 50c stamp.

In 2006 she was awarded the International Tennis Federation’s (ITF) highest accolade, the Philippe Chatrier Award.

In 2017, in the context of Australian debates about marriage equality, Margaret Court became a controversial figure, as many prominent people in tennis condemned her views on same sex marriage and the rights of transgender people.

In January 2021, Court was awarded an AC in the Australian Day Honours Awards list, for eminent service to tennis as an internationally acclaimed player and record-holding grand slam champion, and as a mentor of young sportspersons. In response to criticisms that it was not appropriate to honour her this way, based upon her controversial views on the rights of LGBTQI+ people, an anonymous member of the Council for the Order of Australia said the award to address a gender disparity created five years ago when Rod Laver became the first tennis player to be made a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC).

Details

When Margaret Court (née Smith) was thirteen years old Frank Sedgeman, the Australian tennis champion, told her that she was so talented, she could be the first Australian woman to win Wimbledon. Eight years later she achieved that goal, and then spent the next decade or so creating tennis records. In 2007, she remains the most prolific winner, male or female, of major championships, having notched up 62 titles in singles, doubles and mixed doubles between 1960 and 1975, including seven straight Australian Championships between 1960-1966. She took the Australian, French, Wimbledon and U.S. singles titles all within 1970 to become the second female Calendar Year Grand Slam winner after Maureen Connolly, who achieved the feat in 1953. She is the only player to achieve a Calendar Year Grand Slam in doubles as well as in singles. In purely statistical terms, her nearest all time 'rivals', Martina Navratilova, with 56 majors, and Roy Emerson, heading the men with 28, are a long way behind. Court has 24 titles in singles alone, three ahead of Steffi Graf when she left the game. Putting this into some contemporary perspective, Roger Federer, with ten grand slam titles and Serena Williams, with eight, still have some work to do if they are going to catch her. As the citation to accompany her 1979 induction in to the International Tennis Hall of Fame reads, 'For sheer strength of performance and accomplishment there has never been a tennis player to match Margaret Smith Court.' Not bad for an ordinary girl from regional Australia.

Born in July, 1942, Margaret Smith was, quite literally, a fighter from the moment she drew breath. Her mother nearly died giving birth to her and Margaret was very ill upon arrival. Fortunately, she lived to grow up and go to school in Albury, New South Wales, a regional centre in the state's southeast situated on the Murray River. Her circumstances were not affluent. Her parents owned neither the house they lived in, a very modest, two bedroom, thin-walled, asbestos dwelling with a tin roof that stretched to fit a family of six, nor a car. Margaret was lucky, therefore, that she lived across the road from twenty-four grass tennis courts. She was also lucky that the coach there, Wally Rutter, spotted her and took the time to nurture her talent. It was Rutter who brought her to the attention of Sedgeman and it was Sedgeman who encouraged her to come to Melbourne so that she could make the most of her potential. At 16 she moved to Melbourne to widen her experience and to receive specialist coaching.

In retrospect, she also thinks she was lucky to grow up a tomboy in a neighbourhood full of sports mad boys, with whom she regularly competed. She suggests, however, that it was 'determination to succeed and to be the best' rather than competitiveness that later drove her to succeed. Whatever the motivation, there is no doubt that she became the best, although she never really sat down to measure how good she was until she'd finished playing. She didn't know exactly how many titles she had won until she retired and even then that was only because someone else (English commentator John Barrett) had counted them for her.

This is not to say that Margaret was blasé about her success; rather it is an indication of her modesty and source of motivation. She did not do things for the glory and attention but because she always had personal goals. There were three in particular, throughout the course of her career, that drove her to 'be the best'. The first of them, to be the first Australian woman to win Wimbledon, she met in 1963. The second, to win the Calendar Year Grand Slam (the Wimbledon and the Australian, United States, French Opens all in the one year) eventuated in 1970 and the third, to be the first mum to be number one in the world, she achieved in 1973. She tried coming back after having her second child but says that, at that point, she didn't have a goal, so she knew it was time to give the game up, which she did in 1975.

Margaret had natural talent, athleticism and strength; her court coverage was amazing and the power of her serve-volley game set her apart in the women's game. She and one of her early physical instructors, Stan Nicholls, did things differently in order to capitalise upon and enhance her physical strength. She spent a lot of time in the gym lifting weights in an era when very few women did this as a matter of course. But she also attributes the power of her game to her early upbringing. 'As a young girl, I used to train with the men. I practiced with the men all the time and I thought I had to serve-volley, because they wouldn't invite me to play with them if I didn't...I was brought up playing with the men.' Consequently, she developed a style of game that saw her constantly serve-charging the net and, in so doing, introduced change into the women's game. The British, who were unused to their female tennis players being so physically imposing and aggressive on the court, called her the 'Aussie Amazon'. Apart from being strong, her physique gave her other natural advantages. People used to think she was taller than she was (5'9") because she was all arms and legs. (Indeed her International Tennis Hall of Fame still describes her as 'nearly six feet tall'.) In particular, her reach was 'telescopic'; one of her regular opponents, Billie Jean King, called her 'the Arm', because of it. It was like it added extra inches to the length of her racquet. One can only speculate on how much better she might have been if, as a natural left-hander, she hadn't been trained not to be at school, as was the policy at the time she was growing up. 'Sometimes I wished I had've stayed lefty,' she says. 'I would have had probably a better serve.'

At times, it seemed that the only person capable of beating Margaret was Margaret herself. Sometimes she suffered from nerves and was accused, in modern day parlance, of choking, most famously against crowd favourite, Evonne Goolagong (Cawley) in the 1971 Wimbledon final. (Perhaps they might have bit their tongues if they had known she was pregnant with her first child at the time!) Seeded 1 in her first attempt at Wimbledon in 1962, and after having a bye in the first round, she got bundled out in the second round by an unseeded player named Billie Jean Moffitt (later King). It wasn't one of her greatest days and she remembers phoning home talking to her Mum, who said "I suppose you'll give up tennis now and come home." On the contrary, she replied, 'No, I'm going to go on to America and I'm going to win everything,' True to her word, she won the U.S. Championship that year, beating Darlene Hard in straight sets.

Margaret was consistently excellent in both singles and doubles over the next four-five years, winning 29 grand slam titles in the period 1962-66. Towards the end of 1965, however, she began to get tired of life on the road and, having won all the

grand slam events and thinking she had achieved all that she could achieve in tennis, she decided to retire the next year. She moved to Perth, Western Australia and tried something entirely different; she opened a boutique. Travelling had given her a taste for once clothes and she decided to turn her hobby into a business venture. Perth is also where she met her husband, Barry Court, son of then Premier of Western Australia, Sir Charles Court and brother to the future premier, Richard Court. This was a family that was very far removed from the tennis world – Barry didn't even know how to score the game and his mother, when introduced to her said 'Oh, that's interesting, you have the same name as the tennis player'. In Perth, for a year or so, Margaret escaped from the world of tennis and refreshed. No struggles with administrators about the quality of accommodation she had to stay in when on tour; no dealing with media outlets curious about her personal life, Margaret enjoyed living life outside the tennis world. She married Barry in 1967 (the same year she was awarded an M.B.E.) and suggested they go overseas – Barry had never left the country and she was keen to share the life she had lead with him. 'Maybe I'll go back and play tennis and you will see where I've come from'.

She returned to the game in 1968 and had the best two-season run in history in 1969-70, with seven majors, missing out only at Wimbledon in 1969, where she lost in the semis to champion Ann Haydon Jones, 10-12, 6-3, 6-2. Her new goal, to win the Calendar Year Grand Slam was achieved in 1970. The Wimbledon final she won to achieve that goal, against Billie Jean King, is she says the game 'means more to me than most probably means the most to her.' With an injured ankle, she played two marathon sets (there were no tie-breakers then) to win 11-9, 14-12.

She played again in 1971 until she discovered she was pregnant with her first child, Daniel. After he was born, everyone assumed she would give the game away for good. Instead, she decided she had something else to prove; she was going to be the first mother to be number one in the world. Not only did she go on to do this in 1973, she did it in extraordinary style, playing some of the best tennis of her career and winning 24 of 25 tournaments she played. In 1974, her second child, Marika, was born. Court started playing again but her heart wasn't in it and so she retired permanently in 1977 around the same time she learned she was expecting the third of her four children.

When she retired from tennis for good, life took a big turn, initially, not for the best. Brought up a Catholic, she regularly attended church but one day when she was attending a service in France given in French and Latin, she realised how disconnected she was from her spiritual self, and how she needed more than the traditional church could offer her. During this period, she suffered from depression and was physically unwell; the world's once fittest woman was weak, fearful and afraid to go to sleep. She experienced a crisis of confidence and a crisis of faith.

It wasn't until she began to attend Bible school in the early 1980s that the disparate threads of her life began to mesh again, and Margaret committed herself fully to the Pentecostal Church. In 1991 she was officially ordained to the ministry and a year later she established her own outreach ministry, Margaret Court Ministries Inc. In 1995 she entered into formerly uncharted waters by founding and establishing Victory Life Centre, of which she is the Senior Pastor. With an average Sunday attendance of 1300+ this makes it one of the Perth's largest and dynamic churches.

Recognised as an inspirational speaker as her new career developed, Margaret's tennis achievements were also recognised in a variety of ways at this time. In 1993, together with Rod Laver, she was inducted into the Australian Tennis Hall of Fame, the first players to be granted this honour. In 2002 Tennis Australia named the Number 1 Court at Melbourne Park, the home of the Australian Open, 'Margaret Court Arena', in 2007 she received an Order of Australia.

Margaret still plays tennis. 'I know the spiritual side,' she says, 'I need to keep the outer man fit as well. And she still plays hard – she is still very determined. 'I don't think that ever leaves you,' she says. 'I'm a very focused person.' Only now, instead of changing the game of tennis, she's working at 'changing nations'.

Margaret Court's Grand Slam Wins:

Wimbledon

Singles: 1963, 1965, 1970

Doubles: 1964, 1969

Australian

Singles: 1960-1966, 1969-1971, 1973

Doubles: 1961-1963, 1965, 1969-1971, 1973

United States of America

Singles: 1962, 1965, 1968-1970, 1973

Doubles: 1963, 1968-1970, 1973, 1975

French

Singles: 1962, 1964, 1969, 1970, 1973

Doubles: 1964-1966, 1973

Events

2001 - 2001

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

Published resources

Resource

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<http://www.abc.net.au/talkingheads/txt/s1774139.htm>

Book

Reflections : profiles of 150 women who helped make Western Australia's history; Project of the Womens Committee for the 150th Anniversary Celebrations of Western Australia, Popham, Daphne; Stokes, K.A.; Lewis, Julie, 1979

Great Australian Women in Sport, Brasch, Nicolas, 1997

Encyclopedia of Australia Sport, Shepherd, Jim, 1980

Court on Court : a life in tennis, Court, Margaret Smith, 1942-, 1976

A winning faith : the Margaret Court story, Oldfield, Barbara, c1993

Winning words : the creative power of what you say, Court, Margaret, 1999

Newspaper Article

The Court of Champions, Henderson, Jon, 2000

Court's crusade, Pennells, Steve, 2001

Court honour bestowed on Australian great Court, 2003

Journal Article

All-time Australian tennis great Margaret Court found her true from serving Jesus, Williams, Sue, 2003

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 2002, Herd, Margaret, 2002

Site Exhibition

She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html>

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Margaret Court interviewed by Gail O'Hanlon for the Battye Library collection \[sound recording\]](#)

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Created 18 October 2002

Last modified 11 August 2021

Digital resources



Title: Mrs Court serving in Women's singles against Miss L. Hunt

Type: Image

Date: 3 May, 2023