

Gussie Moran, a Tennis Star Who Wore a Daring Wimbledon Outfit, Dies at 89



Gussie Moran, who as a ranked American tennis player in 1949 caused an international stir and gained worldwide fame for competing at Wimbledon while wearing a short skirt and lace-trimmed underwear, died on Wednesday at her home in Los Angeles. She was 89.

She had recently been hospitalized with cancer, Jack Neworth, a tennis writer and friend, said.

Moran's **daring outfit** worn in a bastion of English propriety won her more renown than her tennis playing, though she was ranked as high as No. 4 in the United States, won the United States women's indoor championship in 1949 and reached the quarterfinals that year at Wimbledon.

By the end of her life she had come to know hardship — bouncing from job to job, living in near squalor, telling of abortions and rape. At her death she lived in a small apartment. But for a time, more than half a century ago, she was a household name around the world. A racehorse, an airplane and a sauce were named after her.

Moran, who was 25 at the time, arrived in London for Wimbledon in June 1949 with a new outfit in mind, having already reached out to [the British designer Teddy Tinling](#) to create one.

“I wrote him a letter prior to Wimbledon, asking him if he would design me something with one sleeve one color, the other sleeve another color and the shirt another color,” Moran told *The Orlando Sentinel* in 1988. “He wrote back, ‘Have you lost your mind?’ ”

Tinling, a former tennis player and for many years the official Wimbledon host, told *The Associated Press* during the tournament that Moran had asked him to make her “look more feminine.”

Sticking to Wimbledon’s all-white dress code, Tinling came up with a white silk sun-top jersey with a tight waist and bodice and a short skirt that boldly bared her knees. Underneath were matching white silk jersey panties trimmed with two inches of open lace.

Moran displayed her outfit during a pretournament tea party at the Hurlingham Club, instantly inspiring a nickname. “Gorgeous Gussie’s Lace-Fringed Panties No. 1 Attraction on Wimbledon’s Courts,” a headline in *The New York Times* declared after the tea party preview.

By the time of her opening match, photographers were jostling for position, many lying flat, the better to catch the most risqué angle as she served the ball. They were not disappointed.

“The fringed panties are very much in evidence when Gussie races across the court or leaps for a high shot,” *The A.P.* reported.

Moran, who was noted for a powerful forehand, won her match, defeating Bea Walter of Britain, but it was her underwear that became front-page news and a subject of debate in the British Parliament. The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, the

home of Wimbledon, accused Moran of “bringing vulgarity and sin into tennis.”

Although Moran did not wear the lace panties for the rest of the tournament, the sensation they caused made her one of the biggest attractions in women’s tennis. She made a cameo appearance in the 1952 sports movie “[Pat and Mike](#)” with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. The newspapers reported on her romantic life. And her underwear, soon christened “Gussie panties,” started a trend. Women began taking to the court in lace panties, T-shirts and plunging necklines.

“Gussie was the Anna Kournikova of her time,” the former tennis champion [Jack Kramer](#) told The Los Angeles Times in 2002, referring to the Russian star and sometime model. “Gussie was a beautiful woman with a beautiful body. If Gussie had played in the era of television, no telling what would have happened. Because, besides everything else, Gussie could play.”

But there were negative repercussions, too. Wimbledon banned short dresses from the tournament. By 1950 there were grumblings among the tennis elite that the attention Moran had received was unmerited, in light of her being ranked seventh among American women at the time. In 1951 the United States Lawn Tennis Association banned lace panties and low-neckline attire from its tournament in Forest Hills, Queens, that would become the [United States Open](#).

Tinling had to resign as official Wimbledon host and was not to be welcomed back until 1983, seven years before his death. In the meantime he had designed tennis wear for players like Chris Evert, Evonne Goolagong, Martina Navratilova and Virginia Wade. Tennis wear evolved as well, rendering Moran’s outfit relatively tame by today’s standards.

“Gussie wasn’t a revolutionary,” Tinling once told The Times. “She wore the dress for two reasons. She wanted to look good, and the shorter dresses allowed her to move more freely on the court.”

Gertrude Augusta Moran was born on Sept. 8, 1923, in Santa Monica, Calif., and grew up in a grand Victorian house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Her father, Harry, was a sound technician at Universal Studios, and her mother, Emma, was a housewife.

Daniel E. Slotnik and William McDonald contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 24, 2013

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Moran said she learned to play tennis when she was 11. While competing on a junior circuit, she and other young players were sometimes invited to play at Charlie Chaplin's house on Sunday afternoons, trading volleys with stars like Greta Garbo and Olivia de Havilland.

During World War II, after her older brother was declared missing in action, Moran joined the war effort, going to work at the nearby Douglas Aircraft Company.

She was well into her 20s when she joined the amateur tennis circuit, in 1947, relatively late for a newcomer. But in nine months she won three major tournaments. Her victory in the National Indoor Tennis Tournament in March 1949 was on the wooden courts at the Seventh Regiment Armory in Manhattan, where she defeated Nancy Chaffee.

Moran retired from amateur tennis in August 1950 and signed a one-year, \$75,000 contract to play on a professional tour run by Bobby Riggs.

Playing alongside [Pauline Betz](#), Moran did not do well on the tour and left it after the year was up. She then began playing exhibition matches at military bases and hospitals as part of a tour managed by the tennis great Bill Tilden. She also joined a U.S.O. tour.

Moran went on to work in radio as a sports director and in television hosting interview

shows, all in Los Angeles. She was also a radio sportscaster in New York on WMGM, marketed her own line of tennis clothes, wrote for tennis magazines and taught tennis. In 1970 she joined a U.S.O. tour in Vietnam and sustained broken bones when a helicopter in which she was riding was shot down. She continued to compete in tournaments into her early 40s, Neworth said.

She also publicly spoke of having abortions and of being found backstage beaten and raped during a Lawrence Welk concert at a Santa Monica centennial celebration. There was no arrest.

Moran had three marriages, none lasting more than two years. She had no children. In her later years she went from job to job, often living in reduced circumstances after losing her home in the 1980s. At one point, largely supported by friends and fans, she was reported to be living with cats in a single room in a run-down building in Hollywood, the curtains made of bedsheets. In recent years she sold her tennis memorabilia and autographs online.

At the height of her celebrity, Moran expressed frustration with all the attention she was receiving, some of it, in the gossip columns, exasperating. It was a Wimbledon title that she wanted more than anything else, she said.

"Publicity follows me," she wrote in an article for The A.P. at the time. "I cannot help it if people cook up phony quotes about engagements with tennis players I've never even seen off the court. I am interested in clothes I can play tennis in, not in creating a sensation and certainly not in anything anyone at all would consider in poor taste."

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Gussie Moran gave daily television sports reports in New York in 1955.

Friend's love kept tennis star Gussy Moran in the game to the end

Everyone deserves life with dignity in their final years, whether you dug ditches or played tennis on the world's most famous stages.

Gertrude "Gussy" Moran did the latter. She also got that deserved dignity because of the extraordinary kindness of a woman possibly as quirky as Moran was herself — this other woman wears a \$15,000 Rolex that she painted purple with nail polish to hide the gold.

We shall call her Lovey Jurgens, because that's what she will allow us to call her. Nothing else. No bending. No exceptions. The Los Angeles tennis community knows who she is and everybody else only needs to know that her story is true and exceptional.

Twelve years ago, Jurgens got an email from Mark Winters, an official at the Southern California Tennis Assn. Winters knew that Jurgens, then in her late 40s, was a woman of means and somebody who played tennis, taught it and cherished the idea of preserving its memories. The email said that Gussy Moran, the famed "Gorgeous Gussy" of Wimbledon lace-panties fame, was within 36 hours of being evicted from her small apartment near Paramount Studios in Los Angeles.

"Can you help?" the email asked.

Jurgens was there in 30 minutes and has been back to the small apartment with the "1/2" in its address thousands of times in those 12 years. Her last trips were Thursday and Friday, when she cleaned it out for the final time. Moran, 89, had died there Wednesday night.

"There is a big hole in my heart," Jurgens says, "but being with Gussy was worth every ounce of energy I used and every penny I spent."

Moran was written off years ago by many in the Los Angeles tennis community, especially by those who didn't care enough to make the effort to really know her, as a hopeless recluse. She was a world-class tennis player in her prime — she got to one doubles final at



American tennis player Gertrude 'Gussie' Moran stretches... (Keystone / Getty Images)

Wimbledon — but not a Pauline Betz or an Alice Marble. She was a friend of Charlie Chaplin, she was married and divorced three times, she held jobs in television and other media, but never for long.

Besides, her fame had been gained, not completely to her dismay, by wearing a short skirt that revealed lace panties at Wimbledon in '49. Moran, whose given name was Gertrude and always preferred to be known as "Gussy" not "Gussie," wanted to make a fashion splash at Wimbledon that would be in line with her outgoing personality and showcase her pretty legs.

Today, her outfit would be considered modest, even bland. But in 1949, it set photographers and Wimbledon officials into a tizzy, each for a different reason.

By the time Jurgens showed up at her door, life had left Moran with a modest monthly Social Security check and little else. There were rags stuffed into cracks around the windows, little furniture and barely enough to make ends meet. What remained was plenty of spirit.

They became friends. They argued and disagreed, but never split. Moran accepted her fate, but was also fiercely independent. Every month or so, Jurgens would give her a packet of cash, usually \$2,000 in either \$10 bills or \$20 bills. She also hired a driver for her so Moran could get to things such as doctors' appointments.

"But she wanted her own driver, one that we had fired," Jurgens says. "So she kept him and paid him herself. He was handsome, and she never lost her eye for a good-looking man."

Besides her three husbands, Moran had many lovers and once told author and noted sportswriter Roger Kahn, whom she also dated, that the most amazing thing she had ever done in her life was "the night I went to bed with King Farouk."

Moran had cats in her apartment, which became part of the recluse bag-lady image. But Jurgens says she was never a classic cat lady.

"They found her," Jurgens says. "She didn't find them. She just kept food out so they wouldn't starve. None of them had names."

Moran stayed contemporary. A friend introduced by Jurgens, columnist Jack Neworth of the Santa Monica Daily Press, mentioned Bono to Moran one day on the phone and she quickly told him that she was quite fond of U2.

"Eighty-nine years old and she knows U2," Neworth says.

She didn't bemoan modern-day tennis or make fun of the advantages of the new equipment. She just told Jurgens she would have loved to have tried some of those rackets.

"To the end," Jurgens says, "Gussy was alert, aware and amazing."

When the colon cancer got bad recently and Moran was hospitalized at Good Samaritan, where Jurgens says she was treated like "VIP royalty," there was a need to establish her next step. The options were nursing homes or home hospice. Home hospice was a problem because Moran's apartment had no stove, refrigerator or microwave. Moran wanted to go home, so Jurgens bought the stove, refrigerator and microwave.

And more.

"It was just a week ago, and we were sitting on her hospital bed, looking at carpet colors," Jurgens says. "I had all the whites and the beiges, but I knew she always wanted a red carpet. She said, 'C'mon, girl. Let's go red.'"

By the end of the next day, the appliances and all the red carpet were in.

Next, Moran had to sign herself out, to the hospice care, which is usually the final stop before death.

"So there she is," Jurgens says, "knowing what she is signing, and she is telling the nurses to be nice to me — yes, to me — because I had lost my husband this summer. That was her. Complicated and full of love."

Sometime next week, when Jurgens, as executor of Moran's will, gets the ashes, a group of friends will gather and release them into Santa Monica Bay.

That was Moran's wish.

It will be a dignified ceremony for a life that ended in dignity.

That was Jurgens' doing.

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