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'American Colossus' Review: Unforced Errors

At the height of his tennis fame, three-time Wimbledon champion Bill Tilden picked a high-school boy to be his doubles partner. Edward Kosner reviews 'American Colossus' by Allen M. Hornblum.



American tennis player Bill Tilden.
PHOTO: S&G/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner
March 8, 2018 6:46 pm ET

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In old newsreels and instructional films on YouTube, he commands the tennis court. Tall and slim in his long white trousers and shirt with the sleeves rolled at the elbow, he loopes along the baseline, slashing forehands and crosscourt backhands that confound his opponents, or he finishes the point with a smash or volley. His "cannonball" serve skips off the slick grass—another ace. Afterward, he offers a gracious handshake to the loser and ambles off. Think of a young Gary Cooper with an armful of spindly wooden rackets heading for the clubhouse and a tall cold mineral water.

That was "Big" Bill Tilden, the first great American tennis champion, nearly a century ago—a Jazz Age icon of sports. Tilden had an array of weapons—including three or four distinct serves—but a fateful secret that shadowed his career and ultimately corroded his legacy.

The cautionary tale of Tilden's rise and stumble is told yet again in "American Colossus," by Allen M. Hornblum. Graceful, arrogant, volatile—splendor on the grass—Big Bill deserves better than this conscientious, plodding account, full of tropes like "as if Merlin's magic wand had been transformed into a racket." Still, Tilden's story, evocative of America and sports in what we think of as golden days, is always worth another recitation—one, unlike Mr. Hornblum's, that treats Tilden's closeted homosexuality, and his predatory crimes, as an essential element of his anguished saga.

Born into the 1% on Philadelphia's Main Line in 1893, Tilden was a mama's boy with a tragic family history. His parents lost three young children to diphtheria before Bill and his older brother were born, and his mother, father and brother would be dead by the time he was in his early 20s. At 6, he picked up his brother's discarded tennis racket and felt the call. But he was a mediocre player as a home-schooled boy, even though he haunted the grass courts at the Germantown Cricket Club just steps from the Tilden mansion. He didn't do much better when he finally went to prep school nearby or to the University of Pennsylvania. But miraculously, the scrub molted into a legend.

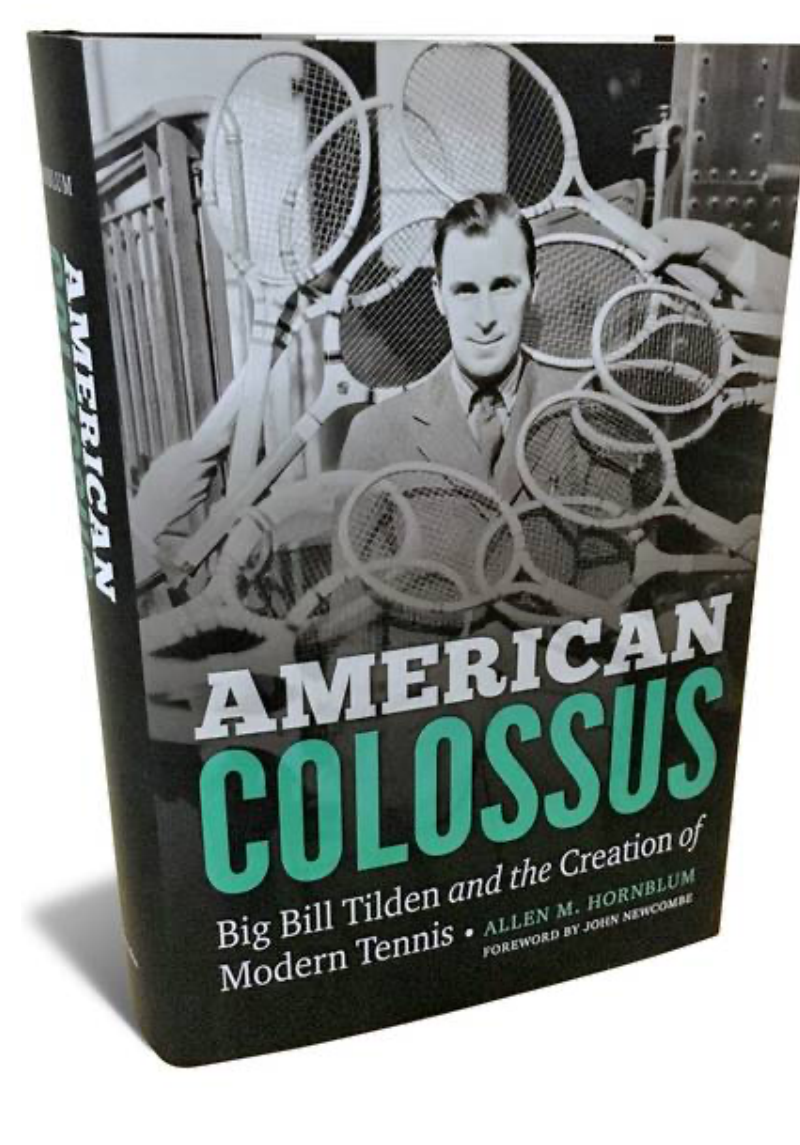


PHOTO: WSJ

AMERICAN COLOSSUS

By Allen M. Hornblum
Nebraska, 465 pages, \$39.95

Mastering every shot through brainy analysis and maniacal practice, William Tilden II turned himself into the best tennis player in the world. In five seasons, from 1920 through 1924, he became the first American to win Wimbledon, led the American team to consecutive Davis Cup victories—when the cup was the premier championship in the tennis world—and collected countless American and European tournament titles. He did all this while writing magazine articles and novels and manuals about tennis, palling around Hollywood with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin, acting on stage and in the movies, and feuding with the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association, the starchy arbiter of what was a rigorously policed amateur sport. After a freak injury in 1922 that led to the amputation of the top of the middle finger of his racket hand, he played even better.

Tilden was an odd jock. He loved literature and classical music, especially opera. He was devoted not only to his own tennis game but to promoting it with the young boys of 14 and 15 that he coached at clinics and exhibitions. After

tournament victories, rather than hobnobbing with tennis-club worthies, he liked to have dinner with his barely adolescent protégés. At the height of his fame, he chose a high-school boy as his doubles partner and toured the circuit with him. Tilden's behavior raised eyebrows, but, Mr. Hornblum writes daintily, there was no suggestion of "salacious" behavior.

That streak in the first years of the '20s was the first phase of Tilden's unmatched career. In 1926, he inexplicably went into a slump and aggravated an old knee injury. He began to lose matches that he'd always won before, and in 1928 his enemies at the USLTA banned him from the Davis Cup for publishing newspaper articles on tennis until an international furor forced them to relent. Then he rebounded and went on to win the U.S. national championship at age 36. Before he turned pro in 1931, he had won three Wimbledon titles, seven U.S. championships and dozens of international tournaments and had led the U.S. team to seven Davis Cup victories. He essentially created the U.S. pro tennis circuit, touring for years and leaving up. Then he moved to Los Angeles, where he whipped the coming champion, Jack Kramer, who was nearly 30 years younger, and taught tennis to the stars. On Charlie Chaplin's court, he played mixed doubles with Katharine Hepburn and Greta Garbo. During World War II, he played exhibitions at military bases and hospitals. Then Tilden's life changed forever.

Mr. Hornblum waits until page 383 of a 405-page book to address Tilden's sexuality. He was a predator irresistibly drawn to fondling adolescent boys. Episodes overseas had been hushed up, but starting in 1946 he was arrested twice in Los Angeles and served two terms at a prison farm. Tilden's reputation was ruined, although some loyal friends, including a few of his old Hollywood pals, stuck with him. He died at 60 in 1953, essentially broke.

In his epilogue, Mr. Hornblum castigates the master sportswriter Frank Deford for "amateur armchair psychoanalysis" and supposed inaccuracies in his 1976 biography, "Big Bill Tilden." But Deford is straightforward about Tilden's sexuality from the start. Readers seeking a sophisticated and not unsympathetic account of this supremely talented and complicated man should seek out the Deford book. It sweeps "American Colossus" off the court.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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