

# HOW SHE PLAYED THE GAME

By Cynthia L. Cooper

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## CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

**ELEONORA RANDOLPH SEARS** one of the century's most versatile sportswomen, from Boston, high-spirited and energetic, born in the late 1800s, lived through the 1960s, serves as the play's "moderator," introduces and closes the show, her letters serve as a continuing thread throughout the play

**ALTHEA GIBSON** became the first African-American athlete to break through the barriers of top tennis competition, background as a child of the ghetto made her an unlikely candidate for such a role, but her personality did not, takes place on the day she about to win the Wimbledon tennis match

**GERTRUDE EDERLE** the first woman to swim the English Channel, breaking the records of the five men before her, after which, Ederle, an unassuming young woman, seemed to disappear from the public spotlight, takes place forty years after the famous swim, when life has evolved in a different direction

**SONIA HENIE** richest athlete in all of history when she died with some forty-two million dollars to her name, of Norwegian background, made her fame on ice in the twenties and thirties, then in movies and her own ice revues, revolutionized the concept of ice skating by incorporating dance and movement, later began ice revues and is credited with popularizing ice skating, shrewd business skills and a fierce determination combined with her athletic and artistic skills, takes place on ice as her career winds

down and she takes stock of her accomplishments and her future

#### GRETEL BERGMANN

Jewish in Germany at a time when Jews were not welcome, high jumper, added to the German Olympic team of 1936, when the time to compete came around was not in the arena, relates to us the feelings of all those who find their abilities unfulfilled for reasons beyond themselves

#### BABE DIDRIKSON

became famous mostly for her unbelievable skill at golf, but she had a perhaps more extraordinary career in track and field, tennis, baseball, basketball, and it is no exaggeration to say few athletes ever -- male or female -- possessed her abilities, while naively rushing forward against the societal forces that wanted women to be everything that she was not, she exuded a down-home confidence that pushed her to become a star

**NOTE:** All of the characters in HOW SHE PLAYED THE GAME are real women. As persons from sports history, their very individual stories were designed to be dramatized through one actress, playing all of the roles. The separate stories of the women athletes, are, together, meant to create a collage of the many aspects of personality and character that make a whole. In some circumstances, permission had been granted to perform the show with multiple actresses; in these cases, the author encourages creative integration of the characters in the entire play through various stage and directorial techniques to avoid a rhythm of monologues and to encourage the understanding of a big picture and the characters as a part of it.

#### PROP LIST

Paper and envelopes  
Scrapbook  
Tennis Racquet (optional.)

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***At Rise: The actress enters, and takes command of center stage. Playing all of the characters and transforming from one to the other from scene to scene, SHE is now in the character of ELEONORA RANDOLPH SEARS. ELEONORA is a Bostonian, well-bred, energetic, and high-spirited, with more than a bit of verve. Her tone is light, and she has a sense of humor and intelligence about her. SHE whips out a sheet of paper and addresses the audience.***

ELEONORA RANDOLPH SEARS: I want you to listen to this resolution they passed about me: "Whereas it has been brought to the attention of the Burlingame Mothers Club ..." They're out here in California where the United States Polo Team is practicing. Frankly, I had every intention of becoming the first woman on the team. "...that Miss Eleonora Randolph Sears ..." That's me ... Eleo Sears, great great granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson -- the Thomas Jefferson; the Belle of Boston; and voted the Best Dressed Woman of 1910... "...has been parading through our city in the unconventional trousers and clothes of the masculine sex, having bad effects on the sensibilities of our boys and girls; Now be it resolved that we are strongly opposed to this unsightly mannish garb and request that Miss Sears restrict herself to normal feminine attire. Signed Mrs. D.S. Harns, the year of 1912." Naturally, I decided to pay a visit to the Mothers' Club. In trousers! (***speaks as if addressing the Club***) "Dear women. Mothers! Please sit back down. I have no intention of 'corrupting' you ... I haven't that much time. This is my unsightly mannish garb. Take a good look, ladies. Because, this is the future staring you straight in the corset! Your daughters and their daughters won't stand for being laced up, stowed down, braced against a board! And there's more -- women are going to leave these silly parlor meetings and play outdoors! Tennis! Biking! Hiking! Polo! In trousers!" "Ladies, I will make a stand: Women will excel in ways men have not! Not equal. Excel. And to prove it myself, I offer a bet of \$200 -- yes, \$200 -- that I can walk -- without stopping -- faster and farther than any man has ever done on record. I will walk -- from Burlingame to Del Monte, California! One hundred and nine miles! ... Anyone willing to take my bet? "Well, then, what a pity ... Oh ... Mrs. D.S. Harns, I believe? You accept my bet? Well, what a bully good opportunity. Then, arrange for your monitors ... I will commence at once!" (***turns as if exiting, begins to strap on her walking shoes, and addresses the***

**audience**) One hundred and nine miles is a very long distance. But, I'm no quitter. I'm off. Five miles. Ten miles. Twenty-five miles. Around about mile 37.1, I'm feeling a little tuckered out. The future of my career as a champion pedestrian doesn't seem too promising. I promise ... by George, I promise ... every time I find out about a woman trying to make a special mark in sports, I will write her a little note. A certain 'hey-ho, bully good' congratulations-good luck from me -- Eleonora Randolph Sears. I swear to it on this dusty road at mile 37.2 between the cities of Burlingame and Del Monte in the state of California.

**(Conclusion of the opening ELEANORA sequence, and the play shifts away from her as the actress transforms into the next character. The actress takes on the character of ALTHEA GIBSON. Dressed in tennis whites, hair neatly coifed, SHE is strong and tough and carries a tennis racquet with a grip that lets everyone know she intends to use it mercilessly. It is July, 1957, and ALTHEA GIBSON is about to become the first Black person -- male or female -- to win the Wimbledon championship. When SHE speaks, SHE talks to a an off-stage character, Darlene Hard, another tennis player. ALTHEA opens her locker, finds a letter there and reads it.)**

ALTHEA GIBSON: "Dear Miss Gibson: Old as I am, I can hardly remember a time when I've been so incensed as I am at the way you've been treated at these so-called tennis tournaments. Well, being the first person -- male or female -- to break the color barrier is a mighty task. I just want you to know you can count on me rooting my heart out for you whenever you play. Sincerely: Eleonora Randolph Sears, July, 1957." That's nice. That's real nice. **(puts the note down, looks up as if someone is signaling her and then calls to Darlene)** What? Hey there! Fifteen minutes to go, Darlene. The ballgirl just came by. You hear me? The match begins in fifteen minutes! **(picks up the tennis racquet and fiddles with it)** It's hot out there, Darlene, honey. Real hot. Nearly a hundred degrees of hot. Folks falling out in the stands. It's so hot they ran out and got blocks of ice to keep the Queen cool. To ... keep ... the ... Queen ... cool. Isn't that something? So you take care to splash some cold water on your face before we head out to the court, all right, sugar? I don't want anything happening to you out there today. We got a show to put on for the Queen. Althea Gibson, Darlene Hard ... two Americans on the grass courts of England. Me ... I don't need any cold water. Don't need any ice either. Not today. I'm cool like I've never been. This is the kind of hot we had in Harlem. Days like today, all of Harlem floats through your memories, pushes out from under your

skin like something you can't contain any more. If you listen real close, you can hear the music of Buddy Walker's Harlem Society Orchestra drifting by. And there I am on 143<sup>rd</sup> street. 'Cause in 1939 that's the street the Police Athletic League closed off for us kids to play. **(acts out the next scene)** "We won! We won! The 143<sup>rd</sup> Street Club won again!" "Mr. Walker! Mr. Buddy Walker! Did you see the game? ... We took the paddle tennis tournament again! "Phenomenal? Your really thought I played phenomenal? Thanks, Buddy. Will you dedicate a song to us tonight? Right on stage?" "Why do you ask me a question like that? I didn't fight nobody. I didn't have to. I was winning! And the fact is, the story going 'round about me beating up that one boy on the other team isn't true. I only did it because he stole my uncle's five dollars." "Shoot, Buddy. I don't 'xactly know how I learned to play. I just did. They didn't teach us none in school. That's why I had to quit. And my folks don't care none. That's why I had to run away. Now I just play." "Would I? Yessir, I would love to play at the Harlem River Tennis Courts Club!" "Yes, sir, I surely do promise." "Okay, Buddy. I'll say it all the way through. 'If you take me to play at the Harlem River Tennis Courts Club, I ... promise ... not to get into any fights.' ... That aren't absolutely necessary." I went to the Harlem River Tennis Club, where the fancy Afro American society played. It was different. Everybody was all dressed up in immaculate white and acted so strange, like it was a church meeting or something. I just walked out on the court and played. Pretty soon all the other players stopped their games and were watching me. I felt grand. I played hard, just like I was on 143<sup>rd</sup> Street. But, I guess I kind of had a little slipping in my promise to Buddy. "What do you mean 'out'? That ball was right on the line! Don't tell me that was out! You tell me to my face that was out!" **(drops her racquet and rushes like SHE's going to fight)** Buddy called me over to the sidelines. "I can't help it, Buddy! The one thing my daddy taught me was how to box. Every time I start to losing, I got to fight the other player." "I understand," he said. "But you don't really know how to fight. Folks have a different way at the Club. Everyone acts polite. They shake hands. And then they go out and play like tigers and beat the liver and lights – out of the ball." **(repeating that, gently, as if remembering one of the Ten Commandments)** "Shake hands and beat the liver and lights out of the ball." Not too long after that the two Black doctors saw me play. They thought I was the Black tennis player who could play in the white tournaments and win. So, they arranged to take me South, where they were from. I went back to high school. Finished, too. At age twenty-one. Went on to college. And all the while I practiced and worked my tennis game like nobody's business. **(looks out as if someone's signaling her)**

What's that? Five more minutes? All right. Hear that, Darlene? Only five more minutes. Put a washrag to your head. That'll cool you down, doll. I want to know if you can hear, Darlene? You see, you're white. Harlem's just a name to you. You're still young. About the age I was when I took up tennis. Well, I'm thirty years old, Darlene. That makes me an old lady for tennis. **(as if playing the game)** Last year, the crowd here at Wimbeldon booed me, and it threw my game. This year, I'm going to serve hard, let the ball jump off the grass. I'm going to rush to the net, cut away the volley. And I won't even notice the heat. Reason I've been telling you all this, sugar, is, you see, the heat makes me feel right at home. I'm going to win. At last. I've got to, hon. See, I always wanted to be somebody. So what I'm saying, Darlene, is I'm going out there in front of that Queen today, and I'm going to beat the liver and lights out of you. You can understand that, now, can't you, doll? **(calling)** Yeah. We're ready. It'll be over soon, hon. Then we'll go back and win the doubles together -- you and me. When we go out there, Darlene, I want you to shake my hand. All right, hon? **(grabs the note, sticks it in her bag, and turns, with racquet, as if exiting)** Yeah. We're ready. We're ready.

*(Actress takes on the character of GERTRUDE EDERLE, first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926. It is 1969 now, and she is 62. GERTRUDE EDERLE is a matronly woman and hardly seems athletic. SHE is pleasant, and a bit shy. Everything about her seems straight-forward, reflecting perhaps her parents' New York-German heritage. SHE is extremely hard of hearing. In an outfit that indicates swimming -- goggles, nose plugs -- EDERLE carries a scrapbook, taken out of a locker. SHE looks up as if seeing someone. When SHE first starts speaking, SHE shouts.)*

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