

Good evening.

I am speaking to you on the eve of my appearance at the 1908 London Olympics. You probably know me as the five-times winner of the Wimbledon Singles Championship.

I would like to start by recounting an exciting match that I played four years ago:

It's May 12th 1904, I'm playing in the final of the Ladies' Golf Union Championship at Troon. My opponent, May Hezlet, is considered to be Ireland's greatest golfer. There are around 6,000 spectators; many are shipyard workers from the nearby Clyde who have taken an unofficial day off. It's a close contest; by the time we reach the 17th, Miss Hezlet is one ahead. I win the 17th hole and there is a frenzied uproar of cheering and counter-cheering, jostling and jeering from the crowd. The captain of the Troon Golf Club tells the spectators that the match will be abandoned unless they behave in a seemly manner. There is absolute quiet at the final green. We both drive well; I lay my second about six yards from the hole, Miss Hezlet's approach is short, and I win the match. The crowd surge forward – stewards seize myself and Miss Hezlet and bundle us to the safety of the clubhouse ...

I received hundreds of telegrams from around the world to congratulate me on becoming the new British Ladies' Golf Champion. I was subsequently invited to compete in the American Ladies' Championship that autumn. They changed the rule, that had formerly restricted entry to American citizens, for my particular benefit!

My sporting career started with lawn tennis. I was only five when my father had two tennis courts laid out at our home. At first, my two older brothers, Willy and Tony, dominated the game. Annie, my older sister, and I were determined to hold our own against the boys; we practised seven days a week! I became a member of the Rock Ferry Tennis Club in Birkenhead at the age of 11 – five years younger than their minimum official age. Annie began taking me out on the road to play tennis tournaments.

When I was 13, Annie and I won the Ladies' Doubles Northern Championship; our novel tactic of both advancing to the net as soon as possible proved successful. I won Wimbledon in 1887 at the age of 15 years and 10 months. The Press called me, 'The Little Wonder'. In 1888, after my second Wimbledon win, I invited three of the best male tennis players to a series of sporting duels. The men considered it an unequal challenge and agreed to give me a 15–love advantage in each game. I held my own in these contests and beat the six-time Wimbledon champion, William Renshaw, 6–2, 6–4!

For me, the greatest pleasure in any sport is in learning to play it well. In 1895, I took up Winter Sports in St Moritz. I passed the Ladies' Figure Skating Test after practising two hours a day for two months. The following season, I became the first woman to pass the more rigorous Male Skating Test. I also wanted to become the first woman to complete the Cresta toboggan run; I was coached by the current record-holder who had reached speeds of 70mph on the track. There was a problem: custom dictated that women wear a petticoat. The best racing position was lying head-first on the toboggan, but then the petticoat could get tangled up in the equipment. I was obliged to complete the run sitting upright!

In 1900 I played centre-forward for the England National Hockey Team and scored both goals in an exciting 2:1 victory over the Irish in Dublin.

Today is July 16th 1908 - tomorrow, I will be competing with the British Archery Team in the Fourth Olympiad at the White City. My ancestor, Sir Antony Dod, commanded the English Archers at Agincourt; I shall be in my element, firing off 144 arrows.

In conclusion, I would say that I have gained much from playing competitive sports. A commentator once described me as giving off 'a coolness and presence of mind that made it almost impossible for opponents to disconcert or unnerve her'. These qualities are not acquired by accident. At Wimbledon a girl once asked me about the secret of my success. 'Well,' I replied, 'I never lose my head in a game and experience has taught me never to lose my temper. I think tennis a capital game to teach a girl self-control.'

On that note - I will say Goodnight.

Charlotte Dod (1871 – 1960)

Marie Charnley