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With a Scalloped Skort, Ashleigh Barty Salutes a Big Anniversary

Barty, the top-seeded woman at Wimbledon, asked her apparel sponsor to design an outfit that paid tribute to Evonne Goolagong Cawley, the first Indigenous Australian woman to win the tournament.



Ashleigh Barty has paid tribute to Evonne Goolagong Cawley with her outfit choice at Wimbledon.

By Ben Rothenberg
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WIMBLEDON, England — As the top-seeded Ashleigh Barty looked forward to Wimbledon this year, she also looked back half a century. To another Indigenous woman from Australia. To a groundbreaking Wimbledon title. And, ultimately, to a hemline.

Barty knew she wanted to pay tribute to Evonne Goolagong Cawley, who 50 years ago became the first Indigenous Australian woman to win a Wimbledon title.

“Evonne has guided the way,” Barty, 25, said. “She’s created a legacy like no other in Australia.”

Barty, who traces her Indigenous Australian ancestry to the Ngarigo people from her father’s side, said she first met Goolagong Cawley when she was 13 or 14 years old and already considered something of a prodigy. At age 15, she won the 2011 Wimbledon junior title, and two years ago she won her first major title, at the French Open. She and Goolagong Cawley, who is of the Wiradjuri people, have stayed in close contact.

“I think for her to be able to share knowledge with me from such a young age was incredible,” Barty said last month in Paris, adding, “I’m forever grateful that she’s opened up to me and has been so extremely generous with her time and her knowledge and her thoughts.”

Barty, who is seeking her first Wimbledon title, defeated Anna Blinkova of Russia, 6-4, 6-3, on Thursday and will face Katerina Siniakova of the Czech Republic in the third round on Saturday.

Before the tournament, Barty approached her clothing sponsor, Fila, with a suggestion to re-create elements of the outfit Goolagong Cawley wore during her first Wimbledon triumph. Goolagong Cawley’s white dress had buttons all the way down the front and, most notably, a scalloped hemline.

“We took that element, we took some beautiful stitching of flowers on another dress that Evonne loved, and we took all of that as inspiration, and designed a couple of different outfits for Ash,” said Lauren Mallon, Fila’s senior director of tennis marketing. “We also kept in mind what Ash likes to wear; it’s really important to us as a brand that is comfortable, functional, and beautiful for all of our athletes.”

Barty, who prefers not to wear dresses on the court, was given a tank top and skort with similar elements. There were other updates: Whereas the flowers that appeared on some of Goolagong Cawley’s outfits were embroidered with colorful thread, the ones on Barty’s dress were laser cut out of the fabric.

Barty said in her pre-tournament news conference that she had sought Goolagong Cawley’s blessing before going ahead with the plan; Goolagong Cawley’s excitedly gave it.

“That made me feel a lot more comfortable,” Barty said. “Knowing her favorite dress, probably her most iconic dress, is something that inspired me and inspired our generation of Indigenous youth, I hope that my version of it, my outfit, can do the same for the next generation of Indigenous youth coming forward.”

In a news release from Tennis Australia, Goolagong Cawley said the tribute “just blows my mind. What a wonderful thing to do, what a wonderful honor.”

Though Goolagong Cawley would be sponsored by Fila later in her playing career, the outfits that inspired Barty’s were made by Ted Tinling, a former player turned couturier whose creations defined that era of tennis fashion.

Tinling, a Briton who was posthumously honored by the Lawn Tennis Association last month as a leading L.G.B.T.Q. figure in the sport’s history, used female players professional tennis as his muses at a time when the women’s game was just finding its footing as a professional sport.



Evonne Goolagong Cawley beat Margaret Court on July 2, 1971, to win Wimbledon.

In his 1983 memoir, “Tinling: Sixty Years in Tennis,” Tinling described Goolagong Cawley as one of his most confounding clients to capture correctly.

“I felt I was grappling with a ghost, trying to grasp the essence of her elusive personality so as to interpret this in her dresses,” Tinling wrote. “The real answer is that Evonne’s beauty lies in the exquisite grace of her movements. When she is still, it seems impossible to capture her true identity. Yet this ‘nature sprite’ spontaneity is the heart and soul of Evonne’s fascination.”

Tinling later made one of his most unusual creations, inspired by Goolagong Cawley’s Indigenous heritage. Hearing that the word “goolagong” meant “tall trees near still water,” Tinling created an embroidered landscape of gum trees beside a creek for one of the dresses Goolagong Cawley wore most often in the early 1970s.

“The detail, the beauty: You can spot a Ted Tinling dress,” Mallon said. “We love what he did back in the ‘60s and ‘70s, really giving each player their own beautiful look to wear on court.”

Two of Goolagong Cawley’s dresses are now part of a collection at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, as are her two Wimbledon singles trophies — from her 1971 victory over Margaret Court in the final and from the 1980 defeat of Chris Evert.

In a video produced by Wimbledon for the anniversary of Goolagong Cawley's 1971 breakthrough, Barty did the narration and described Goolagong Cawley's roots in the rural town of Barellan as "perhaps the humblest origins in Grand Slam history."

In a recent interview, Goolagong Cawley, who will turn 70 at the end of the month, said that as she was growing up she feared being forcibly removed from her family by the government, as Indigenous Australian children often were through much of the 20th century.

"Every time a shiny car would come down the road, my mum used to say, 'You better run and hide: The welfare man's going to take you away,'" Goolagong Cawley recalled. "So I remember hiding very nervously under the bed because I didn't want to get taken away."

"I think that's why losing a match never really bothered me: I just felt I was very lucky to be there in the first place to enjoy this wonderful game."

Barty, who has worked actively with Indigenous Australian youth, including at Indigenous tennis programs in Queensland, said Goolagong Cawley's effect on her own life and career had been wide-ranging.

"Evonne achieved her tennis dream long before I was born, but her legacy is an inspiration to me both on and off the court," Barty said in the anniversary video. "As a proud Ngarigo woman, I cherish our shared heritage, and I'm humbled to walk in her footsteps."