



King, Billie Jean (b. 1943)

by Tina Gianoulis

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From the time she was a young girl playing tennis in Long Beach, California, Billie Jean King knew she wanted to make a difference in the sport. She wanted to carve a place for herself, a middle-class girl, in an elitist sport where only men were taken seriously. She wanted to be a champion.



Billie Jean King in 1962.
Courtesy Library of
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King achieved her goals, winning her first championship at the age of fifteen and going on to set a record for wins at Wimbledon, with twenty titles. She also won thirteen U.S. Open titles and six Grand Slams.

However, King's ambitions included more than merely winning. She wanted to take tennis out of the country clubs and make it a more accessible sport; she wanted as well for women to have a more nearly equal role in the sport. King has worked toward these goals throughout her career, and because of her work tennis has become a different sport than it was when eleven-year-old Billie Jean Moffitt of Long Beach bought her first racket.

Billie Jean was born in Long Beach on November 22, 1943 into a close-knit, religious family. The fact that her family was not wealthy was a disadvantage in the elite world of tennis. In addition, she was not possessed of the optimum physique for a tennis player. Nevertheless, her drive and talent outweighed these disadvantages.

Perhaps because she faced obstacles and opposition with every step of her tennis career, King learned to fight for the respect due her. Women's tennis of the early 1960s was an amateur sport mostly reserved for the wealthy. As someone who needed to earn a living in the sport she loved, King banded together with other players in 1968 to demand that all tournament organizers pay prize money.

Her success in this effort did her little good, however; the prize money for women's tournaments remained a fraction of that offered to men. So, in 1970, King organized again, this time with other female players. The women refused to participate in the Pacific Southwest Tournament because the prize money they were offered was only \$1,500. In contrast, the male champions would divide \$12,500 in prizes.

Braving threats of suspension from the United States Lawn Tennis Association, the women organized their own tournament. The Virginia Slims Tournament offered \$6,500 in prizes and eventually became an annual event in women's tennis.

King went on to help organize the players into the Women's Tennis Association. She co-founded the Women's Sports Foundation to raise money for women's sports at all levels. She also co-founded *WomenSport* magazine, and for decades has worked on behalf of Team Tennis, a project designed to bring tennis out of the private clubs and into the communities.

Because of her tireless work for equality for women both in and outside of tennis, King was the perfect choice for the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" with aging tennis champion and hustler, Bobby Riggs.

Riggs' taunting challenge that women should stay at home and not compete with men struck a profound note in 1970s America. Although on the surface, the match was farcical--an over-hyped Las Vegas-style sideshow in the Houston Astrodome in which a has-been attempted to dethrone a champion--in reality it was about something very significant: the right of women to be taken seriously in sports.

In the late 1960s King began to have affairs with women. She had married Larry King while she was still in college, but their relationship became more distant as Billie Jean's career blossomed.

King kept her relationships with women deep in the closet until 1981, when Marilyn Barnett, an ex-lover, outed her by filing a very public palimony suit. King admitted the affair to the press, but called it a "mistake" and hid behind her marriage, pointedly stopping short of acknowledging that she was a lesbian.

In spite of this evasion, undoubtedly motivated at least in part by fears that she would suffer financially from any public acknowledgment of lesbianism, she lost almost all of her commercial endorsements and had to postpone her retirement from tennis for financial reasons.

In the somewhat more accepting climate of 1998, King finally came out openly, although her longtime partner does not wish to be identified. In 2000, as coach of the United States women's tennis team, Billie Jean King became the first openly lesbian coach of an Olympic team.

In 2006 the United States Tennis Association voted to name the National Tennis Center after King. In doing so, they chose to forego the sale of naming rights, which could have brought in an estimated six to ten million dollars, in favor of honoring King's leadership and achievements.

At the dedication ceremony on August 28, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and tennis greats including Chris Evert, John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, and Venus and Serena Williams praised King for her contributions to both sports and society. Evert commented that, as a teen starting out in professional tennis, she did not fully comprehend the women's movement, but, she said, "Billie Jean made me feel good about myself, worthy of myself . . . I was very lucky to come in right behind her."

For her part, King commented, "I'm so grateful and humbled by this, I still cannot believe it. So rarely are women thought of in this way, to get a name in sports, and for that I'm thrilled. This is for all the world, particularly for the underserved--women, people of color, the LGBT, the disabled."

On August 12, 2009, President Obama awarded King the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. In bestowing the award on King, Obama said that today "we honor what she calls 'all the off-the-court stuff'--what she did to broaden the reach of the game, to change how women athletes and women everywhere view themselves, and to give everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation--including my two daughters--a chance to compete both on the court and in life. As Billie Jean once said, 'We should never, ever underestimate the human spirit.'"

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.