



Richards, Renee (b. 1934)

by Carolyn Kraus

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Transsexual tennis player Renee Richards successfully sued the United States Tennis Association when it barred her from competing in the U.S. Women's Open, establishing an important precedent for the rights of transsexual athletes.

From an early age, Richards experienced what she describes as a strange sort of dual consciousness, "a lifetime of freakish behavior, forever vacillating between masculinity and femininity."

As Richard Raskind, she was a Yale graduate, a naval officer, a husband and father, a prominent New York ophthalmologist, and a tennis champion on the amateur men's circuit.

After sex reassignment surgery in 1975 at the age of forty, she reestablished her ophthalmology practice in Southern California and began life as Renee. She played in women's tournaments until her former identity was discovered and she was barred from women's tennis. Richards attracted international attention in the late 1970s when she successfully challenged the sanctions against her in court.

In her 1983 autobiography *Second Serve*, Richards writes of a childhood characterized by "a provocative set of circumstances": a controlling psychiatrist mother, disappointed that her first child "Mike" was a girl; a tomboyish sister who dressed her little brother in girls' panties and slippers, forced his penis into painful inversions, and encouraged his exploration of her own anatomy; and the boy's secret cross-dressing and invention of an alter ego named Renee.

Richards acknowledges that "the cause of transsexualism may someday be proven to be biochemical. If this happens, I can only conclude that fate has a sense of humor because my early life is strewn with unobtrusive touches that beg to be seen as reasons for my sexual confusion."

Richards' early adult life featured Richard and Renee in alternating ascendance. "I've been asked many times why I didn't simply live the life of a homosexual," she writes. "This question is asked by those who do not understand that Dick was a heterosexual male and that Renee was a heterosexual female. Dick had no sexual interest in men and, when Renee fantasized, she fantasized the pleasures of sex as a woman with a vagina."

In the late 1960s, Richard Raskind received female hormone treatments and traveled to Casablanca for sex-change surgery, but balked at the hospital doorstep. "Up until that moment of truth in front of the clinic, I would have said confidently that I was a woman trapped in a man's body," Richards recalls, "but I had stood paralyzed, not fifty feet from the remedy and had been unable to cross the remaining space. Somewhere inside me, the previously failing masculinity was rising up again and making a bid for life."

He subsequently had breast reduction surgery, married, fathered a child, and divorced before finally having gender reassignment surgery in 1975 and legally becoming female.

After reestablishing her life and medical practice in Newport Beach, Richards played in several women's tennis tournaments until a reporter discovered the lanky six-foot-tall athlete's former identity and claimed she was a man masquerading as a woman.

The United States Tennis Association denied her entry into the 1976 U. S. Open because, since gender reassignment surgery cannot change a person's genetic makeup, she could not pass an Olympic-style chromosome test.

Officials cited what Richards calls "the floodgate theory." "If I was allowed to play," she writes, "then the floodgates would be opened and through them would come tumbling an endless stream of made-over Neanderthals who would brutalize Chris Evert and Evonne Goolagong." Some even imagined a profit motive. Richards replies: "How hungry for tennis success must you be to have your penis chopped off in pursuit of it?"

Encouraged by thousands of supporting letters, many from people who identified themselves as minorities and urged her to fight, Richards finally challenged the tennis organization's sanctions against her in court. "I heard from blacks, convicts, Chicanos, hippies, homosexuals, people with physical handicaps and, of course, transsexuals," she writes. "My god, the whole world seemed to be looking for me to be their Joan of Arc."

Richards spent a year battling the ruling before the New York Supreme Court cleared the way for her to compete in the 1977 Women's Open. She lost in the first round but won a 1979 singles title and served a two-year stint as Martina Navratilova's coach.

In 1981, after four years on the pro tour, during which "quite a lot of ink was used on the reaction of players to my presence in the locker room," she returned to medicine: "I had to admit that I was a better doctor than I was an athlete."

In a rare interview in 1999, Richards spoke of mixed feelings about her mid-life surgery. There is nothing she misses about being a man, she said, but insisted that she doesn't want anyone to hold her out as an example to follow.

She stressed that the problems she faces as a transgendered woman have less to do with her compelling need to "make right what nature didn't" than with the timing of her operation.

"I get a lot of letters from people in their 40s who are considering having this kind of operation. And I discourage all of them. It's not something for somebody in their 40s to do, someone who's had a life as a man. If you're 18 or 20 and have never had the kind of advantages I had, and you're oriented in that direction, sure, go ahead. . . . But if you're a forty-five-year-old man and you're an airline pilot and you have an ex-wife and three adolescent kids, you better get on Thorazine or Zoloft or Prozac or get locked up or do whatever it takes to keep you from being allowed to do something like this."

Yet to continue living as a male had seemed impossible: "I couldn't do it. Most people can't."

As a doctor, parent and tennis pro, Richards had been "a thorny problem for those who liked to think of transsexuals only as perverts dancing in sleazy bars," a puzzle that could not be solved by resorting to stereotype. This, she says, was the source of her "surprising popularity."

Richards, now the surgeon director of ophthalmology and head of the eye-muscle clinic at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital in New York City, acknowledges that this popularity continues to haunt her. "Sure it bothers me," she says. "It bothers me that when I die, my obituary will read, 'Transsexual Tennis Player Dr. Renee Richards.' But there's nothing I can do about it."

Bibliography

Bassis, Lisa. "A Legal Conundrum: Transsexuals in Athletics." *Comment, A Journal of Communications and Entertainment Law* 2 (Spring 1978): 369-417.

Richards, Renee, with John Ames. *Second Serve*. New York: Stein and Day, 1983.

Shmerler, Cindy. "Regrets, She's Had a Few." *Tennis* 35.2 (March, 1999): 31-32.

About the Author

Carolyn Kraus is Associate Professor of Communications at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where she teaches journalism and creative nonfiction. She has written for a variety of publications, including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *Partisan Review*.