

The Battle of the Sexes:

20 Years After Billie Jean King vs. Bobby Riggs

By Michael A. Stusser



The Cheat Sheet is designed to give readers a quick overview of sophisticated topics, making you look smart without all that annoying, studious effort. Use it as a conversation starter—all you gotta do is keep a straight face. “Go get ‘em, Einstein!”

Namedropping:

Billie Jean King (pron. Bee-lee Jeen King) is right up there with Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug – but they couldn’t hit the broadside of a barn with a tennis ball (and we use the term “broad” in a literal sense...). Bobby Riggs (pron. Seh-x-ist Pihg) found out the hard way.

The Basics:

In May 1973, former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs challenged the top-ranked female player Margaret Court to a match in California. He beat her 6-2, 6-1 and announced to the world that he wanted his next victim to be “the women’s lib leader,” Billie Jean King. Riggs, a self-proclaimed “chauvinist pig,” boasted he was far superior to King (his junior by 26 years) by virtue of his, well, manhood. On September 20, 1973, the so-called “Battle of the Sexes” winner-take-all game was held at the Houston Astrodome, packed with over 30,000 fans – the largest live audience ever to see a tennis match. The prize: \$100,000 (and big-time locker room bragging rights). Riggs insisted on a best-of-five match, rather than the traditional best-of-three usually played by women, and King, fit as a fiddle, didn’t object. She realized that at age 29 she’d easily wear down the 55-year-old Riggs. She was right, whipping him in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3, in front of an estimated 50 million TV viewers worldwide.

EXTRA CREDIT:

“No one changes the world who isn’t obsessed.” Billie Jean King.

King knew at age 11 she wanted to change the sport after being barred from posing in a group photo at the Los Angeles Tennis Club in 1955 for wearing shorts instead of a tennis skirt. If they’d only invented “skorts” back then, there wouldn’t have been a problem...

In addition to being a helluva show, the “Battle of the Sexes” was a victory for women’s tennis. Afterwards, more media attention was devoted to the sport, the prize purses grew larger, and kids (like the Williams sisters) took notice – and headed to the courts.

As for Riggs, after his famous loss he realized he could make big bucks by being his outrageous self, and challenged an assortment of folks to ridiculous exhibitions. In 1974, he bet Evel Knievel \$25,000 he could ride a motorcycle from Las Vegas to Twin Falls, Idaho (heck, I could do that!). He also played a game of tennis strip-tease against six women in Washington, D.C., in 1983 – which, thank goodness, he won.

Conversation Starters:

- King entered the arena carried by four muscular beefcakes; Riggs was wheeled out in a rickshaw pulled by half a dozen showgirls. Before the match they exchanged gifts: Riggs gave King a giant Sugar Daddy, and King presented Riggs with a live pig.
- At age 21, Riggs was ranked the number one tennis player in the world. He was the 1939 Wimbledon champion, and won U.S. titles in 1946, 47 and 49. Riggs was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1951.
- Billie Jean King won her first Wimbledon title in 1962, and went on to win 19 more (6 singles titles, ten doubles, and 3 co-ed). In 1972 she was named Sports Illustrated’s “Sportsperson of the Year,” the first woman to win the honor.
- Bobby was always feisty – the press christened him the “Bad Boy of Tennis” back in the 1930s. In an era when tennis players were expected to be wholesome and humble, he was an avid card shark and known to bet on his own matches, sometimes even during a game.
- Elton John was a fervent tennis player and his 1975 hit “Philadelphia Freedom” was a tribute to King (original pressings of the single bore the inscription “To BJK”). Good thing he didn’t dedicate “The Bitch is Back.”
- As a child, King excelled at softball, but switched to tennis when her parents decided there was no future in softball, and tennis was more “ladylike.”
- King’s brother, Randy, was a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants. Far as we know, he never challenged his sis to a game of hardball – at least not for money.
- Double-handed backhand: In 1981, King was slapped with a palimony suit by hairdresser Marilyn Barnett. King admitted the affair and was later given an award from GLAAD “furthering the visibility and inclusion of the community in her work.” She went on to serve on the boards of several AIDS charities.
- King retired from competitive tennis in 1984 and has been a TV commentator, coach, and founder of World Team Tennis. Riggs was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1988, and spent the last years of his life educating the public about the disease before passing away in 1995.

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