



Striking a Blow Against Misogyny—With a Tennis Racket

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at www.easttexashistorical.org.

(Mar 13, 2023) As the 1970s dawned feminism—the battle for women’s equality—began to enter a new era, one some have called a “second wave” phase of the movement that began to confront discrimination and oppression not just in the economic sphere but in all aspects of social life. The decade saw the intensification of the battle for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and women’s rights icon Gloria Steinem’s founding of Ms. Magazine, which became the prominent organ of the movement when it eschewed the traditional women’s journalism domain of “beauty” and household advice and wrote about political and social issues that directly affected women. Adjunct movements such as the Combahee River Collective, a group of African American feminists who called attention to female voices other than the normal middle-class expression that overshadowed other discourses, began to attract attention. Perhaps most significantly, the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* energized—and divided—women on the issue of reproductive rights all over the nation.

Representative of the move of feminism into all tentacles of society were two significant developments that would have large reverberations in all aspects of the nation’s life but would impact the sports world most directly. The United States Congress, in 1973, passed amendments that added to pre-existing law that made educational funding contingent on making sure that higher educational programs were equally available to men and women. Title IX, the number of the amendment that mandated the practice, did not specifically mention sports programs, but it would be that arena that the law would have the greatest effect. Peripheral to that, world competitive tennis had undergone a change in 1968 when major tournaments such as Wimbledon acknowledged that tennis professionals “existed” and began to offer prize money for participation for the first time. The men’s singles champion that year, Rod Laver, received two thousand pounds, but the women’s winner, Billie Jean King, collected only seven hundred-fifty pounds. King was incredulous, saying at the time that “it didn’t even dawn on me that women would get less.” Incensed, King became the leading voice for

equality in payment between men and women in professional tennis, and her campaign became a resounding part of the equal pay movement overall. King helped to form a new professional tennis circuit and threatened to boycott tournaments that did not have equal purses, such as Wimbledon and the United States Open, the two most important competitions in tennis.

King's activism created a backlash among more conservative elements who viewed her crusading as another attack on the social order of the nation. She became one of the leading voices of feminism in the nation, an inspiration and a lightning rod. Her visibility also inspired self-acknowledged "hustler"—which was the name of his autobiography—Bobby Riggs to use her celebrity for his own gain. Riggs, who was fifty-five years old in 1973, had once been one of the leading men's tennis players in the world, although his brash and unconventional manner had never endeared him to the "country-club set" that governed the sport when he was in his prime in the 1930s and 1940s. Riggs saw King and her feminist campaign as a way to once again put himself in the limelight. One of the excuses tournament promoters gave for not paying women as much as men was that the men were more skilled, so King was battling that stereotype as much as the patriarchy that claimed women were inferior to men. Riggs decided that was his opening. In an interview, Riggs claimed that the "one hundredth ranked" male player could beat King, who was the top-ranked female. He went on to exclaim, "Hell, I could beat her!"

Riggs ramped up the pressure. He convinced women's champion Margaret Court, who was past her prime playing days, to play him in May 1973 and he resoundingly defeated her. He would talk to any outlet that would listen about King, calling her a "women's libber leader" who has to "keep this sex thing going." King finally agreed to a \$100,000 winner-take-all match to be played in September at Houston's Astrodome, a venue that could pack more than 30,000 people into the arena for a tennis match. King explained years later that she knew the match was a "gimmick," but after Riggs defeated Court and his sexist insults increased she felt she had to accept the challenge because she was worried about the how such perceptions could harm her campaign for equal pay and how it would affect newly christened Title IX.

Riggs amplified his PR campaign to appeal to the sexist environment in the U.S. At the press conference announcing the match he said, "I'll tell you why I'll win. She's a woman and they don't have the emotional stability." At another briefing he said, ". . . women belong in the bedroom and kitchen, in that order." For Riggs, as revealed later, this was part of his "hustle," but among those who believed his shtick the match against King was a way to end such talk about "women's lib" and "equality." For Billie Jean King, it was important that she put a dent in such sentiments.

The match was a television extravaganza. King entered the Astrodome carried on a litter by male members of the Rice University track team dressed in togas. Riggs made his entrance on a rickshaw pulled by women in bikinis that he dubbed “Bobby’s bosom buddies.” King met Riggs at the end lines and presented him with a squealing baby pig, and Riggs pulled a “Sugar Daddy” candy lollipop from his pocket for her. Riggs played the first few games of the first set with a yellow jacket emblazoned with “Sugar Daddy” on the back. As for the tennis, it was not even close. Billie Jean King abandoned her normal serve-and-volley tactics and wore down the older Riggs with baseline rally after baseline rally, running him all over the court. She soundly defeated him 6-4, 6-3, and 6-3. After the match, Riggs was visibly worn and it looked as if Billie Jean King had hardly broken a sweat. It was a blow against misogyny, with a tennis racket.

#