

Billie Jean King

The Fight for Equality
in Sports for Women



Essential Questions

- How do the achievements of women in sports compare with their achievements in other areas?
- What was the relationship between the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s and other civil rights movements of that era?
- How have the stereotypes about women's abilities changed in the last century and how have these changes affected women's roles in sports?



King in Ireland for the Irish Open
in the early 1960s

- 1943—Billie Jean Moffitt born in Long Beach, CA
- 1961—At 17, she won the women's doubles tournament at Wimbledon with Karen Hantze
- 1965—Married Larry King
- 1966—Won first of six singles titles at Wimbledon
- 1966-1975—Won 12 Grand Slam Singles titles, nine Grand Slams Women's Doubles titles, ten Grand Slam Mixed Doubles titles

Billie Jean Moffitt was born in Long Beach, CA in 1943. She started playing tennis on the public courts at the Los Angeles Tennis Club. She attended California State University, Los Angeles; however, no sports scholarships were available to women at that time. In 1961, the Long Beach Tennis Patrons raised \$2000 to send her to Wimbledon in England, where she won the women's doubles tournament with partner Karen Hantze. After marrying Larry King in 1965, she took his name, becoming Billie Jean King, although she had already made a name for herself as Billie Jean Moffitt. In 1966, she won the first of her six singles tournaments at Wimbledon, where she dominated both women's singles and doubles for the decade. She was a fierce competitor known for rushing the net, as well as her speed and aggression.

The Women's Movement



Betty Friedan

- Girls and women began to protest for equal rights in education and employment, as well as reproductive rights
- 1963—Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. The book became a bestseller and helped start the modern women's liberation movement.



As King was winning tennis championships, a book published in 1963 would spark a movement that changed the lives of women in America and around the world. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* began as a series of interviews the author did in the late 1950s and early 1960s with her fellow graduates of Smith College, one of the most prestigious colleges for women. She found that many were unhappy with the restrictions their roles as wives and mothers put on their lives. Friedan's book documented the many ways in which the media, education, and psychologists dictated that women should find fulfillment only through marriage and motherhood—roles that precluded women from making other choices.

Women were treated unequally in practically every walk of life. There were quotas for admitting women to colleges and graduate schools, especially in law and medicine. Women could not get credit cards or loans in their own names unless their husbands, fathers, or some other man co-signed with them. Newspapers divided employment ads into "Male" and "Female" so that even if a woman were, for instance, a trained architect, she would not be considered for a job if it was advertised for a man. Sandra Day O'Connor, who became the first woman appointed as a Justice of the Supreme Court, was third in her class at Stanford University's law school. However, as her male classmates were finding employment at law firms all over the country after graduation, she was only offered work as a legal secretary. Even when women did get jobs, they often earned much less than men; in 1973, women earned 59 cents for every dollar men earned.



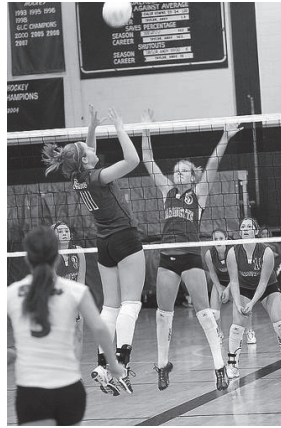
Billie Jean King
at Wimbledon



- 1967—Pushed for tennis to become a professional sport
- 1968—The “open” era in tennis began, with tennis players competing for prize money
- 1968—Argued that men and women should receive equal prize money
- 1970—Helped organize the first professional women’s Tennis tour, sponsored by Virginia Slims
- 1971—Became the first woman athlete to win over \$100,000 in prize money
- 1972—Won the U. S. Open, but earned \$15,000 less than men’s champion Ilie Nastase
- 1973—U. S. Open instituted equal prize money for men and women

King was determined to fight gender inequality in tennis. She saw sports as a vehicle for transforming society. Remembering an incident from her childhood, she said, “Ever since that day when I was 11 years old and I wasn’t allowed in a photo because I wasn’t wearing a tennis skirt, I knew that I wanted to change the sport.” In 1970, she got her chance. Long frustrated by the fact that the tennis world was controlled by men and that women received much less prize money than men, King and eight other women left the U. S. Lawn Tennis Association and signed on to the new Virginia Slims tour, which evolved into the Women’s Tennis Association. In 1972, she broke new ground again when she became the first tennis player and the first woman to be named *Sports Illustrated* magazine’s Sportsman of the Year.

- 1971—Testifies before Congress in support of Title IX, which would give girls more opportunities to play sports in school
- 1972—Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972
- 1975—Department of Health, Education, and Welfare published final regulations for institutions to follow in carrying out Title IX
- 2006—The number of women in college sports had increased by 450%



In 1972, Congress passed an educational amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that came to be known as Title IX. It said that if an institution received federal financial aid, it could not discriminate in any of the school's operations or educational activities, including hiring, promotions, and sports. Schools, colleges, and universities now had to provide women with equal treatment in terms of the number of sports offered to women, scholarships, access to equipment, supplies, and practice time, as well as equal pay for coaches. In 1996, U. S. women competed who had grown up while Title IX was in effect competed for the first time in the Olympics. Women's teams took the gold in basketball, gymnastics, softball, and soccer. Billie Jean coached the women's tennis team, which won gold in both women's singles and doubles.

Title IX has had an impact beyond the playing fields. A 2009 report on Title IX noted that 80% of women executives in Fortune 500 companies had been athletes in school and that girls who got involved in sports were less likely to drink, smoke, or get pregnant and drop out of school.

Picture source:

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marquette_Senior_High_School_Redettes_Varsity_Volleyball_vs_Gladstone_Braves_-_Marquette,_Michigan_-_October_16,_2007_%282413581445%29.jpg

The Battle of the Sexes

1973—King played against Bobby Riggs in the “Battle of the Sexes.” Riggs, a 55-year-old former champion, claimed that he could beat any of the top women players in the world, yet King defeated him in straight sets.



Billie Jean King



Bobby Riggs

In 1973, King took part in what became one of the most iconic moments in the history of sports and the women’s movement. Bobby Riggs, who had been the number one male tennis player in the world in the late 1940s, belittled women’s accomplishments in tennis and claimed that even at 55, he could defeat any of the top female players. After Riggs defeated Margaret Court (who had won more titles than any other woman tennis player) in two sets, King took up the challenge. She said, “I thought it would set us back 50 years if I didn’t win that match. It would ruin the women’s tour and affect all women’s self-esteem.” The match was scheduled to be played in the Houston Astrodome and became a media spectacle. The television audience was estimated at 50 million people worldwide, many of whom had never watched a tennis match before.

For those who had never seen her play, King’s trademark aggressiveness, speed, and hard-hitting shots proved without a doubt that women had the skill and stamina to play professional tennis at the top level of the game. King’s performance gained respect not only for women’s tennis, but for all women’s sports. Many men came away from that game with a different view of women’s capabilities and potential.

- 1974—Started the Women's Sports Foundation
- 1982—Became commissioner of World Team Tennis, started by her husband and others in 1974
- 1987—Inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame
- 1990—Received the Arthur Ashe Courage Award
- 2000—Recognized by GLAAD for her work in education and service on the boards of several AIDS organizations
- 2006—National Tennis Center in NY renamed the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center



King (center) in the commentators' box at the 2007 U.S. Open



Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, Flushing Meadows, NY

As King's career on the court wound down, she became more involved in the business of tennis and in charity work. In 1974, she founded the Women's Sports Foundation, an educational organization dedicated to advancing "the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity." The Foundation distributes scholarships and grants to individuals, teams, and local organizations. In 1974, King's husband Larry, along with three others, founded World Team Tennis. Billie Jean became its commissioner in 1982 and an owner of the Philadelphia Freedom team. Elton John later wrote the song "Philadelphia Freedom" in the team's honor.

In 1993, King was presented with the Phillippe Chatier award, tennis' highest honor, given only to people who have made major contributions to the advancement of the sport.

In 1987, Billie Jean and Larry King divorced. In 1998, King came out as a lesbian. Rumors had circulated about her sexuality since 1981, when an ex-lover sued her. At that time, King called the affair a "mistake" and denied she was a lesbian because she was not ready to publicly acknowledge it. Later she said that it was hard for her to be outed by the lawsuit and that everyone has to make that decision on her own. King also said that she was not aware of her homosexuality as a youth. "I would never have married Larry if I'd known," she stated. "I never would have done that to him. I was totally in love with Larry when I was 21."

King became involved in the Elton John AIDS Foundation and worked with organizations that helped LGBT youth. In 2000, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) gave her an award for her work in education and with AIDS charities.

In 2006, the National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, NY, where the U.S. Open has been played since 1978, was rededicated as the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. It is the only major sports stadium named for a woman.

In addition to hosting the U. S. open, the Center offers classes and training facilities, including a program on courts designed specially for children under 10.

Picture sources:

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Commentators%27_Box.jpg
- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Tennis_Center_outside_courts_and_stadium.jpg



2009—President Barack Obama awarded Billie Jean King with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award given by the U.S. government

In 2009, Billie Jean King received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award given to a civilian. The citation read in part: “Through her example and advocacy, Billie Jean Moffitt King has advanced the struggle for gender equality around the world...Her athletic acumen is matched only by her unwavering defense of equal rights. With Billie Jean King pushing us, the road ahead will be smoother for women, the future will be brighter for LGBT Americans, and our nation’s commitment to equality will be strong for all.” President Obama went on to say “We honor...what she did to broaden the reach of the game, to change how women athletes and women everywhere view themselves, and to give everyone—including my two daughters—a chance to compete both on the court and in life.”

The awards are presented annually at the White House. Ironically, while tennis was still an amateur sport, King had decried the lack of respect tennis players got compared to other athletes, saying, “ In America, tennis players are...not respected. In England, you’re respected as an artist. In Europe, you’re a person of importance...The Queen [of England] leads the applause. How many times have I been presented at the White House?” In 2009, Billie Jean King got the recognition for which she had worked all her life, and it was not only for her championship titles as a tennis player. She was honored as an athlete, a woman, and a dedicated activist for the rights of all.