

Billie Jean King

TENNIS

On the eve of receiving a 2009 Presidential Medal of Freedom, tennis legend Billie Jean King reminisced about how times had changed.

"Everybody used to say how radical I was," she told CBS News. "I just thought I was pragmatic."

A star softball shortstop at age 11, King was encouraged by her dad, Bill, to leave baseball to brother Randy Moffitt, who went on to pitch with the Giants, Blue Jays and Astros from 1972 to 1983. He steered her toward tennis.

"I knew after my first lesson what I wanted to do with my life," she has said.

What she did in the tennis world was rise to World No. 1; spend all or parts of 17 years among the top 10 players; and capture 39 singles, doubles and mixed doubles Grand Slam titles, history's third-highest total at the sport's most important tournaments.

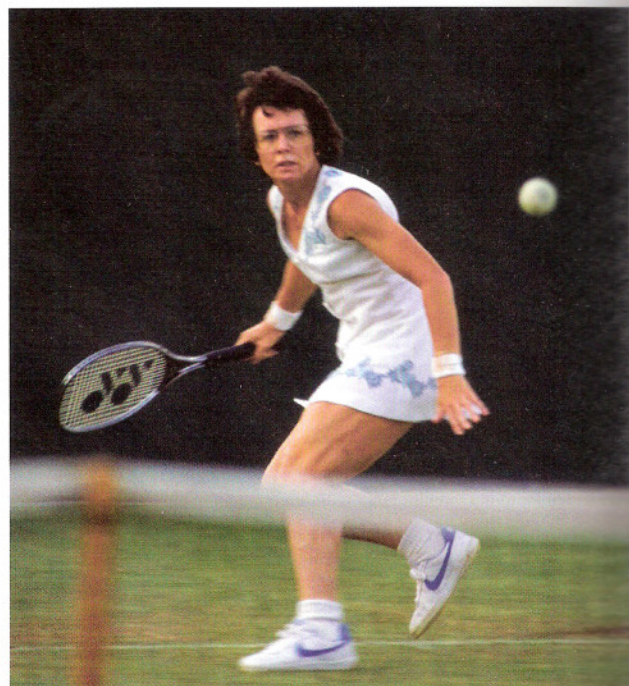
She was also instrumental, among other accomplishments, in creating the women's professional tennis tour, leading the fight for women to receive prize money equal to that of men, founding *WomenSports* magazine and the Women's Sports Foundation, and getting Title IX — the federal law ensuring women access to school sports — passed. She became the first woman commissioner in professional sports history as leader of World TeamTennis.

"At the peak of my career, we were getting our sport formed and were focused on survival," she said. "We did it all — owned and promoted events, publicized them, secured the sponsors — and looking back, it was amazing we found the time to practice and play matches."

Given all her achievements, an exhibition match did as much as anything to cement the belief that a woman could compete as well as a man.

King faced off against tennis hustler Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes," a 1973 spectacle played out before an estimated television audience of 50 million, at the time the largest ever for a tennis match.

She dominated, defeated and, to many, upset Riggs in three straight sets. It was a victory, according to *The New York Times*, that "struck a proud



blow for [King] and women around the world" and confirmed "her status as one of the gifted and tenacious competitors in sport, female or male."

Those gifts and her tenacious competitiveness are still focused on helping others.

"Since I was a child, I have been committed to equal rights and opportunities for all — men and women, boys and girls," said King, who received an MLB Beacon Award in 2010 for her civil rights efforts. "We are starting to see the establishment of some women athletes as superstars, and with that recognition comes financial reward. It won't happen in my lifetime, but I believe there will be a day when the whole thing comes together and women will enjoy the same level of recognition and reward as the men."

— Kent Oswald

Kent Oswald is producer of the blog Jock Book Review, a former editor of Tennis Week and a longtime tennis journalist.