

**The Battle of Fact and Fiction:  
A Contrast Between the 2017 Film “Battle of the Sexes” and the 1973  
Match**

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The date is September 20, 1973, 30,472 spectators and ninety million people across the world were glued to their televisions to watch Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs compete in a coveted tennis match at the Astrodome for a cash prize of \$100,000. The match was a spectacle at its time as King defeated the 55-year-old Riggs in three straight sets. Although a plethora of matches before and after this have been coined “a battle of the sexes,” this match is regarded as a critical milestone for second-wave feminism. In this paper, I will be comparing the 1973 Battle of Sexes match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs to the 2017 film “Battle of the Sexes”, on which it is based. In my analysis paper, in addition to comparing the two pieces of media, I will be discussing the momentous events of both the film and the real events of the match and discussing why Battle of the Sexes is important in terms of gender equality in sports.

## **The History of Tennis**

Before I give an analysis of the 1973 Battle of the Sexes Match, that is important to understand the historical origins of where tennis originates from and its classist and patriarchal origins. The first mention of tennis dates to the Middle Ages, when the French played a similar game that involved hitting a ball with a bare hand and later with a glove. In later centuries, tennis was practiced across Europe and had become popular with royalty including Henry VIII and had even been mentioned in literature by William Shakespeare (Shakespeare et al., 2020). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tennis (now known as lawn tennis) had spread to the United States with the help of Dr. James Dwight ("the Father of American Lawn Tennis"), Henry Slocum, Richard Dudley Sears, and Fred Sear and the first tennis courts being built in Nahant, Massachusetts.

It is important to note that up until the early 20th century, tennis is exclusively practiced by men (Pickett et al., 2012). The four Major tournaments (Wimbledon, U.S Opens, French

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Open, and Australia Open) were exclusively men's tournaments up until the introduction of women's divisions (Kelkar, 2018). For example, The U.S. National Men's Singles Championship is now recognized as the US Open. The women's tennis league began in 126, when Suzanne Lenglen accepted \$50,000 for a series of matches against three-time U.S. Champion Mary K. Browne. The series ended in 1927, and the women did not compete as professionals again until 1941 when Alice Marble headlined a tour against Mary Hardwick.

Up until 1967, women were invisible in the world of professional tennis. In that year, promoter George McCall signed Billie Jean King, Ann Jones, Françoise Dürr, and Rosie Casals to join his tour of eight men for two years. In 1970, promoter for the Pacific Southwest Championships in Los Angeles Jack Kramer offered the women only \$7,500 in prize money versus the men's total of \$50,000. When Kramer refused to match the men's prize money, King and Casals urged the other women to boycott. In 1971 and 1972, the WT Women's Pro Tour offered 10 times the prize money of other pro women's tennis events. The USLTA initially would not sanction the tour; however, the two groups determined to give Virginia Slims the individual events, and the USLTA the tour, thus resolving the conflict (Robertson & Kramer, 1974). In 1973, the U.S. Open made history by offering equal prize money to men and women. Billie Jean King, the most visible advocate for the women's cause, earned over \$100,000 in 1971 and 1972 (Robertson & Kramer, 1974).

## **Battle of the Sexes (1973)**

The Battle of the Sexes has a long-in depth history. Bobby Riggs had been a tennis legend since the 1940s, being ranked year end three times and had one three Wimbledon titles and had retired in 1951. Riggs was notoriously a misogynist, referring to female tennis as

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inferior and that he could beat any female tennis player. Twenty years after he retired, he challenged Billie Jean King and she initially declined; thus, Margaret Court took her place. On May 12, 1973, 5,000 people gathered in Ramona, California to watch their match. Ultimately, Riggs won the match with a victory of (6-2) (6-1) and helped land Riggs coverage on both Sports Illustrated and Time Magazine (Kirkpatrick, 1973).

Following his victory, Riggs went on to taught female tennis players further. These actions finally prompted King to sign a deal to compete against Riggs in a winner-takes-all style match, where the winner took home \$100,000. At that time, Billie Jean King was ranked the number one female tennis player in the World for the fifth year in a row. The match took place on September 20, 1973. During the match, King mostly stayed at the baseline, at least at first, easily handling Riggs's lobs and soft shots, making him cover the entire court as she ran him from side to side and beat him with his own defensive style of play. After quickly falling from the baseline, where he had intended to play, Riggs was forced to change to a serve-and-volley game, but he was no match for King.

Ultimately, Billie Jean King came out the victor of the Battle of the Sexes, with a serve of 6-4, 6-3, and 6-3 sets. There was speculation by some men that Riggs had deliberately lost the match, based on his poor play and a considerable number of unforced errors, in order to win large sums of money that he had bet against himself as a way to pay off his gambling debts. A few male critics were less than impressed by King's victory, saying she was 26 years younger. However, neutral observers were impressed by King's brilliant play and smart tactics.

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### **Battle of the Sexes (2017)**

The 2017 *Battle of the Sexes* follows the events of the real-life match. The film begins with Billie Jean King and Gladys Heldman confront Jack Kramer, who has organized a tennis tournament where the top prize for women is one-eighth of the men's prize, despite equal ticket sales. King and Heldman threaten to start their own tour, but Kramer will not alter the terms, citing the inferiority of women's tennis. Because of this, King and eight other female tennis players form the “Original 9” and begin their WTA Tour. Meanwhile, Bobby Riggs' marriage to the wealthy Priscilla Whelan is in trouble because of his addiction to gambling. Thrown out of his house when he cannot conceal a Rolls Royce he won in a tennis bet, he hits upon the idea of a challenge match against the top woman player, boasting that even at age 55 he can beat any woman.

The women's tour has slowly gained a stronger foothold, with the Women's Tennis Association formed in 1973. Riggs continues to pressure King to play him. Eventually, Riggs persuades Margaret Court, who recently overtook King to gain the World No. 1 ranking, to play a match in May 1973. Riggs easily defeats Court and King decides she must accept his challenge but demands a final say on the arrangements. King trains intensely, while Riggs relaxes. King objects to Kramer as a game announcer, threatening to not play unless he withdraws, which he does. After a slow start, King wins the match, changing the future of women's tennis. The film ends with a written epilogue that King eventually divorced her husband and had a long-term same-sex relationship while Riggs reunited with his wife.

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### Fact versus Fiction

After analyzing both the 1973 match and the 2017 film *Battle of the Sexes*, I have determined that the 2017 film does a respectable job of keeping true to the details of its source material. I personally enjoy that it kept in minor details that happened, leading to the astrodome match. For example, in the match between Court and Riggs, Riggs came out with a bouquet of flowers for Court (Ferris & Dayton, 2017). This happened in real life during the 1972 match. The reasoning behind this action was because the match took place on Mother's Day and Riggs descended the stadium steps and presented Court with Mother's Day flowers, which she accepted while curtsying.

However, few details about the film differ from the events of the match. One aspect of the film that differed from real life was King's relationship with Marilyn Barnett. In the movie, King meets Barnett in a hair salon in 1971, before announcing their pro-contracts (Ferris & Dayton, 2017). While the pair did meet in a hair salon, it was in 1972 after the Virginia Slims tour had already launched. Another aspect of their relationship that differed from real life was the duration of said relationship. In the film, Barnett leaves King but returns to her side during the match between her and Riggs. In real life, Barnett stayed with King before, during, and after the match. To add on, the film makes no mention of King's correct partner, Ilana Kloss, or said ending of King and Barnett's relationship.

Another important aspect of *Battle of the Sexes* is Bobby Rigg's preparation for the infamous match. In the film, Riggs' preparation for his match against King consisted of endless photo stunts, excessive partying, and a regimen of pills dispensed by an odd man named Rheo Blair (Ferris & Dayton, 2017). In real life, Riggs prepped rigorously for all his matches. For his match against Margaret Court, Riggs trained for six hours a day. By the time his match against

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King came to fruition, his training became less rigorous. However, Rheo Blair was considered the “vitamin guru of Hollywood” and put Riggs on a pill diet of 415 pills a day.

Finally, I want to focus on the actual match between King and Riggs. In the film, Billie Jean King threatens to pull out of the match if Jack Kramer was presenting in the commentary box and presents Riggs with a piglet before the match (Ferris & Dayton, 2017). Along with other over-the-top events in the match. In real life, both events took place, with slight alterations. Jack Kramer was set to present commentary during the match. In response, King made ABC drop Kramer as a commentator. King said, "He doesn't believe in women's tennis. Why should he be part of this match? He does not believe in half of the match. I am not playing. Either he goes—or I go. the match” (Augustyn, 2023). During the actual match, Riggs came out to the court in a rickshaw surrounded by statuesque women and wearing a warm-up jacket emblazoned with “Sugar Daddy.” King had her own cheeky entrance on top of an ostentatiously decorated litter carried by a bevy of shirtless he-men (Augustyn, 2023).

## **The Importance**

Overall, the *Battle of the Sexes* is an important moment not just in sports history, but also in feminism history and equality in sports. Because of Billie Jean and her contributions to the world of tennis, she is highly regarded as “both a top competitor and a fighter for equal pay.” (Kelker, 2018). The efforts of King and her fellow teammates helped pushed for inclusion of Title IX, which is vital for equal rights for women, on and off the field. Title IX, “gives women athletes the right to equal opportunity in sports in educational institutions that receive federal funds, from elementary schools to colleges and universities” (*What is title IX?*, 2019). Furthermore, King was part of the Original 9 players who formed the Virginia Slims Series,

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created because the women wanted to end inequality of pay between male and female victors. These nine women created their own tournaments and played wherever they could. Eventually this turned into the Women's Tennis Association.

Outside of tennis, King also is an outspoken activist for LGBTQ+ rights and overall, the *Battle of the Sexes* changed the way gender is viewed in the world of sports. Her public coming out in 1981 has helped pave the way for future tennis competitors and athletes to be more visible in the world of sports. Additionally, King's representation had helped women in future generations. Girls' participation in high school sports has increased for the last 25 consecutive years. Bigger audiences are also being drawn to women's sports. In fact, women's collegiate softball often draws bigger audiences than men's baseball. The women's College World Series averaged 44,000 more viewers than the men's College World Series (Willis, 2017).

Because of the *Battle of the Sexes*, women's equality has been shown both on and off the field. Although we still have much progress to make in equality, this milestone helped set in motion the modern-day liberation of women's empowerment in sports.



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