The Oregonian
Click here to subscribe!

» More From The Oregonian

# A win that still echoes

09/14/03

**KATY MULDOON**

H e arrived in a brilliant-red rickshaw pulled by sexy-suited showgirls; she, atop a golden Egyptian litter hoisted by muscle-bound football players.

He gifted her with an all-year sucker, a super-sized Sugar Daddy; she presented him a live piglet.

And so the show began 30 years ago this week, on Sept. 20, 1973, when Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs faced off in their "Battle of the Sexes" at Houston's Astrodome before the biggest crowd ever to watch a tennis match -- 30,472 spectators and an estimated 50 million TV viewers worldwide. Husbands and wives made wagers. Bookies took them, too. Oddsmakers, perhaps all of one gender, had Riggs an 8-5 prematch favorite.

The pig and its new partner lost.

Three decades later, during the same year that golfer Annika Sorenstam showed she can handle the pressure of the top men's pro tour, the same year that hundreds of thousands of fans will pack stadiums in Portland and across the nation to watch Women's World Cup soccer, and the same year that nearly 3,000 U.S. girls play in what not long ago was a no-girls-allowed club -- high school football -- it's clear who won.

In 1973, the Vietnam War began to wind down, the Watergate scandal heated up and the nation wrestled with cultural shifts that would change women's status in board rooms and courtrooms, laundry rooms and locker rooms.

That year, "The Exorcist" bedeviled a girl on the big screen, "All in the Family" lampooned sexism on the small screen and Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman" won a Grammy Award.

That year, President Nixon appointed Anne Armstrong to his Cabinet; among her duties was to establish the first White House Office of Women's Programs, which worked to recruit women to high-level government jobs. The U.S. Supreme Court gave women the right to choose abortion. The U.S. Government Printing Office agreed to accept "Ms." as an optional title for women in government publications.

Others, however, were not so accepting.

In Portland that year, 8,600 delegates at the Southern Baptist Convention's 116th annual meeting passed a resolution making clear their views on which gender they believed superior. In part, it read: "Man was not made for woman, but the woman for the man."

And "Sexual Suicide," George Gilder's rant against the equality movement, published that year, enraged feminist-leaning readers with such passages as, "Women domesticate and civilize male nature. They can destroy civilized male identity merely by giving up the role."

The gender tug-of-war was on, and Bobby Riggs, a self-described chauvinist, seemed uniquely suited to grab one end of the rope.

Riggs, a U.S. champion, was the world's No. 1 player in 1939, when he won a rare Grand Slam triple: Wimbledon's singles, doubles and mixed doubles titles in the same year. King matched that feat in 1973.

But Riggs wasn't cut from the mannerly cloth of the traditional tennis set. He was a cocky, loud-mouthed hustler with a personality as squirrelly as his tennis game. He was all bluster and con, all spinning drop shots and to-the-moon lobs. He was the fellow who once said: "If I can't play for big money, I play for a little money. And if I can't play for a little money, I stay in bed that day."

Riggs, whose tennis career had stalled like a wet ball in the 1950s and '60s, first stirred the sport's gender pot on Mother's Day 1973, when he took on Margaret Court, then ranked No. 1 in the world. He beat her 6-2, 6-1.

Afterward, he declared: "I want Billie Jean King. . . . I want the women's lib leader."

Four months later, the two players, their entourages, groupies, fans, assorted celebrities and the spectacle-hungry news media descended on Houston for a match that some dubbed "the libber vs. the lobber."

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, the federal law that prohibits gender discrimination in education, including athletics. One in 25 American girls played organized sports. The tide was rising.

At the elite level, scant competition was available to women, save the Olympic Games. The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women had just been hatched, and along with it a collegiate championship series.

"But it was quite unknown," says Carole Oglesby, the association's first president. "It was just emerging into people's consciousness that there was something like the NCAA, but for women.

"It is hard for people today . . .," says Oglesby, 65, chairwoman of the Department of Kinesiology at Cal State Northridge, "to even imagine how different people's perception was of women's athletic possibilities."

Oglesby felt those possibilities, though. She had since she was a girl who grew into such a skilled softball player that she competed in three Amateur Softball Association national championships. Later, she earned her doctorate at Purdue, focusing on social and cultural influences on physical education. Her biography is packed with academic and advocacy work for girls and women's sports.

But in the early 1970s, such work was scarce. Even the women's liberation movement had little connection with efforts to give girls and women more opportunities in sports.

Then, along came King and Riggs.

"Billie Jean King defeating a man," Oglesby remembers, "that was a mind-boggling experience."

In the years since, she says, King often has talked about the crush of mail she received after the match, letters that said: "I went into my boss' office and asked for a raise the next day."

"It was something," Oglesby says, "that empowered women tremendously."

Billie Jean King learned to play an aggressive, hard-hitting tennis game on Southern California's public courts. She loved to rush the net. She hated to lose.

Her substance and style paid off with a record 20 Wimbledon and 13 U.S. titles in singles, doubles and mixed doubles.

Although titles were nice, King resented that women tennis pros were paid far less than their male counterparts -- a fact that mirrored pay differences elsewhere in the U.S. work world, where women made 59 cents to every dollar men earned. Women couldn't get a credit card without a man signing for them. She convinced her colleagues to form a players' union and is widely considered the force that led, in 1973, to the U.S. Open offering equal prize money to men and women for the first time.

Thirty years later, Wimbledon still pays men more. This summer, Shock Absorber, a sports bra manufacturer, filled the nearly $70,000 gap so that women winners would earn the same as the men. King was there for the announcement.

It's just the kind of move that would have rankled Riggs.

So back in '73, when she was 29 and he was 55, how could she possibly have turned down his challenge?

"It set up a situation," says historian Susan K. Cahn, "where if she lost, it would be horrible. But if she won, you could say, 'Well, he's an old guy anyway.'

"So in that sense it was a tough situation. But to say no would have looked like she was afraid."

"I just remember all the pageantry," says Cahn, "her being carried in, and . . . just thinking that was ridiculous -- that she had sort of been forced into a spectacle."

Cahn, associate professor of history at the University at Buffalo, wrote "Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport," published in 1994 by The Free Press. She is 45 now, was 15 in 1973, and remembers being riveted.

"Everyone had an opinion and everyone was watching it," she says. "It was a really important event, but people wouldn't have been able to exactly tell you why."

Over time, though, the meaning grew clear.

"It became," Cahn says, "the measurement of women's relationship to men: whether they were, or could be, or should be as powerful as men . . . It was really a battle about feminism."

Inside women's tennis, players were split.

"We had those that felt it was a stupid match -- that we had so much to lose," remembers Rosie Casals, King's doubles partner, who teamed up as a TV commentator with Howard Cosell for the

King-Riggs match. "And we had those who felt very positive and supportive of Billie Jean, and what it meant to women's tennis."

It might have been a circuslike, made-for-TV extravaganza, Casals says, "but that match was important in the scheme of what has happened to women's tennis and women's sports and women, period."

In the Oct. 1, 1973, issue of Sports Illustrated, writer Curry Kirkpatrick described the days and nights leading to the match.

King avoided the media. Riggs threw news conferences.

Both worked out in The Bubble, a big plastic practice facility set up in the Astrodome parking lot. King practiced first, hitting with a teaching pro.

"Then Riggs would arrive," Kirkpatrick wrote, "with his touring medicine show featuring sons, relatives land developers, starlet-models and Bobby's favorite nutrition specialist, Rheo Blair, whose yellow Jose Greco bell sleeves rippled in the breeze and whose suitcase of vitamin pills shimmered like a rainbow . . . All the while Riggs spieled for Hai Karate after-shave and Sugar Daddy suckers. He flaunted a shirt with two holes cut out of the chest. And he kept quoting from a song, 'Get your biscuit in the oven and your buns in the bed.' "

Finally, Sept. 20 arrived at the Astrodome, the same place where Evil Knievel jumped his motorcycle over 13 cars, and where Frank Sinatra sang a tribute to Apollo 11 astronauts. This night was equally remarkable.

"It was," says Casals, who has spent a lifetime playing and watching the pro game, "one of the most exciting, exhilarating moments that I can remember in tennis . . . It was bigger than life."

Kirkpatrick noted that the crowd included "hardhats and hippies; libbers and lobbers; chauvinists and charlatans; handsome gladiators with no outerwear, nubile maidens with no underwear. . . ."

Before them all, King ran Riggs ragged. She took him 6-4, 6-3, 6-3.

"She was too good, too fast," Riggs said at a news conference after the $100,000, winner-take-all match. "She returned all my passing shots and made great plays off them . . I was trying to play my game, but I couldn't."

King's reaction at the time: "I feel this is the culmination of my 19 years in tennis."

"It's really important to recognize the extent of the change," says Cahn, the professor and author. "But I also don't think that things have changed. Sexism is powerful and present in sports still."

Many schools still fail to comply with Title IX, shortchanging girls and women of opportunities offered to boys and men. Sports administrators and coaches are still overwhelmingly male. As Cahn puts it, "where the power lies, men are still pretty entrenched."

Amateur and professional sports organizations, as well as American culture, still pressure girls and women to be slim and to play up traditional notions of beauty, even as they encourage and admire strong muscles and powerful lungs. Such pressure, Cahn says, can lead to eating disorders and deficiencies in self-esteem among athletic girls and women.

"But what's most important, on the other side," she says, "is that so many girls and young women get the joy and confidence that . . . they just didn't used to get. It really does make a difference in girls feeling good about themselves."

Today, one in three American girls play sports.

Purses in women's tennis tournaments run six figures and higher; just this month Justine Henin-Hardenne won $1 million in the U.S. Open. Top players such as the dazzlingly talented Venus and Serena Williams have their pick of rich product endorsements.

And amazingly, tennis fans and those who favor a gender-level playing field across the sports landscape, remember Bobby Riggs, chauvinist pig extraordinaire, fondly.

A new Riggs biography, "The Last Sure Thing," by Tom LeCompte (Skunkworks Publishing), shares that Riggs and King became friends who stayed in touch until shortly before he died in 1995, at 77, of complications from prostate cancer. LeCompte writes that in a telephone conversation during his last days, Riggs told King: "Well, we did it. We put women's tennis on the map."

Katy Muldoon: 503-221-8526; katymuldoon@news.oregonian.com