



A Necessary Spectacle: Billie Jean King, Bobby Riggs, and the Tennis Match That Levelled the Game

Selena Roberts

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Billie Jean King didn't want to play Bobby Riggs. He baited and begged her for months while she ignored his catcalls and challenges. But after Margaret Court's ignominious defeat in the so-called Mother's Day Massacre, Billie knew what she had to do despite the personal and professional risks: take on the self-proclaimed male chauvinist pig and slay the myths about women and weakness. And so it was that King's acquiescence led to the Battle of the Sexes, one of the most wildly surreal moments of the decadent 1970s. The worldwide event, showcasing three sets of tennis in a raucous Houston Astrodome, forever changed the social landscape for women.

In *A Necessary Spectacle*, Selena Roberts, one of the country's finest sportswriters and the only female sports columnist in the *New York Times*' history, has created a masterful and entertaining journey through the 1970s and beyond, capturing the color and passion, tackiness and anger, prejudice and progress of an American culture in transition. At the heart of the story lies the intersection of two complex characters: Billie Jean King, the daughter of a homemaker and a firefighter who grew up in the Norman Rockwell tradition of the 1950s; and Bobby Riggs, the gambling son of a fundamentalist minister who won everlasting fame as a card-carrying sexist—not because he believed women to be inferior, but because he craved attention.

Roberts enjoyed unprecedented access to the characters in this story, including numerous in-depth interviews with Billie Jean King and her former husband, Larry, as well as the friends and family of Bobby Riggs, who died in 1995. Essential details and insights also were provided through hours of conversation with key figures in the women's rights movement and Title IX fight, including Gloria Steinem and Donna de Varona, and with tennis legends of the 1970s, such as Chris Evert, Margaret Court, Rosie Casals, and others. This book reveals the outsize personalities of Billie and Bobby; the intensity and intricacy of the Kings' longtime marriage; the simmering social revolution that pitted chauvinists against feminists and tennis players against each other; and a wrenching coming-out story recounted in intimate detail by Billie Jean King for the first time. By the end of the book, Roberts has traced the cultural continuum of Billie and Bobby's night at the Astrodome. She relates its significance to the day Richard Williams began hitting bald tennis balls to his pigtailed daughters, Venus and Serena; to the glorious afternoon when more than 90,000 fans watched as the U.S. women's soccer team won the 1999 World Cup; and, ultimately, to the present day's second-generation battle to keep Title IX alive. The book's poignant last scene between Billie and Bobby serves to remind us how much of an effect that 1973 match—and the passion it fueled for change—continues to have on American society, showing how necessary it was, and how necessary it remains.

1973. The Battle of the Sexes.

It was the match that changed everything. In this riveting book by *New York Times* sports columnist Selena Roberts, the whole spectacle returns, larger than life and more important than ever. This story reaches beyond two outsize and utterly fascinating personalities who emerged during a simmering social revolution that pitted chauvinists against feminists. It also chronicles the complex, longtime marriage of Billie Jean and Larry King; the cavalcade of issues that rocked the 1970s, from equal pay to abortion rights; and a wrenching

coming-out story recounted in intimate detail by Billie Jean King for the first time.

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