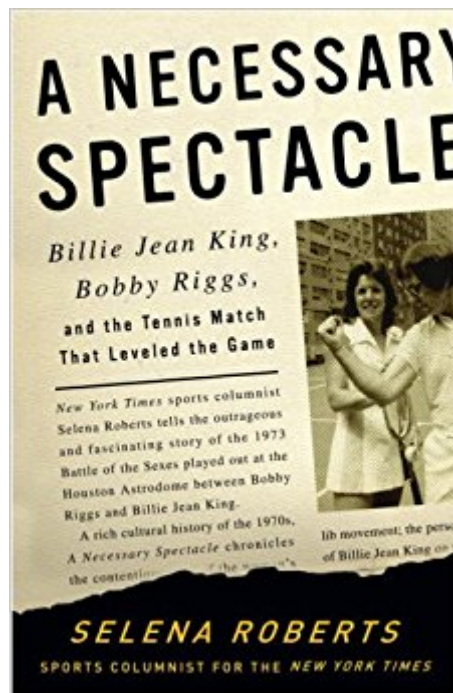




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# A Necessary Spectacle: Billie Jean King, Bobby Riggs, And The Tennis Match That Levelled The Game



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The legendary 1973 battle of the sexes tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs was equal parts media circus and watershed political moment. This book on the match, however, is beguiling in structure: it starts with the pair's oddly similar underdog childhoods and slowly builds to the main event—only to turn unexpectedly in the second half into a chronicle of the Title IX movement. Women's soccer, the Williams sisters, Annika Sorenstam—Roberts's coverage knows no bounds. The author, a New York Times sports columnist, gets at the falseness of the 1973 competition (aging Riggs didn't even bother to train) without detracting from its significance. And if the match's outcome is well known, Roberts spices it up with new insight: King's evolution as an activist was slow and uncomfortable; Riggs's chauvinism was as much shtick as misguidedness. But for a book with such evident ambition, it sometimes feels too journalistic; only too late does it move from a celebration of feminism to a larger assessment of Title IX's future. More perplexingly, Roberts reflects only a little on the consequences of what, as she suggests in the title, is the biggest subtext of Riggs-King and, indeed, modern sports: its evolution into spectacle. Copyright © Reed

On September 20, 1973, Billie Jean King, the premier female tennis player of her era, defeated aging male former Wimbledon champion and self-promoting hustler Bobby Riggs in a nationally televised match ballyhooed as the "Battle of the Sexes." At the time, it seemed like made-for-television tripe, but there were larger issues at stake, many understood only by King and a handful of supporters. Roberts, an award-winning columnist for the New York Times, explores the events leading up to the match as well as the subsequent consequences, both direct and indirect. Riggs had created a context for the match by proclaiming women players so inferior to men that the best woman couldn't beat an over-the-hill hustler. His first challenge match with a woman, against Australian Margaret Court, seemed to prove his point as he demolished one of the top-tier female stars. But Court was no Billie Jean. Roberts explores the match in terms of its cultural significance, its impact on Title IX legislation, and the rise of feminism--in sports and otherwise--in the last quarter of the twentieth century. She also profiles the personalities involved, particularly the principals, King, Riggs, and Court. The only misstep in this ambitious and successful exploration of a uniquely American athletic moment is a chapter on contemporary tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams. It just doesn't fit well within the theme of the book. On balance, though, this a fascinating, carefully crafted history of a contest that may have been the catalyst for a new era of women's athletics. Wes Lukowsky

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Roberts can turn a phrase and capture vast or humorous thoughts with few words. A terrific piece on the social history and the rapid change that was occurring during the 70s ... on the heels of the tumult of the 60s. Probably no other sporting event featuring 1-on-1 opponents was more widely viewed and had more social and political impact in post WWII America than the Riggs v. King tennis extravaganza in September of 1973. To this day, with an attendance of 30,492, still the largest live audience to see a single tennis match in US history....not to mention the 90 million who watched on television in the US and 36 countries. The battle of the sexes was/is really the battle for equality. "A Necessary Spectacle" is an entertaining read about the biggest "sports-entertainment-political" event of the past century which was fused into a huge fireball...and continues to burn. You will enjoy this book.

Excellent background on the history of the Women's Tennis Association, the impact of this match on women's tennis and title ix and the implications for the increased participation in sports by women at

all levels (interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional).

Boy, women's tennis was different back then! And I am not a tennis fan at all but BJK changed sports and our culture, not just tennis.

she changed the world that nite. read this to know how.

I enjoyed the first few chapters of this book. They provide a cursory look at the careers of Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King; the "Mother's Day Massacre" of Margaret Court; and the events leading up to, during, and immediately following the Riggs-King match. My only issue with these chapters would be with those concerning the careers of Riggs and King. In both cases, the author jumps from each one of them struggling to make it big, to suddenly they are playing at Wimbledon. Some portion of both of their career paths is obviously omitted from the text. Where the book really stumbles, however, is with the later chapters and the ludicrous hypotheses that without the Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs match of 1973, Title IX would never have been signed into law, the Williams sisters would never have made it big, and the ladies of the 1999 World Cup would have been ignored. In all three cases, that is a mighty big leap in logic to make. The best definition of the Riggs-King match is in the title of this book...."spectacle". While it may have finally proven to some who had not yet realized it that watching a woman play tennis could be enjoyable, it certainly shouldn't be argued that it proved much else. BJK defeating a man who competed in Wimbledon before she was born certainly didn't prove that women's tennis and men's tennis were equal. Unfortunately, it appears that this is the only book currently available to cover the subject of this memorable match. Therefore, it may be worth a look for the early chapters, as well as the chapters concerning Billie Jean's later years, Bobby's last years, and the insecurities possessed by each of them. However, take the conclusions that the author makes on the importance of this match with a grain of salt. Certainly there were other much more relevant events in sport that led to better opportunities for women than the circus in Houston.

The subtitle of this book 'the Tennis Match that Leveled the Game' isn't quite strong enough. This single match, called the 'Battle of the Sexes' was far, far more than a tennis match, and the aftereffect was far, far more than levelling the tennis game. For a tennis standpoint, before The Match women's tennis was not a serious sport. The women played, but almost by themselves. The money, the sponsors, television, the fame wasn't there. After it was all there. From a legal

standpoint, The Match put power behind Title IX that required equal funding in schools for men and women's athletic programs. From the overall women's rights viewpoint The Match was in 1973, so was Row v. Wade. Ms. Roberts is a sports columnist. This training gives her a newspaper like writing style that is very well suited to the subject she is covering here. The book reads almost like a novel, an excellent novel but also conveys the impact of The Match that changed women's sports forever.

Serena has the courage here to take on Bobby Riggs. Frankly, it was about time, people. It's journalism like this that makes you thankful for the freedom of the press. Serena pulls out all the stops and wields her pen like a mighty sword that skewers Bobby Riggs and masculines like him. What I like about this book is that we have a journalist of unquestionable character writing facts. Never imposing her will or agenda on the topic, Serena writes with an aplomb for herself. Serena Roberts would never make a claim or supposition or read a situation 100% wrong (except for the Duke Lacrosse Case, give her a break folks, she's human!). So, while a lot of people like to point out that Ms. Roberts may have her own agenda and jump to conclusions that turn out to be 100% inaccurate, that doesn't make her a bad journalist. The bad journalists are the ones who never take a chance and risk a little something by inserting their opinions and judgments into the story. Integrity can be regained, people. Serena takes her first step back with this grand tome.

I loved this book! I'm not a huge tennis fan so as I began reading, I was shocked at how quickly this story pulled me in and kept me fascinated. It's about so much more than tennis. The personalities and motivations of Billie Jean and Bobby were so thoroughly explored that as this spectacle of a match was becoming imminent, I could feel the pressure and the tension that must have been felt not only by them, but by many women and men in the 1970s as gender lines were being tested. This book did a great job of framing the importance of that one event, as circus-like as it was. Billie Jean and Bobby brought discussions of gender roles into people's living rooms that day and the consequences have paved the way for women and for the athletes we cheer on today. "A Necessary Spectacle" gave me new insight. Excellent!

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