



Billie Jean King (*née* Moffitt; born November 22, 1943)

American former World No. 1 professional tennis player.

Billie Jean King won 39 Grand Slam titles: 12 in singles, 16 in women's doubles, and 11 in mixed doubles.

King is an advocate for gender equality and has long been a pioneer for equality and social justice. She brought about changes in prize money for female tennis players who previously won significantly less than their male counterparts.

She was also the founder of the Women's Tennis Association and the Women's Sports Foundation. As well as being instrumental in persuading cigarette brand Virginia Slims to sponsor women's tennis in the 1970s.

Regarded by many in the sport as one of the greatest tennis players of all time, **King** was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1987. The Fed Cup Award of Excellence was bestowed on her in 2010. In 1972, she was the joint winner, with John Wooden, of the *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year award and was one of the *Time* Persons of the Year in 1975. She has also received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the *Sunday Times* Sportswoman of the Year Lifetime Achievement Award. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1990, and in 2006, the USTA National Tennis Center in New York City was renamed the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. In 2018, she won the BBC Sports Personality of the Year Lifetime Achievement Award.

Billie Jean King holds many records for her sporting achievements:

- In 1972, **King** triumphed at the French Open making her only the fifth woman in tennis history to win the singles titles at all four Grand Slam events, a ‘career Grand Slam.’
- **King** won a record 20 career titles at Wimbledon – six in singles, ten in women's doubles, and four in mixed doubles
- **King** played 51 Grand Slam singles events from 1959 through 1983, reaching at least the semi-finals in 27 of them.
- **King** won 129 singles titles 78 of which were WTA titles, and her career prize money totalled US\$1,966,487!



Battle of the Sexes

In 1973, King defeated Bobby Riggs in an exhibition match, winning \$100,000.

Bobby Riggs had been a top men's player in the 1930s and 1940s in both the amateur and professional ranks. He claimed that the women's game was so inferior to the men's game that even a 55-year-old like himself could beat the current top female players.

He challenged and defeated Margaret Court 6–2, 6–1. Then **King**, who had previously rejected challenges from Riggs, accepted a lucrative financial offer to play him for \$100,000, winner-take-all.

The match was dubbed "the Battle of the Sexes", the Riggs-King match took place at the Houston Astrodome in Texas on September 20, 1973. The match gained huge publicity. In front of 30,492 spectators and a television audience estimated at 50 million people (U.S.), and 90 million in 37 countries, 29-year-old **King** beat the 55-year-old Riggs 6–4, 6–3, 6–3.

The match is considered a very significant event in developing greater recognition and respect for women's tennis. **King** said, 'I thought it would set us back 50 years if I didn't win that match. It would ruin the women's (tennis) tour and affect all women's self-esteem'. She was thrilled to expose a lot of new people to tennis.



Push for Gender Equality

When the open era began, **King** campaigned for equal prize money in the men's and women's games.

In 1971, with ideas for the formation of an eight player women's group from her husband, Larry King, financial backing of World Tennis magazine founder, Gladys Heldman, and the sponsorship of Virginia Slims Chairman Joe Coleman, **King** became the first woman athlete to earn over US\$100,000 in prize money; however, inequalities continued.

King won the US Open in 1972 but received US\$15,000 less than the men's champion Ilie Năstase. She stated that she would not play the next year if the prize money were not equal.

In 1973, the US Open became the first major tournament to offer equal prize money for men and women.



Coming Out

Billie Jean and Larry King were engaged in 1964 and married in Long Beach, California, on September 17, 1965. **Billie Jean** credited Larry with introducing her to feminism and for pushing her to pursue tennis as a career. **Billie Jean** later said she 'was totally in love with Larry' when they married.

By 1968, **King** realized that she was attracted to women and in 1971, began an intimate relationship with her secretary, Marilyn Barnett. **Billie Jean** acknowledged the relationship when it became public in a May 1981 palimony lawsuit filed by Barnett, making **Billie Jean the first prominent professional female to come out**. Feeling she could not admit to the extent of the relationship, Billie Jean publicly called it a fling and a mistake. She remained married to Larry. The lawsuit caused Billie Jean to lose an estimated \$2 million in endorsements and forced her to prolong her tennis career to pay attorneys.

Concerning the personal cost of concealing her sexuality for so many years, **Billie Jean** said:

I wanted to tell the truth but my parents were homophobic and I was in the closet. As well as that, I had people tell me that if I talked about what I was going through, it would be the end of the women's tour. I couldn't get a closet deep enough. One of my big goals was always to be

honest with my parents and I couldn't be for a long time. I tried to bring up the subject but felt I couldn't. My mother would say, 'We're not talking about things like that', and I was pretty easily stopped because I was reluctant anyway. I ended up with an eating disorder that came from trying to numb myself from my feelings. I needed to surrender far sooner than I did. At the age of 51, I was finally able to talk about it properly with my parents and no longer did I have to measure my words with them. That was a turning point for me as it meant I didn't have regrets any more.

King's marriage ended in 1987 after **Billie Jean** fell in love with her doubles partner, Ilana Kloss. **Billie Jean** and Larry remained on good terms, with **Billie Jean** serving as godmother to Larry's son from his subsequent marriage.



Pictured with life partner Ilana Kloss