

The "Battle of the Sexes:" An Embodiment of Gender Conflicts in the 1970s and Influence on Equality in Sports

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Abstract: In 1973, 48 million Americans sat in front of their televisions to watch a tennis match known as the “Battle of the Sexes” [1]. By pitting a male against a female, this match attracted enormous attention as people thought it possessed an answer to their burning question, which gender is superior? Especially during a time when the prominence of gender social equality advocacy increased conflicting societal sentiments, this tennis match seemed particularly important. This research paper explores the “Battle of the Sexes” through the lens of second-wave feminism and athletics—specifically, how this event encapsulates the gender conflicts and catalyzes more equality in sports. By exploring previous research and primary source documentation on the “Battle of the Sexes,” this paper provides a detailed account of the match and its larger implications for feminism and athletics, allowing readers to better understand the formation of current societal gender norms and expectations, thus, better able to identify current events that may shift future society. Additionally, readers will see the importance of advocacy and how a single point of advocacy can expand into a powerful network that causes change.

Keywords: Feminism, Tennis, Athletics, Equality

1. Introduction

Something bigger than a tennis match. That was what most people thought on the evening of September 20, 1973, when around 48 million Americans sat in front of their televisions to watch the "Battle of the Sexes," a tennis showdown between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King for \$100,000. However, it was difficult to pinpoint what made this match so special [1]. Before King agreed to the showdown, Bobby Riggs—a top-ranked American tennis player who claimed that no woman in this world could beat him even when he was 55 years old and extremely out of shape—challenged Billie Jean King—a top-ranked female American player—but was rejected. To prove his point, Riggs then challenged Margaret Courts—the number one ranked female player at the time—and beat her 6-2, 6-1 [2]. After witnessing Courts' loss, King knew that she had to accept Riggs' challenge to uphold the legitimacy of women's tennis [1]. Thus, King and Riggs arranged to hold a match, known as the "Battle of the Sexes," on September 20, 1973, in the Houston Astrodome [2].

In the 1960s and 70s, the United States also saw the rise of second-wave feminism—a movement to expand women's rights throughout American society. Differing from first-wave feminism, which started in 1848, second-wave feminism focused on guaranteeing social equality and passing equal

rights amendments instead of gaining opportunities and suffrage [3]. In the early 1970s, second-wave feminism began to gain significant traction. For example, in 1972, Congress sent out the Equal Rights Amendment to the states for ratification; it also passed the Education Amendments Act containing Title IX—an amendment that prevented discrimination based on sex in educational programs and activities (“Title IX and Sex Discrimination”) [4]—the influential feminist magazine *Ms.* launched, and a Congresswoman ran for president [1]. These successes of second-wave feminism leading up to the “Battle of the Sexes” made the event a symbolic and highly visible microcosm of the fight for equality. This research paper explores how the “Battle of the Sexes” reflected disagreements on gender equality in American society and attracted national attention by displaying a centralized conflict between a male and a female and transformed women’s sports by displaying a woman’s triumph over a man.

This paper differs from previous research regarding the “Battle of the Sexes” because it assesses the event as a catalyst for larger movements in the era. Thoroughly analyzing previous research and documentation on the “Battle of the Sexes,” this paper provides the reader with a detailed account of the event and its larger implications. Reading this paper allows the reader to understand how an event can capture complicated societal sentiments and affect society on a large scale. Understanding these important events will help individuals see societal transformations through a different lens.

2. Gender Conflicts in the 70s

In the 1970s, conflicting opinions regarding second-wave feminism manifested in both legal and personal spheres as different people benefited and lost from women gaining the same rights and opportunities as men. In the *Roe v. Wade* case of 1973, although most of the Supreme Court agreed that states could not prohibit women's abortions, some justices disagreed. In the argument, Justice White argued that the decision to allow abortion was “an extravagant and improvident exercise of the power of judicial review that the Constitution extends to this Court” [5]. Because of the success of second-wave feminism, women were able to have a direct legal impact on their rights. This new agency was significant because it generated conflicting opinions regarding women's legal rights. In fact, many, including the high justices of the Supreme Court, disliked the power that women gained. They did not want to provide women with more agency. As such, they tried their best to prevent the success of second-wave feminism through legal and other means. Not only did arguments over gender rights occur in legal spaces, discussions, and arguments over topics such as equal pay and opportunity occurred in the daily lives of Americans—in restaurants, living rooms, and other casual spaces. The topic of gender equality and second-wave feminism seems to have taken hold of American politics and popular culture [1]. The large-scaled discussions of women's rights in America are crucial because they display a high rate of American investment in the struggle for women's rights. Because the outcomes of second-wave feminism affected Americans' lives, each person wanted to sway the movement one way or another.

3. Embodiment of Gender Conflicts

3.1. Before the Match

The “Battle of the Sexes” captured the rivaling opinions on gender equality. Before the match, both King and Riggs posed statements about each other and their opposing genders. While Riggs' comments were insulting and antifeminist, King's were not anti-man. Riggs said things like he plans “to bomb Billie Jean King in the match and set back the Women's Lib movement about another 20 years,” people should “handle women” by keeping “them pregnant and barefoot,” and “women play about twenty-five percent as good as men, so they should get about twenty-five percent of the money

men get" [1]. Riggs dismissed the feminist movement by stating clearly sexist and anti-feminist comments. He did not want the feminist movement to gain traction as he thought women possessed lesser abilities than men, so they should not obtain the same rights as men. Conversely, King's comments on Riggs were more neutral. She said that

People seem to forget Bobby Riggs is a human being, and maybe he can psyche himself out. He is going to be able to choke, too. I've seen every champion in the past and present choke at one time or another, and he is not any different from anyone else [6].

Unlike Riggs' clearly insulting and antifeminist comments, King remained respectful in her comments, solely trying to rid the image that males are perfect. By decreasing the perceived abilities of a man, King could level the playing field between the genders, showing the world that women could be just as good as men. King's intention to create equality between genders is important because it displays how King embodied the ideologies of second-wave feminism. Like the arguments about gender equality and rights that rang through the popular culture of America, the "Battle of the Sexes" also displayed these arguments where men do not think women possess the same abilities as they do and women think that they are just as good as men.

3.2. During the Match

Not only did these arguments occur before the match, but they were also very apparent during the match. The commentators, Howard Cosell, a famous American sports journalist, Gene Scott, a professional American tennis player at the time, and Rosemary Casals, a retired American professional tennis player, constantly put out contrasting statements supporting Riggs and King. For example, Casal would say, "Billie has one of the greatest volleys, just as good as any men's volley." Gene Scott would make a rebuttal by saying, "I still think the male volley has got to dominate." Casal again disagreed by saying, "I disagree. I think she has just as good of a volley as any man" [7]. While the female commentator tried to argue that women can stand up to men, the male commentator dismissed her through sexist comments, insisting on male superiority. These types of conflicts regarding the capabilities of the different genders continued for the entire match. As such, the viewers of the "Battle of the Sexes" got to watch a physical battle of the sexes on the tennis courts and listen to a vocal battle between the commentators of different sexes. The theme of conflicting ideas regarding gender equality seemed to underlie every aspect of the match; thus, "The Battle of the Sexes" captured the national conflict between genders in a centralized event.

3.3. The National Level

The sentiments of gender rivalry captured by the "Battle of the Sexes" elevated the event to a national level. An article by the Washington Post published on September 19, 1973, the day before the "Battle of the Sexes," wrote that "The Riggs-King confrontation is the quintessential 'hustle.' It is the ultimate in effective promotions and, as such, reflects more than the traditional battle of the sexes" [6]. Here, the author believes that the match between Riggs and King was way bigger than "the traditional battle of the sexes" because of how it captures the American culture. The match took hold of much attention in the United States because it well captured the division between men's want to hold on to power and women's want to gain more rights. It also well utilized the media and "promotions" to reach the American crowd. When the same author from the Washington Post asked Bobby Riggs why the event was so big, he said, "[King is] the gladiator for women all over the world. I'm the gladiator for men all over." This match is significant because "instead of men and women having battles every day all over the world, we're going to have it out for them, all in one arena" [6]. The nature of the time period and rising second-wave feminism meant that most women wanted to triumph over men, and men wanted to uphold their supremacy. As such, Riggs began to symbolize a warrior that fought for men's

upholding of superiority, and King started to embody women's hopes for liberation. The match gained attention at the national level because both men and women cared about the outcomes of second-wave feminism, and this match promised one victorious gender. The gender rivalry in the United States captured by the "Battle of the Sexes" incentivized Americans to pay attention to this event, giving the match much power to change opinions regarding sports and gender roles.

4. Increased Equality in Sport

Just after the match reached the two-hour mark, Billie Jean King had her third match point at 6-4, 6-3, 5-3 ad-out. Nervous, Riggs attempted to hit a flat first serve out wide, but it went into the net. Disappointed, Riggs walked back to the baseline, bounced that ball on the floor, and tossed it up for a slice second serve down the "T." It was a great second serve, landing right on the intersection between the bottom and middle line of the service box and creating an extremely uncomfortable return for King. After hitting the great second serve, Riggs quickly ran up, attempting to finish the point at the net. However, King returned the serve with a slow push to Riggs' backhand volley. With an easy put-away in the air, Riggs swung his racquet at the ball but missed right in the net. At that instant, the Houston Astrodome exploded with screams of men and women as Bobby Riggs jumped over the net to congratulate King. At that moment, the dynamics of women's sports changed forever [7]. Billie Jean King's victory advanced women's sports by showcasing a woman's capability to triumph over a man.

4.1. Title IX

King's triumph increased the effectiveness of Title IX. Initially, the public met the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 with fierce resistance. For example, Don Canham, the University of Michigan's athletic director, demanded to exempt athletics from Title IX. When Congress rejected his wishes, Canham opposed the implementation of Title IX at the University of Michigan, giving women athletes inferior locker rooms, coaches, and transportation. He further restricted female athletes' clothing and practice times [8]. Although Congress had already passed Title IX, women still suffered from frequent discrimination because institutions did not believe nor enforce the contents of Title IX, displaying how the passing of the law did not provide women with equal rights or treatment. As such, there needed to be an event that changed the public opinion on the capabilities of women such that people would actually enforce Title IX. The "Battle of the Sexes" served exactly this purpose. Billie Jean King said in a TED talk that two things came out of the "Battle of the Sexes" for women: "confidence and empowerment." For men, King helped create the "first generation of men in the women's movement" [9]. With her victory in the "Battle of the Sexes," King demonstrated that women have equal abilities to men and deserve equal treatment. Because of the large audience that witnessed this scene, the opinions of many Americans shifted to believe in the abilities of women. By watching the "Battle of the Sexes," Americans started to believe in the ideology written in Title IX and enforce the law. After the "Battle of the Sexes," Canham continued to resist policies of Title IX. However, because people began to believe in and enforce Title IX, they created more specific and strict definitions of the law. Eventually, in 1982, the University of Michigan finally started to meet the law's standards [8]. By transforming people's perception of female athletes' abilities, King's triumph in the "Battle of the Sexes" helped female athletes gain more equal rights and treatments.

4.2. Female Athletes

Billie Jean King's triumph in the "Battle of the Sexes" also elevated the status of female tennis players and athletes. After winning the "Battle of the Sexes," King formed the Women's Tennis Association,

and the US Open began to offer women the same prize money as men [10]. Due to the influence that King gained from winning the "Battle of the Sexes," she possessed the ability to change women's tennis by forming a new tennis association for women so that they could leave the organization that underpaid them. Because the world saw that women could beat men in sports, they believed in the legitimacy of women's sports and King's tennis association. As such, players in the Women's Tennis Association gained the monetary means to support themselves [9]. This new agency that King generated for female tennis players is momentous because it provided them with more ability to control their careers and fight for their rights. This new agency also meant that female tennis players could shape their own image, gaining more status in society. Because of King's triumph in the "Battle of the Sexes," currently, people perceive female tennis players as more equal to male tennis players [11]. Although female tennis players still don't quite receive the same privileges and recognition as male tennis players, the gender dynamics are now much more equal than they were in the 1970s because the "Battle of the Sexes" sparked a significant change in women's tennis.

Sports for women at the high school level also gained more recognition. In 1971, only 294,015 girls participated in high school sports, compared to 3,666,917 boys. However, during the 1989-90 academic year, 1,858,659 girls and 3,398,192 boys played high school sports. The 1972 passage of Title IX largely contributed to this increase in female high school athletics participation [12]. Attitudes toward women's sports also changed. A large majority of parents and children stopped thinking that sports were just for boys. Additionally, the gap between the sporting abilities of males and females decreased [12]. Female sports gained much more recognition starting from the high school level in the 70s because Title IX forced educational institutions to provide equal resources for male and female athletes. Since King's triumph in the "Battle of the Sexes" drastically aided the implementation of Title IX, the match should take some credit for increasing girls' access to sports. Because girls obtained access to sports at a younger age, they could become better at their sports in the future, gaining more ability to compete with men and attention from the public due to their increased competitiveness. The "Battle of the Sexes" allowed female tennis players to obtain more control over their careers and female athletes to start sports at an earlier age, elevating their statuses.

4.3. Inspiration for Advocacy

The legacy of Billie Jean King's victory in the "Battle of the Sexes" inspired more athletes to fight for gender equality. As a case in point, in a post-match interview with Serena Williams, tennis legend and activist, when asked to name a former player that inspired her, she said,

All of women's, not only tennis but sport, really owe everything to Billie Jean King. Everything that she's done for us, demanding equal prize money, demanding equal pay, really makes me not want to focus on what I do on the court, but on what I do off the court, what can I do to help these young players coming up? How can we continue Billie Jean King's legend? [13]

After winning the "Battle of the Sexes," King used her influence to change the situation of women's sports and tennis, leaving a legacy of activism for female athletes. By setting an example of a female athlete advocating for women's rights and achieving success, King helped future female athletes understand that their work can actually make an impact on society. Just like Serena Williams, many other female athletes also follow King's legacy, trying to change the gender dynamics in society through the influence they gained in their respective sports [11]. By triumphing in the "Battle of the Sexes," King gained the ability to make tangible changes in society. Through the significant changes she brought about in society, King demonstrated to future female athletes that their activism matters and influenced them to carry on her legacy of advocating for equal rights.

5. Conclusion

The "Battle of the Sexes" reflected differing opinions regarding gender rights by displaying a centralized battle between the sexes. This centralized battle changed women's sports by showing Americans that women possessed athletic abilities on par with men. A New York Times editorial explained that "In just a single tennis match, Billie Jean King was able to do more for the cause of women than most feminists can achieve in a lifetime" [1]. It is because King reached a vast audience with the match and her victory was so influential in shifting the opinions of the crowd that she could achieve such a dramatic effect in society. From King's triumph in the "Battle of the Sexes," further acts of feminism spread as athletes and citizens gained inspiration from King's actions and started to believe in women's abilities. As more advocated for second-wave feminism and equal rights for women in sports, they inspired more people to join the advocacy network. When more people joined the advocacy network, the power of the organization to catalyze change for equality increased rapidly. Like a tree's root, expanding more as it grows into the soil, a single starting point of advocacy can branch out into a huge movement that eventually shifts society.

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