WOMEN OF WISDOM

TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES

Billie Jean King

By Lynn Gilbert

with Gaylen Moore

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Particular Passions: Billie Jean King

By Lynn Gilbert with Gaylen Moore
Published by Lynn Gilbert

Creative Direction: Alison D. Curry

Cover Design: John Malcolmson

Library of Congress Cataloging in the Publication Data Main Entry title:

Particular Passions.

1. Women – United States – Biography: Billie Jean King

2. Success

I. Gilbert, Lynn

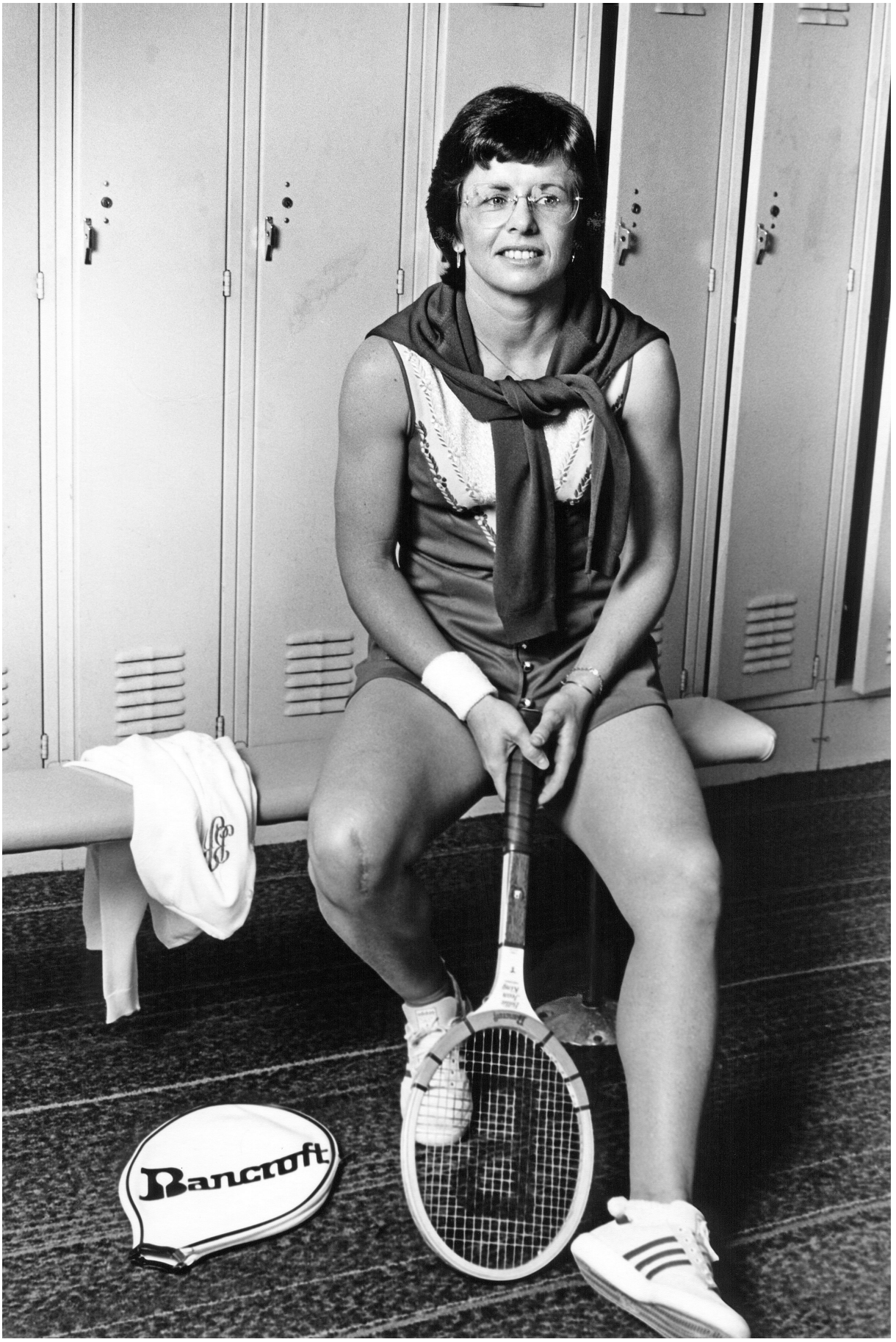
II. Moore, Gaylen

978-1-61979-354-5 Particular Passions: Billie Jean King

Dedication

To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.

— Lynn Gilbert



Billie Jean King, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

Billie Jean King

(born 1943, Long Beach, California) a world tennis champion and winner of a record twenty Wimbledon matches, fought for women's right to perform in sports. She was the driving force behind the creation in 1971 of the first professional tennis circuit for women, the Virginia Slims Circuit. This breakthrough led to an examination of management policy in other sports, opening up professional and amateur opportunities, and establishing larger purses for women. In 1971 she was the first woman athlete in any sport to win more than a hundred thousand dollars in one season.

AS A CHILD I wanted to be the best tennis player in the world. My first love was music, but I found out that I didn't have much talent. I realized very early in my life that I was better coordinated than most children. I enjoyed sports and always did well in them. That's one thing my parents understood, especially my father. He's a baseball scout for the Milwaukee Brewers now. He knew that I loved to run—he used to time me from one tree to another—and he knew I loved to hit a baseball and throw a ball, but he also knew that there were very few sports available to girls. He suggested either golf, swimming, or tennis.

We couldn't afford golf. I took swimming lessons at the YWCA and practically drowned. Swimming didn't fit me at all. I like to dance and prance and jump up in the air. So I said, "What's tennis?" My father didn't know much about tennis. Nobody in the family plays tennis to this day, but he knew enough about it to know that running and hitting a ball were part of the game.

I was eleven when I took up tennis at the public parks in Long Beach, California. The first day I hit the tennis ball I knew I'd found what I loved doing. There was something special about hitting the ball, the way it felt. There wasn't a doubt in my mind.

My mother took me home in the car and I remember telling her that I would be the number-one tennis player in the world and she said, "That's fine, dear." She and my father thought, This will last two weeks and then we'll be on to something else, which is pretty normal at that age. But ever since that moment, tennis has been my medium of self-expression.

From the beginning I was very aware of being a girl in sport, even at home. My brother Randy is a relief pitcher for the San Francisco Giants. He's five years younger than I am but when we were growing up, he always got to do more because he's a boy, even though I was more responsible. My parents told me that if they had only enough money to send one of us to college, they would send Randy because someday he would be a breadwinner. That ticked me off a little. They said, "That's the way life is." They always thought that if Randy really liked baseball and he had a high enough skill level, he'd have a career doing something

he loved to do, but they didn't think in those terms about my playing tennis.

Even so, they were terrific. My parents did everything to get tennis shoes on my feet and get me to a tennis tournament. My mother was very shy at the time but she became an Avon lady, she sold Tupperware, she did anything because she didn't have any experience. My father took on another job and they had three jobs between them so that Randy and I could have what we wanted. They never slighted me at all in those terms, but in their perceptions, in their own frame of reference, I was different. They've changed now, but you can see that the way the world perceives what your sport is worth, or the value of what a girl is doing versus the value of what a boy is doing, is totally different.

It was the same at school. As long as you were involved with boys and cheerleading, basically these were the two things. The kids thought I was nuts, going to tennis tournaments every weekend. "Why don't you come to our slumber party? You're going to play tennis? Oh, what's that?"

It's hard to explain that to people today because Andrea Jaeger and Tracy Austin, who are both still in high school, are famous in their schools. Their friends celebrate and put up banners for them when they win a tournament. Their teachers let them out of school for weeks, not just days.

Right after the time I started playing tennis, I realized that the sport of playing tennis was not right. At that age it was difficult to articulate, but tennis wasn't available to everyone, number one; it was too stodgy, number two. See, in basketball, baseball, and football, all the team sports, hootin' and hollerin' were all right, but in tennis you had to wear all white and you could never speak your mind; you had to be a lady or gentleman at all times, whatever that means.

My parents had always taught us that if you don't like something, you should stop complaining and do something about it. That very simple instruction paid off later.

When I was starting out in tennis, Wimbledon was it. There were no other opportunities for women tennis players. I played in ten tournaments in 1966 and

had to look hard to find even ten. Now we worry about which weeks we're going to take off because there's a tournament for us to play in every single week of the year.

My husband, Larry, played a big part in helping me change the structure of tennis. I was going to college then and Larry and I had been dating for a while. He said to me, "Why are you in school? You don't go to class, you run to the library in the morning to look at the sports page to see where all your friends are playing. Do you really want to be here?" I didn't, except for him. I wanted to be playing tennis. Together we started dreaming about how we would like to make tennis a more popular sport.

Then in 1968 tennis became open, which meant that amateurs and professionals could compete together for the first time. Open tennis was great because it got rid of the hypocrisy, but it meant less money for the women players because men controlled the game. They were the promoters, the administrators, and they didn't want to share any of the prize money. So they started cutting out all the events for women. The justification was that women don't draw as large an audience as men.

That year Rosie Casals, Francoise Durr, Ann Jones, and I joined the National Tennis League, which had six members, all men—Rod Laver, Pancho Gonzales, Ken Rosewall, Roy Emerson, Andres Gimeno, and Fred Stolle. For two years, the ten of us went all over the world to these out-of-the-way places playing one-night stands. I was never so tired in my life. The traveling was a killer. The only way we could get to some of these places was to drive five or six hours. We'd play our guts out for a hundred people, get a few hours' sleep, and then drive to the next place. The men were terrific, true pros, and the one saving feature was we were able to laugh at ourselves.

While we were on the road, in cars, trains, planes, hotel rooms, the four of us women had a chance to communicate with one another. We discussed our philosophy of tennis and talked about where we'd like to see tennis go. One of the dreams we had was to form a women's tennis association. We decided, Let's do something.

So we started holding meetings in the locker rooms at tournaments. The other women players thought we were nuts, but we kept saying to them, "You aren't going to have anyplace to play next year because the men who promote tournaments aren't going to stage any women's events except for a few major ones. We should have our own circuit." They said, "Oh, no, the men will take care of us." We couldn't convince anybody. You know how human nature is. People always wait until a crisis, then they react and start waking up a little.

It went on like that until 1970. Jack Kramer was having a tournament and the prize money had an eleven-to-one ratio. That's all the women were worth, according to Jack—one-eleventh of what the men got. We asked Gladys Heldman, at that time publisher of World Tennis magazine, to ask him if we could get more prize money. He said, "No way." So Gladys said, "I'll tell you what. We'll just get our own tournament organized. I'll talk to Joe Cullman of the Philip Morris Company. He's a friend of mine." Gladys got Virginia Slims to put up seven thousand dollars and we played our first Virginia Slims tournament in Houston on September 23, 1970. That's how women's tennis got started. Everyone thinks we broke away from the men, but it was because we didn't have any choice. All we did, we did to survive.

When the USTA heard about the Virginia Slims circuit, they saw the handwriting on the wall and created their own circuit. They got Evonne Goolagong, Chris Evert, Margaret Court, and Virginia Wade, all the players who wouldn't go with us. The only reason the USTA organized the circuit was because they didn't want to lose control.

Larry and I flew to Florida to try to convince Chris Evert and her father, coach Jimmy Evert, to join our circuit. Even then Chris and I got along great. We said, "We're hurting women's tennis by being divided. Please come with us because we're really the future." Chris said, "It's unfair to the USTA. I don't want to rock the boat." Her father agreed. I said to her, "Chris, I'll talk to you ten years from now and you'll think differently. You don't understand what you're doing. The only reason any of us are getting any money is because Gladys and Joe were

willing to take a risk. Do you think USTA would have started a circuit unless they were forced to?" "I don't know," she said.

It was tough on us, but you can't force people. All you can do is try to persuade them. You can be persuasive if you explain to people that it is in their self-interest to do something.

Eventually, in 1973, the USTA gave up and the Virginia Slims circuit became the one and only women's circuit. It was then that we got Margaret, Chris, Evonne, and Virginia. To this day everybody thinks that they supported us and we were all in it together. Due to all the women pulling together, we finally formed the Women's Tennis Association during Wimbledon of 1973.

I think we worked so hard for a women's circuit because we wanted to be appreciated and to have our sport appreciated. We wanted to create a system that could perpetuate itself so we could play every night of the week, compete and make a living, and we as athletes would be appreciated and our sport accepted.

People think tennis is beyond them. When you talk to taxi drivers, blue-collar workers, they're really nice but they've never come to a tennis match in their whole lives. They watch on televison sometimes. Sure, people know my name, they come up to me and want my autograph, but they've never come and paid money to see me or any of the other players play tennis. Tennis is really a small-time sport, and that bothers me.

See, I want tennis to be a huge spectator sport. There should be more opportunities at every level. The way to do that is to bring back team tennis, have tennis teams in each city like the other professional sports have. In 1978, the last year of team tennis, there were ten teams, one in most of the major cities. Four million people that year saw men's and women's professional tennis combined, which is really minute. But of those four million people, one million of them had seen team tennis.

Team tennis provides a base of watching. Children in the community can get involved. They can be ball girls and ball boys. When they're growing up they can dream about making their tennis team, just like they dream about making their basketball or football team.

In tournament tennis, you don't belong to the community. You can't go to small cities because they can't support a tournament. You only have two or three stars. The tournament doesn't really care about the other twenty-nine players. They only contribute 8 percent of the total gate. The top three players are everyone else's meal ticket, whether the players want to admit that or not. In team tennis, you have at least one star, male and female, on each of the ten teams. That provides more tension and provides a better living for more players. Each star on each team would bring in tickets instead of only two or three people in the game.

In the back of my mind, deep down, I've always wanted to change sports. That's the reason I started the Women's Sports Foundation and King womenSports magazine. I enjoy creating new opportunities.

I would like to see sports treated like any other field of endeavor. A person should be able to go to school on a scholarship and still be able to participate and receive money in his skilled area. Colleges are supposed to help young people prepare for careers. If a student on a music scholarship cut a record, the college would think that was great. Do you think they'd keep her from taking the money she made on the record? But take a woman tennis player going to college on a scholarship and playing for her school tennis team. If the Avon tournament is in town that week and she's good enough to get into the tournament, and she wins, she should be able to take the prize money and still go back to school and play for her team.

Right at the moment, a person in that position at eighteen years of age has to make a choice. Girls come up to me all the time and ask me, "Should I go to college or try and make it in the pros?" They shouldn't have to make that choice. Only in sports do you have to make that choice. It's the only field I know of, for both men and women, where there's that discrimination. No one has really thought much

about this and it's so simple really.

What I'd like to see is the amateur athletic associations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the International Olympic Committee, and the Amateur Athletic Union, make sport honest by not making a distinction between amateurs and professionals, but making it depend on skill level like any other job. That would really clean up sports.

When schools recruit athletes, that's supposed to be against the rules. Well, we live in a free-enterprise system. If a college wants to recruit a good athlete, they're going to find ways, incentives to offer him so he'll go there. If a college wants to pay someone thirty thousand dollars or give his parents a house and it helps that person get his career going in sports, what's wrong with it?

A scholarship is a contract. You can label it anything you want, but what they're saying is, I will pay you to come to my school and in return you will play on the tennis team and maintain a certain grade-point average.

I hope that someday the athletic associations will make those changes because those organizations are so powerful that if they don't make the changes, I don't know if sports ever will be changed. That's going to be my theme if I stay involved. It would probably take the rest of my life.

I do something because I want to do it, not because I feel a sense of responsibility. Sacrifice is doing something you don't want to do. Yes, I get tired, cross, lose my temper, get ticked off, and sometimes I don't feel appreciated, but as I told the women players when we started with Gladys and Joe, "If you think that we're going to be appreciated ten years from now, I got news for you. You should get joy and gratification out of it now. You know that you've done it. If that isn't enough for you, don't bother."

Working to change things gives me the most long-term happiness. Performing is very temporary. To me, winning is doing what I want, what makes me happy, doing the best I can at this given moment in my life. That's all I can ask of myself.

If each person does the best with what he has, that's winning. He's fulfilling his own potential.

The thing I like about tennis is that you're using your mind and body as one. There's a lot of work in bringing them together, a lot more than people realize. Tennis is not something you can buy. You can't buy a great backhand or a great forehand, or a great serve. You have to learn your craft. Tennis can be very boring at times—the practicing, it's so repetitious—but tennis is more fun than most things because the ball never comes over the net twice the same way.

Perfection is something you never reach, although you keep trying. Always. It's being in perfect balance. If you're planning a topspin backhand, that's exactly what you produce. That doesn't happen very often. Even if you hit it almost perfectly, you think, Maybe I could have hit it just a little closer to the line, a little bit harder or softer. You just keep extending yourself. It's fun to see if you can do it.

Injuries take their toll. Players who have injuries generally have a much more erratic career because they're playing when they shouldn't be playing and they have a lot of pain. I've had three operations on my knees and one on my foot. Rehabilitation from an operation is very difficult. It's much more debilitating, mentally and physically, than working toward any Wimbledon title. Those are the most revealing times in a person's life. It takes spirit, willpower, character—all the things people say sports are supposed to do for you.

The pain level is so excruciating you don't know whether you have the courage to persevere. When you get out of bed in the morning you can't even bend your leg. You appreciate walking, going to the bathroom, being able to get into a taxi without being in total pain. You can't go to a movie, you have to stick your leg straight out, just these little things. That's really very basic everyday life. Sometimes I say, It's too tough, I can't do it. Then I think about giving in to it and I get going again because other people have it so much tougher than I.

Now if it ever gets to the point where I no longer have fun playing tennis, let

me out. But that's for me to decide, not the world. I've already retired once, in 1975. It's very frightening. Even when I was eleven years old, watching the older players, I'd say to myself, You little thing, that's going to be you someday. I'm going to have to own up to the fact that I can't run as fast, my eyes aren't quite as sharp, all the things that performers, especially athletes or dancers, have to deal with.

People who love their work keep going back for more. The public doesn't understand that. They keep asking, "Well, why do you keep playing? You have enough money, you've won everything you ever wanted to. Now why do you want to go out there and beat your head against a wall?" Well, because I like it. It's in my blood, it's a part of me.

Each generation makes its statement and leaves something for the others. Every time I walk onto the center court at Wimbledon, I think of aII those people who came before me—Suzanne Lenglen, Alice Marble, Helen Wills Moody, Althea Gibson, Maureen Connolly—all those players left me something. I wouldn't play the way I play without them. And all I can do is leave the next generation something—my personality, my style of play, my titles.

The kids in tennis today are younger and they are more readily accepted. I didn't play full-time tennis until I was twenty-one. Today at fifteen you're a professional. Tracy Austin is seventeen and she's already made over a million dollars just in prize money and over another million in advertisements. Her frame of reference is totally different. These kids have much higher expectations than we did, which I love about them. It's their system now and whether they'll keep it or not, who knows? That's up to them.

My sport can perpetuate itself because we created a system and the system is healthy. We did make an impact. It's trickled down to the grass roots level and it's been accepted. Children at seven, eight, nine years of age are motivated. We got them excited. They could see there was a vehicle of opportunity for them.

You have to think about solutions all the time. Very few people have vision. They

can’t perceive the future, or the consequences of an action, a change. They can’t visualize, they can’t imagine. Imagination is probably the most powerful thing we have and yet how few people ever use it. That is why dance and music are so wonderful. How to shape time and space—imagination!

Take the Bobby Riggs match, for instance. To beat a fifty-nine-year-old guy was no thrill for me. The thrill was exposing a lot of new people to tennis. But the most important thing about the match was that women liked themselves better that day.

In Philadelphia a few weeks later, I walked into the offices of the Bulletin to meet the editor, and all the secretaries stood up and clapped. They just went berserk. The editor said, “You have no idea what you did. The day after you played Bobby Riggs, all of these women asked for a raise.”

People don’t change overnight. It doesn’t matter what the law says. You can have a civil rights act, you can make abortion legal, but you still have to deal with what people feel and think. And that’s what it’s all about. You slowly have to persuade people and hope they are reasonable enough to see things in a logical, objective way.

I don’t think about the past too much, only if it’s going to help me today. The danger of thinking about the past all the time is that you live in the past. A lot of athletes do that. They remember when they were number one. That’s all they talk about to their friends. How boring. You don’t want to hear about somebody who was champion in 1958. They don’t live in 1958, they live in 1981. I get burned out a lot, sure. I take a rest and then get charged up again. I want to shape the todays and tomorrows.

PARTICULAR PASSIONS

recounts the rich oral histories of pioneering women of the twentieth century from the fields of art and science, athletics andlaw, mathematics and politics.

We share their journeys as they pursue successful paths with intelligence and determination, changing the world for the millions of women and men who were inspired by them.

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