

"battle of the sexes" – struggle for gender equality in sport

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Billie Jean King is a former American tennis player that had many abilities on and off the court. She won many titles throughout her professional career but Jean is also known for the work she has done off the court. She started a campaign with the purpose to promote gender equality, but more specifically the equal prize money in the men's and women's games in tennis. Her actions started to pay off every since she started the campaign as she was the first female athlete ever to earn over \$100, 000 in prize money. This payment was the start of a new era in women tennis but most importantly in women sports. Despite her accomplishments off the court, Billie Jean won 39 Grand Slam titles: in singles, doubles and mixed doubles.

After winning the U. S Open tournament she noticed that more had to be done to solve the issue in the tennis courts. When she won, she received \$15, 00 less compared to the men's singles champion. She was well aware that most people that watched tennis didn't actually care about this issue. At this point in her career, we can see how Jean was the driving force in gender bias in tennis. With this initiative, she caught the eye of many around the world. This is why she had the courage to battle play a tennis match a tennis player Bobby Riggs in the " Battle of the Sexes" after Riggs previously stated that the women's games were subordinate to the men's game. She took the challenge to prove him wrong and eventually ended up beating Riggs 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. Since then no tennis match has been seen by so many people around the world. Billie Jean's effort throughout the years had paid off because the game was televised around the nation where many people had the opportunity to see that women's tennis level is at the same level as men's, enforcing her point of equality in prize money in tennis. A year after that, she

went on to co-found the World Team Tennis, a mixed-gender professional tennis league and started the Women's Sports Foundation (an educational non-profit charity focused on female involvement in sports). She did this with the purpose to create leaders that promoted girls access to sports.

While she was encountering extraordinary accomplishments in her professional career, her own life was going to suffer a change when she began a secret relationship with a woman. At the end of the day, Jean was publicly exposed as a lesbian, losing all of her endorsements deals. She didn't take this for granted and eventually her movement against inequality never disappeared as she continued to receive recognition for her contributions to both tennis and fight for equality. She was chosen to the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1987, and after that, she turned into the first woman to have a major sports venue named in her respect.

Serena Williams

Serena Williams is an American professional tennis player that has won 23 Grand Slam singles titles and several Olympic gold medals. She has also had success playing along with her sister Venus Williams where they eventually ended up winning a series of doubles titles. She started playing tennis at the age of three where Serena's father taught her to play with different tennis books and videos that instructed both sisters on how to play the game. She had daily practices of two hours or more in Compton, California. In this city, the Williams experienced a high rate of gang activity. But her father wanted to expose his daughters to this environment to show them the hideous possibilities that you can encounter in life. Richard Williams, Serena's father,

always said that they had to work hard and get an education in order to be successful in life so that they could not experience hideous situations in life.

In 1991 Serena was competing in the junior United States Tennis Association tour, where she had a record of 46 wins and only 3 losses. She was ranked first in the category 10 and under division. Richard noticed that in order for them to become successful professionals, he had to move his family to Florida. In here, Serena and Venus received better and more complete coaching advice. This move eventually paid off when Serena finally turned pro in 1995. She was still at school but a year later she managed to graduate from high school and signed a \$12 million shoe deal with Puma.

Throughout her career, she encountered many issues, one of them being injuries and probation. But Serena always finds a way to manage her problems and come back even stronger to do the thing she knows best, wins. She kept on winning and competing and in 2017 she clinched the 2017 Australian Open to win her 23rd Grand Slam title. Later that year, Williams publicly revealed that she was pregnant. Serena gave birth to her daughter that year in September and returned to competition on February 2018.

Off the court, Serena Williams created her own brand where she managed to expand through film, television, and fashion. She developed her own line of clothing. With this, she was recognized in the People magazine where she was appointed into one of the 25 most intriguing people. Essence magazine also mentioned her as one of the country's 50 most inspiring African Americans. Besides that, she provided educational opportunities for

underprivileged youth around the world by creating a foundation and building schools in Africa.

Both of these tennis players has promoted gender equality in tennis in different ways. Billie Jean came out and created different campaigns to promote equality. Nowadays she still talks about this and has many interviews. Furthermore, Serena Williams is a tennis player from a different era that has also promoted this issue in different ways. For instance, she wrote an open letter about gender equality, empowerment, and resilience in Porter's magazine " Incredible Women Of 2016 issue". But we know about this, what is actually important is the way that they have done this because Billie Jean and Serena Williams have addressed this problem in different ways.

Billie Jean encountered gender inequality when she was 12 in a tournament at the Los Angeles Tennis Club. We can see how, since very young, she was always driven by this issue. It seemed weird to her that everyone around her was looking at her, she wasn't sure why but then noticed that she had decided to wear tennis shorts rather than a skirt, which is what female athletes usually wore to play tennis. After this, she started to participate in various tournaments around the United States. Eventually, Billie Jean became aware that the tournament payouts for women in tennis were lower compared to male tennis players. This was a very serious problem because there is no valuable reason in why men should earn more than women, it seemed ridiculous to Billie Jean, which is why she wanted a change. As she kept competing she became more and more famous to the point that she

became the first woman athlete to earn more than \$100,000 in prize money. Yet this surprised her because men were still earning much more than she did. She improved her ranking and became one of the best female tennis players in the world. With this reputation, she noticed that she could force a change and influence people's perspective about gender inequality in tennis. Billie Jean came out and used media as a resource to address the problem. She was demanding a change and said, "Unless I was number 1, I wouldn't be listened to."

At this time is when she began a campaign for equal payouts in men's and women's tournaments. Along with other eight women tennis players, Billie Jean formed the Women's Tennis Association eventually became its first president. Her hard work and dedication paid off in 1973 when she found a sponsor that will find the equal prize money at the U.S. Open. This tournament became the first major to offer equal prize money to both sexes. After that, now all four Grand Slams now offer equal payouts to women and men. This is one of the many reasons in why Billie Jean is considered the pioneer of gender equality in tennis.

At this point, she had addressed the problem in the United States, which was more than what she expected. With her campaign for equal payouts and after accomplishing equal prize money in the U.S. Open for both gender, she started to gain worldwide attention. She caught the eye from a former number one ranked tennis player Bobby Riggs. In an interview, he claimed that the women's game could not be compared to the men's game because their game was inferior. Riggs stated that he could beat 29-year-old Billie

Jean as a 55-year-old man. He was so confident that Bobby Riggs challenged Billie Jean to a match known as the " Battle of the Sexes". She was very nervous about the challenge that she was facing. But Jean knew that by accepting that challenge she could prove her fight for equality in front of the eyes of the world. Billie Jean came out to the media and said " I'm taking this match very seriously. I love to win. I welcome the responsibility and the pressure. Bobby had better be ready." The match was televised internationally and 50 million people in the United States and around 90 million people worldwide watched it on September 20, 1973. The game was held in the Houston Astrodome. Since that day, the match between Riggs and King is considered to be the most watched televised sporting events of all time, which means that no tennis match before or since has been seen by so many people. It was a relatively easy win for Jean were in straight sets she won, 6-4, 603, 6-3, and earned \$100, 000. Even though it was a friendly match, she felt a lot of pressure to win because she wanted to prove that men are not better than women, that a woman can win a match against a man and that we are all equal. This win was the start of a new era in women's sports participation, as well for allowing women for equal payouts in not only tennis but also in all areas regarding workforce. Eventually, a movie was released in September 2017, starring Emma Stone as Billie Jean and Steve Carell as Bobby Riggs.

Billie Jean was at first known for her achievement in the courts but know a day's people refer to her as the pioneer of gender equality not only in tennis but elsewhere. After many years of putting forward this issue and trying to

find a way to solve it, she received a national honor from former President Barack Obama. King received the presidential Medal of Freedom, which is the highest civilian honor, on August 12, 2009. She became a voice in people minds after many interviews and speeches, she put forward not only the argument for gender equality in sports but she also approved the LGBTQ community. This is why President Barack Obama recognized her with that medal.

Serena Williams did not address the issue of gender equality in tennis the same way as Billie Jean. Even though Billie Jean has done a lot regarding this issue, we can see how still nowadays tennis players, such as Serena Williams, keep talking about it and are demanding that more should be done in order to fully solve this problem. Serena Williams has come out to be one of the best female tennis players ever, if not the best, to play the sport. This is why people listen to what she has to say, throughout the years she has created her own reputation so that people can listen to her opinions. One of the main issues she has faced through her career is with clothing. Ever since she started to play the game professionally, she has been criticized for her clothing. Many have said that Williams outfits do not represent how a tennis player should dress. Besides that, during her career, she has faced the fact that many reports have called her a man because she appeared superficially strong. These things have indeed affected her but she has managed to stay strong enough to overcome them. She came out and wrote an open letter to her mom on Reddit where she said; " I am proud we were able to show them that some women look like. We don't all look the same. " We are curvy,

strong, muscular, tall, small, just to name a few, and all the same: we are women and proud!"

She also wrote an open letter about gender, equality, empowerment, and resilience in Porter's Magazine Incredible Women of 2016 issue. In this letter, Williams mentions the barriers that women need to overcome in order to achieve equality. In her letter, she said that her dream was to become the best tennis player in the world, not the best "female" tennis player in the world." This has become an issue because when male tennis players are introduced, they are directly introduced for example as the best tennis player in the world. We can see this in all the articles online and even in the newspaper. Serena Williams wants to make a point that female tennis players every time are introduced with their gender difference. Seeing that, we can see how this distinction clearly states that women are not equal to men, they are not respected and treated like they should be. Furthermore, in her letter, she encourages women to not be afraid because most of the time they are not supported adequately and therefore are demoralized from choosing their own dreams. She also proposes that we can fix this problem together and that being strong is crucial for success. Moreover, she mentions equal payouts, which she can't understand why it is a problem because throughout her career she has made the same sacrifices and put in the same dedication and hard work as male tennis players. Finally, she concludes the letter by saying, "It is my hope that my story, and yours, will inspire all young women out there to push for greatness and follow their dreams with

steadfast resilience. We must continue to dream big, and in doing so, we empower the next generation of women to be just as bold in their pursuits."