

# MensNet

## BILLIE JEAN'S CASE FOR EQUAL PAY

On September 20<sup>th</sup> 1973 at the "Battle of the Sexes" match in the Houston Astrodome, a seed was planted for the equal pay injustice in professional tennis that still exists today. Young and talented Billie Jean King had been challenged by 55 year old Bobby Riggs because he disagreed with women demanding equal prize money at the U.S. Open. Riggs had beaten Margaret Court the #1 woman player months earlier 6-2, 6-1. The match was mostly ignored by the media and downplayed by professional women players because of its predictable outcome. Billie Jean who at first refused his challenge eventually accepted. She realized with all the money offered her and the positive publicity for women's tennis, there was nothing to lose and everything to gain. She defeated Riggs, 6-4,6-3,6-3, while millions of naïve viewers watched on television. The outcome shouldn't have proved a thing. His age, the fact he had retired long ago and didn't play regularly anymore was never mentioned in her victory speech. Additionally her remark, "This proves that a woman can beat a man," was not only opportunistic but ludicrous. Was she inferring on equal terms? Unjustly but predictably, the Women's Tennis Association used the match to sway public opinion and persuade officials to award equal prize money at the following U.S. Open.

Billie Jean had already become the first tennis player to win \$100,000 in one year. Playing women only, she won more money than any male player who she wouldn't have had a chance of beating. Years later when Martina Navratilova was dominating women's tennis, the male-female challenge arose again. This time Martina and Chris Evert, the two top female players, would be matched against top male players John McEnroe and Vitas Gerulaitis. Vitas stated that he would have bet his house on such a match. But this time the ladies didn't accept the challenge. It wouldn't have been prudent. They would not only embarrass themselves, but they might jeopardize the equal prize money justification. Chris finally admitted, "that not only wouldn't they have a chance (against John and Vitas), but they probably couldn't beat the 1000<sup>th</sup> ranked male players."

Arthur Ashe summed it up in a Tennis Magazine article listing three reasons why women shouldn't get equal prize money. They don't draw the same amount of spectators that the men draw. They don't entertain their fans as long, playing 2 out of 3 sets vs. the men's 3 out of 5 sets per match. They cannot come close to beating men ranked the same as them. If women's tennis is considered entertainment then equal prize money is unfair because they don't entertain as many fans for as long a time as the men. If it's considered an athletic competition, then equal prize money is being awarded to players in a protected substandard category. Nevertheless, women professional tennis players receive equal prize money at most tennis tournaments. The unfairness of receiving equal pay for unequal work is conveniently and shamelessly overlooked.