



Bio: **Billie Jean King** is a former professional tennis player from the United States. She won 12 Grand Slam singles titles, 16 Grand Slam women's doubles titles, and 11 Grand Slam mixed doubles titles. King has been an advocate against sexism in sports and society.<sup>1</sup>

She is the founder of the Women's Tennis Association, the Women's Sports Foundation, and owner of World Team Tennis, which was founded by her former husband, Larry King, Dennis Murphy, Frank Barman, and Jordan Kaiser.<sup>2</sup>

Billie Jean King has received countless awards over the years and most recently received the Presidential Medal of Freedom award in 2009.

An Interview with Billie Jean King

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Rebecca Granet, Class of 2013

Edited by Nicholas Salazer

**Rebecca Granet: Could just talk about the political climate that you lived through in your childhood and what it was about that environment that allowed you to shape yourself?**

**Billie Jean King:** I was born in nineteen forty-three, so it was during the Second World War. So, there was a lot going on with the men away. War creates crisis. All of a sudden women were allowed to do things when they really weren't before. When the men are at war the women [could] step up. They [worked] in the factories, they [could] make the airplanes like my mother was Rosie the Riveter with the planes because we [lived] in Long Beach, California. But when the men [came] home, women [had] to go back to being a homemaker.

But as a child it was very white-bred lower middle class in long beach. [We] lived in a track home and we had a great neighborhood, it was very safe. You could go outside and run and play and it was very safe it felt safe. I don't think we have that sense of feeling safe anymore like we used to in the neighborhoods. My mother said, my brother and I were moving a lot, kicking a lot before we were born, and then after we were born, we were totally into movement. The ball was big. In fact, it was the third word we ever learned. And he and I absolutely got along. We've gotten along unbelievable. I had one younger brother almost five years younger. My dad was a firefighter when he came home from the war, and my mother a homemaker. She wanted to make sure she was there when we came home from school. They both come from divorced situations and parents and they felt that it was very important to be very committed, and they absolutely loved each other dearly. I mean they really did so it was easy. My mother met my dad at seventeen, by the third date my mother came home and told her mother, my grandmother, I'm going to marry him, and my grandmother said, Well has he asked you? And she goes, No but he will. And he did. I think my brother and I were very fortunate to have two parents who loved us

unconditionally. I'm always a big believer that you only need one person that loves you in the

---

<sup>1</sup>. < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billie\\_Jean\\_King](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billie_Jean_King)>

<sup>2</sup>. See 1.

whole world unconditionally and you can make it. Every child, that's all they really need, is one. If you have more than one it's a bonus and my brother and I had a bonus having two. And they were very strict, dad was in the navy and the military, and he brought it home. My mother was strict. They agreed with each other too much for Randy and you know, we could play them against each other a little, but not too much, so, we had a really- I would say- it wasn't perfect, I mean they argued and they'd get into it, but they always made up and that's what I liked.

**RG: Was there someone you feel like unleashed your passion?**

**BJK:** I think my parents were great examples. I used to go watch [my dad] play when he was in his forties. He's a firefighter. He played in a night league. My dad would give it his all to win and just give it everything he had. He was the coach of the team; I mean that's probably why I ended up being coach, a leader. People push me there, but my dad was kind of like that. He was always instructing; he was a great instructor, he taught me basketball. He did not touch tennis. He said, I have never played [and] I don't understand it. I will never tell you how to play the sport. He was absolutely on the money and yet, you know how many parents that have never played or hardly played and go get a book and teach their kid? My mom and my dad were great; they would never tell me what to do. It's up to Clyde Walker, it was up to Alice Marble, it was up to all these great people that helped me in my life.

**RG: Was tennis a process of self-discovery for you?**

**BJK:** Oh I think everything you go through is a process of self-discovery, but tennis really does because it's very emotional, it's very physical, it's the whole shoot and match, and boy do you find out about yourself really fast. And sometimes I liked what I saw and other times I didn't like what I saw. Sometimes my anger would come out sideways which I did not like, and that had nothing to do with the tennis match, it had to do with my life off the court. Did I recognize it at the time? Absolutely not. I wish I had, but going through that process, I did get to the right point, and I did get to where I understood myself better, and I continually try to grow. What I learned through sports and through tennis is invaluable. I wish every child could have that experience because you find out about yourself; your character is revealed. My character was revealed through my sport; sometimes I was really happy with it and sometimes I wasn't, or in between. And I think you learn [that] there's a place you go that you didn't realize you [would] have to be able to finish. There's a time when you think you can't take another step, you can't continue, and there's some reserve you find in your body, in your soul that you didn't know you had. You go into different gear. It's not one, two, three or five, it's a different number, and you find it, and it allows you to rise to the occasion. Never underestimate the human spirit. Never underestimate it. Never. It's so powerful. You can do so many things. Imagination is powerful.

**RG: What was the outlet that tennis provided for you in your life?**

**BJK:** I think playing tennis for me is self-expression. It's how to shape time and space. It's like a dancer. You know, if I look at a ballerina, they're changing, they're shaping time and space every move you make. So, we get to do that and we get to compete. We've got two things going; we get to shape time and space so it's like dance, movement, it's balance, it's off-balance, it's still adapting, it's understanding where the face of the racket is in relationship to the ball, all those great things and how the ball feels against the strings, and the sense of integration of my mind, body and soul. And there's a score if competing. I don't care if I compete; I just like to hit the ball. The transition when I retired - I call it transition, not retirement, I was forty, which is old. I went right into the World Team Tennis office. I already knew what I was going to do. I had no problem. I have never had any problem. I have my bucket list when I transition into something else [when] I do not have any challenges.

**RG: You said to Jerry Cromwell when you were little, "you may be smarter than me, but I'm going to change the world through tennis." Did you know at that point that you wanted to advance women's position or even human rights through tennis?**

**BJK:** I did. At eleven, I wanted to be the best player the second time I picked up a racket at the Long Beach public parks. I knew at the end of my first instruction ever by Clyde Walker that I found out what I was going to do with my life. Now today, I'd say I found my destiny. At twelve, which [was] one year later, I had an epiphany at the Los Angeles tennis club that I would dedicate my life to equal rights and opportunities for boys and girls, men and women, [for] the rest of my life. I noticed that everybody who played tennis was white. The clothes were white, the balls were white, the socks were white, the shoes were white, and I said, where's everybody else? Because I grew up in basketball, baseball, football, track and field, so I saw people of color. I think being from California was very helpful. Tennis would be my platform for that. It wasn't the most important thing but tennis allowed me to have a forum. So, that was going to be my goal the rest of my life. Now we have social media today. We didn't have social media. That's how we had to think about it. Now it's just, get on there and tweet or text or do whatever, it [was] just a very different world then. That's what social media is doing too, it's connecting.

**RG: How would you define women's leadership and is it important?**

**BJK:** Women's leadership is more vital today than ever, because you have to see it to be it, and every child boy or girl has to know that women are part of the fabric of every community in every which way, vertically and horizontally. I went to a state dinner the other night at the White House. If you really talk, [and] listen and discuss with [those] women, and if they have enough courage to tell you the truth, they say it is horrible still. It's terrible. And it is. I'm a small businesswoman; the old boy network absolutely controls business to this day, more than ever because they're much quieter about it. Back in the seventies, they were much more overt about it. Then they smartened up and said, oh, we want to keep our power, we got to get a little quieter and a little smarter about things, and they've gotten really smart about it.

Leadership is interesting because followers choose leaders. Leaders don't choose followers. I was always pushed in the leadership positions since elementary school. I didn't think about it but I got pushed. I was pushed [into] a leadership position with the women's tour. The players said, you're the one. I go, I'm the one? What do you mean I'm the one? All of us can do this. And they go, no, no, you're the one. People will listen to you. And finally, I said, okay I'll cross the line and let's go. I'll do it. But, was I scared? Absolutely, because I was representing us, not just me. So, I knew the responsibility was much greater and I accepted it. And accepting responsibility is huge in leadership. But if you're going to be a great leader, it's really about them, not about yourself. And you can lead from the front sometimes, and you lead from the back sometimes. I also think great leaders know when to move on. So I think that's a big part of leadership too. Leadership comes in very different forms, in different ways, and at different times. Also, you know how positioning is really important in tennis or in sports? It's the same being in a position when there's an opportunity, and knowing to go for it. So that's the kind of stuff I think part of being a great leader is. Just having to visualize it, go for it, accepting responsibility, clarity of vision, it's about the people, it's not about you. It's about the people that you're trying to serve.

**RG: Can you talk about being outed and using that opportunity to show your leadership and speak out for your rights?**

**BJK:** You have to make decisions when you're put on the spot. I think that's where your character's truly revealed. And one thing that my mother always taught me was Shakespeare's "To thine own self be true." I just don't like to lie. I like to tell the truth, it's just a lot easier. And I've been brought up to tell the truth; you know it's been engrained in me. I had to really argue with my lawyer and my PR person for forty-eight hours. They didn't want me to do a press conference and tell the truth. I said, well I'm going to do it, and they said, no one's ever done it; you don't do this. The lawyer kept saying, this has never been done, do not do this, take my advice. I said, I'm not taking your advice. I've worked with these media people all of my life since I've been young, I've always talked to them, I'm doing it now, I'm not going to go hide now.

I think facing your fears is really important and this was an opportunity to face my fears. I didn't have a choice; I had to face my fears. I was put in a horrible position by being outed. So, I had the press conference and I just told the truth and everybody gasped. You could hear the pin drop, nobody could say a word. Nobody asked a question. They were just [silent]. [The] silence felt like a year to me. And then they started asking questions, [but] then the lawyer wouldn't let me talk very much but, because we had to go to trial. So, it was horrible because I hadn't had a chance to talk to my [partner]. I mean it was just terrible. My parents still didn't want to get there. Went to Renfrew, they still didn't want to be there. My dad was better than my mother. He said, don't worry your mom will come around.

But I took my power back. I'd given up all my power to my parents when it came to my sexuality. Of course I [had]. I pussyfooted around, I measured my words, I [couldn't] be myself.

So I took [my power] back. And everything started to get good, because if one person changes, everything changes. The whole dynamic changes; the paradigm changes, one move, like in a chess game, it changes the whole board right? It's the same thing in life. It's just a no brainer. Secrets don't work. When parents think they're doing their things and kids don't know, kids do know. They might not know how to say it, precisely, but they feel something. They're bubbling up in their gut; they feel something isn't quite meshing right.

**RG: Was there a moment throughout your tennis career where said this is it for me no matter how down I can get about this sport, this is where I'm meant to be?**

**BJK:** Oh I had downs and doubts absolutely. My lonely times and my tough times were more from a leadership point of view, more of a vision point of view; what I wanted for our sport and couldn't get there fast enough. I wanted professional tennis, it's just, I didn't know if we'd ever get it and I was getting anxious because I wanted to be a part of it. And as an athlete, you have a very limited window of opportunity where you can play. I mean it's very physical and eventually, even if I wanted to play, I wouldn't be able to and I was very clear on that from the time I was about thirteen or fourteen. I remember watching one of my heroes, Althea Gibson, play for the first time. I remember saying boy it goes fast, you can't play forever. Then when I wanted to make professional tennis happen I said, God, now you know, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty one, the years are going by [and] we don't have professional tennis yet. So, that was huge to get that to happen first to make it into professional sport. Then the men were starting an association and I went to them to say, you're going to include us aren't you? They said no, because they reject us. These were my friends by the way, the ones I would go to dinner with, go dancing with, not just men's tennis players. Now remember, I'm for equal rights and opportunity for boys and girls, men and women. I was very devastated and I said to them, you're making a mistake because as one voice, we're a global sport, we're one voice, we have high profile men and women, which is really unusual in sports, it's usually only men. We can change the world, together. We'd be the only co-ed association in professional sports. I said what we could do with this opportunity and they just kept rejecting us, and that's the reason we started women's professional tennis. It wasn't what I wanted; it was the alternative for me. The good thing that came from that is that we learned that we could do it, and we were very empowered. And I'm not so sure if we would have ever understood that without being put in that position of we don't want you.

I hated the rejection, but we adjusted to it. We [started] thinking about society and women's place in it. We thought we could be an example, to change that. Our real mission was to [support] any girl born in this world for the future, [and] if she's good enough, she would have a place to play and make a living and could follow her passion and her dream of being a professional athlete. So, when I speak with the players of today, I do a lot of mentoring still, I try to relay this story to them that they're living our dream. That now the baton's in their hand and they have to shape the future. Your generation will start shaping the future now, it happens pretty quickly. You can shape the future at any age. Every person is an influencer. So, we started that, and then we got the Women's Tennis Association founded in 1973.

**RG: How did the media affect your quest to making effecting change?**

**BJK:** There were no women sports writers [and] very few women writers cared about women's sports. Even today, that's the case quite frankly and it's a mistake on their part. The media was very difficult; they would really label us more than they do men. They started calling me a liber and a feminist, and what I started doing in the press conferences after every match, I'd say, before we start, I'd like you to tell me your definition. Let's go around the room, because we're all men, what's your definition of being a feminist, or what's feminism to you, because I'll tell you what it is for me. For me it's what I've been doing since I was twelve. It's equal opportunities for boys and girls. Or equal rights really, and opportunities. That's what feminism is to me. It's fine for a woman to want to do something as much as a man. A little girl should have the same dreams a little boy has, and a little boy should have the same dreams of whatever we want. We should be free to be who we want to be. And I said, that's all we want. We said, we can't beat the guys. We know that. But what we can be just as entertaining, or even more entertaining sometimes depending upon the match itself. So please, give us an opportunity to prove that we're worthy.

**RG: What is it about you that you think allows you to get up in the face of adversity and advance your cause?**

**BJK:** I love people. I love children. I love people. We're all like this electricity and we're all connected. Every single one of us whether we like it or not are all connected throughout the world. And as social media and as your generation is going to go through this world, and how fast it's going to change, my generation will be in shock. We can't cope with the idea that the changes are happening so rapidly, that you're going to have to know how to adapt better than my generation because of the rapid changes. But, we still have a lot of unrest in this world and I'm hoping the social media can bring us more together. It's a great way to mobilize, which is good news. [It's] bad news because we mobilize for good or it can mobilize for bad. Always know when there's always a plus, there's always usually a trade-off. You got to always try to look at both sides. I'm all for it, but I want the good to come from it.

**RG: What do you think your truth is?**

**BJK:** I'm finally comfortable. I can exhale [and] finally I feel good. I feel great. I feel centered. I've been in a relationship with a woman for a long time, and we have a great relationship, not to say we don't argue and all that, but it's good. I've got godchildren, I help mentor, I still want to change the world, I still want tennis to change, [there's] a lot. I want [tennis] to be a team sport. When a child signs up for tennis, I want he or she to be put on a team immediately. I want the children to stand in a circle and name their team so they have ownership of that team name. So, that's what I want and I think more kids would play, and we'd keep them in a lifetime sport,

because tennis is a great gift of a lifetime. [It's] about health in this country, and tennis is a great one for health. It's a fantastic sport for health and so I want people in lifetime sports.

**RG: What are you most afraid of?**

**BJK:** Getting old is not for sissies. I'm really, emotionally, in such a better place. I wish I could have this emotional well being when I was in my twenties, thirties, [and] forties; it's been such a struggle. However, youth is wasted on the young in a way. I don't know, it's just fascinating, life. I wish I had nine lives. I told people if I die right now, [I'd be] really ticked off because I'm not finished. I've got a lot of things I want to do and enjoy. I want to live a long time, but I want to be physically healthy and emotionally healthy. So, it's a challenge because time's running out now for real, and I've always had a sense of urgency; I can't remember when I didn't have it. I always thought time was passing too fast even as a baby. Young people today say, oh I'm bored, I'm this. I've never been bored a moment in my life! Not one! I don't know what that means almost! Life has just gone so fast.

**RG: What can you offer as a piece of advice for college students and women around my age who are trying to advance leadership and advance their causes?**

**BJK:** The more you know about history, the more you know about yourself. If you don't know about history you won't know how to take it to the next phase. That's why I think learning the past is really important to shaping the future. And so, I would suggest that you understand-whatever field of endeavor particularly that you are going to go in, that you understand the history of it. Live it, love it, get as much of it as you can, so understand the past, understand the present, and from that, I think it will help you shape the future. You should not be the same as the past or the present; you're not going to be. But, it'll help you see the stepping stones that got us to where we are now and where you belong in this universe, and why you're kind of where you are in history and in time. Now, what do you want to do with it for the future? What do you want five years from now? What do you want ten years from now? When I do mentoring with the tennis young people, I shake them up a little. When we'll be talking about the history, I [say], you're going to shape the future, and then I say, how do you want just our little tiny universe of tennis to look give years from now? And their eyes get like saucers, and they look at me like, what do you mean? And I go, well, I'm not going to shape it, I shaped it way back. You're shaping it, we're all shaping it, all the generations that are still alive and breathing. We can do it together to a point, but this is for you and the next generation. What do you want it to look like, what do you want it to feel like, what do you want it to smell like, use all your senses. What do you want? And they go, whoa. I really admire what you're doing and I admire each and every one of you. It's great. And I wish you just follow your dreams and go for it. Think big and go for it, and if people tell you why, you say, why not.

