Billie Jean King

WOMEN OF WISDOM • ACTIVISM • WOMEN'S & LGBTQ RIGHTS • ATHLETE ACTIVIST •

BY LYNN GILBERT

WOMEN OF WISDOM SERIES:
PORTRAITS AND STORIES
OF TRAILBLAZERS WHO
TRANSFORMED OUR WORLD

Women of Wisdom

Billie Jean King

By
LYNN GILBERT

Excerpted from *Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*

Women of Wisdom

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Billie Jean King

B. 1943, Long Beach, California

Billie Jean King, world tennis champion and winner of a record twenty Wimbledon matches, has long fought for women's rights in sports.

She was the driving force behind the creation in 1971 of the Virginia Slims Circuit, the first professional tennis circuit for women. This breakthrough led to an examination of gender policy in other sports, opening up professional and amateur opportunities and establishing larger purses for women. In 1971, she became the first female athlete in any sport to win more than one 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, Andrés 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 other. 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 any place 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 television 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 eight 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 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 all 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 grassroots 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.

Author's Note

BY LYNN GILBERT

As the author of *Particular Passions*, I am updating what I feel has been overlooked. In 1981, when *Particular Passions* was first published, five years after its conception, it was presented as a book that would inspire. Almost half a century later, I realize this book is much more. It is a historic record of trailblazing women who shaped the American landscape.

A group of pioneering women in multiple disciplines emerged in the mid-1970s. Some gained recognition and even fame. Others remained in the shadows but had an equal impact. Over time, women moved into the workforce and emerged in significant roles. It was no longer unusual.

We are moving backwards, unfortunately. Women are being stripped of their rights, even by the highest court.

There was no list of women of achievement in the mid-1970s. This book records, for the first time, these pioneers. Listen to their stories, struggles, and achievements in their own words.

Enjoy this Billie Jean King chapter.

Lynn Gilbert

APRIL 3, 2024

Postface

BY LYNN GILBERT

In 1976, when I was asked to photograph Louise Nevelson for the Pace Gallery, I went to her studio to meet her and was dazzled. Her house on Spring Street was very spare but very ordered. One could see the disciplined structure that dictated the way she lives. Surrounded by the amazing work of her own hands, she created her own atmosphere, her own environment. That day, she had an extraordinary outfit on—a Chinese robe over an American couture gown. A silver African necklace around her neck, a black velvet riding hat, those clodhopper space shoes. The effect was bizarre, yet right. Feeling the tremendous energy and focus of her personality, I was deeply moved.

Back home after the session, I said to myself: There are other women like her who have created something extraordinary and enriched life for themselves and others. Who are they? How were they able to develop themselves and make their astonishing contributions to society? The idea of photographing them and doing brief profiles took form in my mind.

My first task was deciding whom I would include. *Who's Who* was the logical place to start, but I found that the entries only provided information on positions held and awards won; it was impossible to assess the real contributions and far-reaching effects of the subjects. I knew I was in for a lot of research. Plunging in, I used the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and began reading any and every article on a woman or women I could lay my hands on. When an article mentioned a woman who I thought might be considered, I would follow up on that.

Eventually, I found lists of outstanding women that had been compiled in popular magazines, and realized that the lists themselves were new to arrive on the scene. Only in the early seventies did the almanacs, of which there are many, begin to compile lists of distinguished women. In the mid-1970s, *Fortune* magazine wrote its first full-scale article on women in finance and industry, followed by one in *BusinessWeek*. The most thoroughly researched list to appear in any of the women's magazines was published in 1971 by the *Ladies' Home Journal*. According to the author, the 75 Most Important Women were the "women who had made the greatest impact on our civilization within the last five years and would continue to affect us significantly for the next five years." The author added that it is a "representative list that speaks highly for the quality of feminine leadership in America." But it was interesting to see that the positions of a number of women on this list were predicated on their relationships to men of national or international importance. Included were

Rose Mary Woods, "Executive Secretary to President Nixon since he became senator," Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, "widow of President Kennedy and wife of a Greek near-billionaire—the woman most other women would like to be," and Rose Kennedy. I wanted my list, in contrast, to include only women whose contributions had come from their own energies and endeavors. My criterion would be women who had done pioneering work in their field that had significantly changed society and/or opened up a new field for women.

When I had exhausted the *Readers' Guide*, I consulted experts in the fields of art, medicine, science, law, and so forth, and asked them for their recommendations. I finally created a master list of women, with a second column consisting of the writers, editors, and experts who could help me assess the subjects' contributions. I decided that each subject would need at least three referrals by solid sources in order to be included.

Throughout the selection process, I tried to be receptive to the information I was being given. When I was compiling a list of Black women, for instance, the women who were repeatedly suggested to me were almost exclusively in the field of civil rights. I checked my own impulse to find a Black writer, a Black scientist. Any list is necessarily somewhat arbitrary. But by feeling my way, I tried to be true to the names that continued to emerge with the most insistence. I finally arrived at a list of over fifty women.

Several of the women, among them Marian Anderson, Martha Graham, Susan Sontag, and Susan Langer, who indisputably should have been included in such a book, preferred not to be. There were several others, including Jane Jacobs, the architect and city planner, whom I was not able to reach. Lillian Hellman agreed to be photographed for the book, but not interviewed. I photographed three women—Margaret Mead, Cecelia Payne-Gaposchkin, and Aileen Osborn Webb—who were not interviewed before their deaths. Dorothy Height and Dede Allen could not be included for reasons beyond our control. Therefore, the forty-six women included here do not represent a definitive list, but rather a sampling of the scope and significance of women's contributions to American society over the last fifty years.

At this point, I envisioned the book as portraits of the women, each accompanied by a brief text. I hoped my photographs could portray each woman with dignity, and hoped to catch a gesture, a glint in the eye, or some small detail that would enable me to go beyond their public and sometimes well-known image and capture an essential inner quality. To put my subjects at ease during the photography sessions, I prepared by reading published interviews and profiles and their own books and articles, and as we talked, many of the women told me stories I had not seen in print. I went home and wrote down everything I could remember, but it was not long before I realized that these stories were more compelling than the primarily visual book

I had planned. I felt that if I could understand these women, how they function in our society, it would not only help me understand my own life, but perhaps help others.

I wanted the text accompanying the photographs to reflect the style of my portraits: to be revealing, yet written with honesty, dignity, and kindness. As the book evolved, I needed a writer who would go back to the women, gain their trust, listen to the stories I had heard, and go beyond. Again, I relied on research—interviews and profiles—to find a journalist with a sensibility compatible with mine.

Particular Passions turned into a collaboration when I read an interview of Elsa Peretti by Gaylen Moore for the *New York Times Magazine*. I said to myself: This is the first writer of profiles who knows what a person is really about. We proceeded slowly and surely, coping with the difficult logistics of interviews, writing, and editing. This idea of mine took five years to fulfill, and with the collaboration of Gaylen Moore, it has resulted in a book far richer than any I could have imagined.

I hope that our book will not only add to the feminist literature of our time, but will inspire women everywhere to pursue their own particular passions.

Acknowledgments

There are many people I wish to acknowledge for having made this book possible.

Thanks to Arne Glimcher, founder of the Pace Gallery, who entrusted me with photographing Louise Nevelson after I photographed his children. My experience with Nevelson was the pivotal moment that shaped the direction of my life and the inspiration for this book.

I would like to thank the subjects, who gave of their time, and shared the previously unpublished stories of their lives that make this book so rich.

Without the encouragement of my husband, Ronnie, our sons, Paul and George, and my beloved housekeeper, Lessie Freeman, I'm not sure I could have tolerated the endless roadblocks during the five years that it took to complete this book.

My aunt and uncle, Red and Pick Heller, jump-started the book by arranging my first subjects.

To Gaylen Moore, my writer, I owe my deepest gratitude. After firing the first writer during a search that lasted a year and a half, I interviewed thirty writers before I found the person who would share my vision. I wanted the shared stories to be the basis of my book. Gaylen returned to interview and record their voices, to let you feel as if you were in each person's presence.

The editor, Carol Southern at Clarkson Potter, did a superb job. Her faith, and that of publisher Jane West, enabled me, against all odds, to get this book published. Anne Goldstein, assistant editor, was so moved by the book that it enabled her to leave publishing to follow her own "particular passion."

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Women of Wisdom Series

EXCERPTED FROM

Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times

BY LYNN GILBERT

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Billie Jean King
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