

2010 Tennis Industry Hall of Fame

Igniting the Tennis Boom

In many ways, Billie Jean King, the newest inductee into the Tennis Industry Hall of Fame, was the spark that created the tennis industry as we know it.

BY MARY HELEN SPRECHER

She has won Grand Slams and racked up titles. She's defied stereotypes, broken down barriers and through the formation of World TeamTennis, even reshaped the way people enjoy the spectator aspect of the sport. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise at all that Billie Jean King wants to change the perception of even the learning experience in tennis.

"My mantra is to get rid of the word 'lesson,'" King says. "When a child signs up for tennis, they should be put on a team immediately. The socialization process is so important. Children want to be on a team with their friends. This is how they learn leadership roles."

Few players, male or female, have had the large-scale impact of Billie Jean King, on or off the court, and none can claim to

Australian Open and US Open.

It wasn't enough just to play the game, though; King made it better. She campaigned for equal prize money for men and women; her efforts helped make that goal a reality at the US Open in 1973. She led efforts among players to support the first women's professional tour, the Virginia Slims. (King was one of nine players who accepted \$1 contracts from promoter Gladys Heldman, a move that led not only to the women's tour, but to the formation of the Women's Tennis Association).

Jeff Williams, group publisher of Tennis Magazine, who introduced King at the TI Hall of Fame induction, characterizes her as "the spark that caused a boom, a boom that gave rise to the tennis industry as we know it today."

One defining moment both for King and for women in sports came in 1973, when she beat Bobby Riggs in the nationally televised Battle of the Sexes match. Her 6-4, 6-3, 6-3 win was a pivotal point for women's tennis. It was the same year she won her fifth Wimbledon singles title (as well as her ninth doubles title and her third mixed-doubles title there)—but it was the match with Riggs that would cement her status as an icon in the tennis world and in pop culture in general. It was also the moment that would bring tennis into the public's consciousness for good.

Because of King, Williams adds, "We are all part of an industry that is bigger, an industry that is better, and an industry that is stronger."

She founded the Women's Tennis Association in 1973, the Women's Sports Foundation and Women's Sports Magazine in 1974, and also in 1974, co-founded World TeamTennis, the groundbreaking co-ed professional tennis league. She also founded the World TeamTennis Recreational League, one of the most popular recreational tennis formats in the U.S.

King often mentions the social aspects of tennis, particularly the way it helps its youngest players learn to get along. It mirrors her philosophy of life: "You hit one ball at a time and you learn the consequence of 'hitting the ball'—how it makes you adapt. Tennis teaches you to keep playing, keep going and maintain optimism in life."

It was that mentality that she brought to the formation of WTT, noting, "When we started World TeamTennis, it was about the socialization."

Her involvement with the sport continues today; she is a



have her continued influence. And as this year's inductee into the Tennis Industry Hall of Fame, she was once again the focus of the intense scrutiny and applause that has characterized her career.

King was honored at the Tennis Industry Association's Tennis Forum, held in New York City Aug. 31 during the 2010 US Open. It was a time for the industry, the media and even King herself to reflect on her career and on her accomplishments.

The world first became aware of Billie Jean King in the 1960s when as a teenager, she began playing in Grand Slams. She won her first doubles title at Wimbledon at age 17, and went on to amass 39 Grand Slam singles, doubles and mixed doubles titles, including a record 20 titles at Wimbledon (six times in singles, 14 times in doubles and mixed doubles). Other Grand Slam wins included the French Open,

member of the board of directors of the Women's Sports Foundation, and remains involved in the USTA, where she is currently the honorary chairman of the Tennis in the Parks Committee.

Her involvement with tennis on the public level stems from her first experience with the sport, which came about when a friend in fifth grade asked her to play. "If she hadn't asked me, I wouldn't have started playing," King says. She continues to promote municipal tennis programs, saying, "Get out and play and have fun."

Last year, King was awarded the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, making her the first female athlete to be so honored. During the presentation ceremony, President Obama said of King, "We honor... what she did to broaden the reach of the game, to change how women athletes and women everywhere view themselves, and to give everyone—including my two daughters—a chance to compete both on the court and in life."

King continues to push barriers not just from the sidelines, but also outside of tennis. In 2007, she co-founded GreenSlam, an environmental initiative for the sports industry. She was named Global Mentor for Gender Equality by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2008.

She continues to be a leader in the fight for equality and recognition in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community, and has been honored by organizations including the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD and the Lambda Legal Foundation. She currently serves on the board of the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Her honors and awards include the NCAA President's Gerald R. Ford Award (2009) and Major League Baseball's Beacon of Change Award (2010). In 2010, she was appointed to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition.

King's significant contributions on the court, to the sport itself, and to society were noted when in 2006, the USTA National Tennis Center, home of the US Open, was renamed the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. The court on which generations of players will set their own milestones and break their own barriers now carries the name of one of the first players to do that.

King is now the fourth person to be inducted into the Tennis Industry Hall of Fame, following Alan Schwartz in 2009 and Dennis Van der Meer and Howard Head in 2008. Plaques of the inductees hang in the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I.

She recently had double knee joint replacement, but has kept on playing tennis and has kept on enjoying the game. And she continues to advocate for youth programs, particularly at the beginner level.

"Anytime we can give the gift of tennis," says King, "we give the gift of a lifetime to children." 

