

July 6, 2010



An interview with:

BILLIE JEAN KING ILANA KLOSS

ROSIE CREWS: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us this afternoon. I appreciate it. Today is actually day two of our 35th season. We're joined by the two people who really make this league happen, and that's WTT CEO/Commissioner Ilana Kloss and the woman who co-founded the league in 1974, Billie Jean King.

As I mentioned, we started our 35th season last night with three of our first four matches finishing in a Supertiebreaker. A lot of the big names were out playing last night, Martina Hingis, Lindsay Davenport, Michael Chang kicked off their seasons. In the days and weeks ahead, we'll have Venus, Serena, James Blake, Andy Roddick, John McEnroe, John Isner, Kournikova, Sharapova, Clijsters and the Bryan brothers.

I'm going to turn it over to questions now. Direct your questions to Billie, Ilana or both.

Q. Billie Jean, I was wondering why you started WTT and why you think it's lasted 35 years.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Well, the reason we started it was we wanted tennis to be a team sport, a coed team sport, and wanted something that would last two-and-a-half to three hours. Also, more importantly, to have equality, that there be equal contribution by both genders on a level playing field. We thought it was very important for young people to see cooperation among the best players in the world, that everybody may have a chance to play for their home team some year.

There's only two No. 1's in tennis a year, that's on the female side and the male side. We think there's a place for everyone. You can be a role player.

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We have cumulative scoring, which we think is important. Every game that you win counts, whether you win your set or not. We think that is huge. Last night it proved well. As Rosie Crews said, three out of the four matches went right down to the wire last night in our Supertiebreaker. If there's a tie at the end, you go to the end, best of seven.

Everything we do is by one. We also do 1-2-3-4 in games. We want to make it simple. If you've ever come to tennis, we don't want it difficult for you to learn scoring. We think 1-2-3-4 is advantageous.

So I think it's going for 35 years because people like it. I think they like the coed. I think they like the fast pace. We have been the innovators of the sport. We've pushed the establishment to make it more fan friendly at many, many levels, playing let serves, substitutions, instant replay, on-court coaching, music between points, names on the back of players' shirts, letting fans keep the balls that are hit into the stands, multi-colored courts which is a branding thing we did in the '70s. It's different, brings fans together and it's great to play for your community.

ILANA KLOSS: Wow, that was good, Billie.

BILLIE JEAN KING: We thought about everything. We thought about from recreation all the way up to the professional. We wanted to create more business for the tennis industry, too.

Q. I guess 35 years ago when it began, what were some worries that you had and how did the league kind of endure through any concerns that you may have had for the league?

BILLIE JEAN KING: Do you want me to answer that?

ILANA KLOSS: I think you can start.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I think one of the concerns, anytime you're in the human business, like sports, it's a very high-risk endeavor. You do have to get players every year. You have to deal

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with calendar. You have to deal with all kinds of things in our sport, like every sport does.

I always think it's best to pretend you're in a tenuous position. Just as a player, you always want to stay in the now and work hard but also have goals for the future. There's no promises in any entrepreneurial business. You have to really work hard every year and also try to envision where you want to go in the future at the same time.

ILANA KLOSS: I think, just to add to what Billie Jean said, it's important that you are flexible and you can adjust. I think that, you know, we've been very good at making changes. We used to play sets to six. We now play them to five. We now change every four games instead of every odd game because we are very sensitive to people wanting to be in and out in three hours.

We also think it's important that our matches fit in a scheduled television time. We've added on-court autograph sessions for the players because we think that's really important to the kids and the fans.

I think one of the things that we've really always looked at is, How can we continue to innovate? In sport, I think World TeamTennis is thought of as the innovator of the sport and the think tank. There's nothing wrong with trying something. If it works great, you keep it. If you don't, that's okay. But to listen to the fans, to I think provide access to the sponsors and the media in a way that maybe other events can't.

I think, you know, just continue to educate. For us we find that we have a great product; we just really need communities to get out there and support it. Our season is pretty short. It's really a three-and-a-half week season with 73 matches, including regular-season playoffs and the championship match. It comes and goes very fast.

So I think it's really huge that we get support from the media and get out in the community so that people get excited about it and don't miss half the season.

So I think that is a challenge, having a short season, compared to other team sports. But then you look at tournaments, and they're only in a community for a week at a time. We really are in their community for the full season. Not only are we there during the season, but we are on a year-round basis, whether it's doing clinics, whether it's visiting schools, doing the draft. So there are different opportunities.

But I think just getting people to understand that we really are a fabric of the community and this team is their team.

Q. I wanted to know, where does the league stand right now in terms of goals and expectations?

ILANA KLOSS: You know, I think I'll take that to start.

I think one of the big goals is really to try to increase the value of every franchise, obviously get more fans to see the product. Then I think as it relates to the U.S., we feel right now 10 to 12 teams is probably the best number. We don't want to expand and dilute the player field, so we continue to look at that.

I think the other piece which we actually started on this year is international expansion. We had a match in Australia, Australia versus the Rest of the World, during the Australian Open. We have had many discussions with many countries throughout the world.

I think hopefully in the next three to five years you will see the expansion of World TeamTennis to include the rest of the world. I think that was one of the reasons why it was called 'World TeamTennis' when it started. I think we've focused on the U.S. and obviously have players from all over the world. But I think the next phase is to have some international expansion, whether it's league play in those countries, matches like a Ryder Cup scenario, and then of course to increase the value of the existing franchises here in the U.S.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Also that match in Australia went to Supertiebreaker. Couldn't have been any better.

The one thing we're really proud of, we have three generations that play. We want to keep the players in the game as long as possible. The one great thing about our format is that an older player in their twilight years can still play a set against anyone. If they had to play three-out-of-five for the guys, two-out-of-three for the women, they couldn't keep up. For one set, they can play, contribute in a huge way as a star for their team.

I like to keep the players in the game as long as possible. It's very sad when most players are retiring now in their late 20s and early 30s. This is a way to keep them in the game, let the fans continue to watch their favorite players as

well.

Also it's very important to take tennis to the people. For young people, they get to see the best in the world. When I was growing up in Long Beach, I wanted to know how good is good or how good is great. I got to see the best players in the world every year the week after the U.S. Nationals, which is now known as the US Open, in Los Angeles. That made a huge difference in my life.

That's why it's very important that we take tennis to the people through World TeamTennis and help kids think about teamwork and helping each other.

Q. Billie Jean, how important do you think the King/Riggs match was for the women's movement and how much pressure did you feel?

BILLIE JEAN KING: At the time it was perfect. It was 1973 when women still couldn't get a credit card on their own. Title IX had been passed 1972, the year before. But more importantly, for this discussion here today, it put tennis on the map. Particularly the men's and the women's game benefited so very much.

I think people keep forgetting that the ATP got their first big TV contract after I beat Riggs, and so did the women. We had our explosion of participation in this country after that match.

So for the sport alone, it was the difference I think in helping professional tennis in this country and also recreational tennis. But I also think it helped start changes and minds and hearts of people that they insist on their daughters and sons have equal opportunity.

Q. How much pressure did you feel?

BILLIE JEAN KING: A lot (laughter). A tremendous amount. I had to win. I still get very nervous just thinking about it, 'cause it was a one-time deal. It wasn't gonna ever happen again. That puts a lot more pressure on you than, for instance, if you don't win a World TeamTennis championship one year, you go, Well, there's always next year. Or winning Wimbledon, you say, Well, next year.

Well, I knew that wasn't a possibility. It was a one-shot deal. Heavyweight boxing match, that was it. One shot.

Q. What would have happened if you had lost?

BILLIE JEAN KING: I don't want to think about it (laughter).

I have thought about it. That means every day I walk out the door I would have lost to Bobby Riggs the rest of my life and I don't think it would have helped at all. I think it would have given people a chance to weaken Title IX, because people have tried to weaken it throughout the years.

I've thought about it, but I don't like to think about it. But then I say, It's only a match. It's probably nothing.

ROSIE CREWS: Well, you won, so don't feel nervous.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Okay.

Q. Billie, I heard players say before why they play World TeamTennis, How do you say no to Billie Jean? So many players are onboard because of their respect for you. Do you call each marquee player and do you get many rejections?

BILLIE JEAN KING: I do not call one player to play. I have nothing to do with player recruitment. I purposely stay out of it. Sam Shaw at our office, and Ilana somewhat, are the only I think two that get involved in recruitment. Is that true, Ilana? I stay out of it purposely. I do not get involved.

The players, I want them to either play because they want to play for a city, I want them to play because it's a team, I want them to play because they want to and they think it's good for them. If they happen to do it for Ilana, for me, Ilana also played World TeamTennis, so a lot of players know her through the years. She played at Wimbledon on Centre Court on Friday or Saturday I guess. So she's still very involved in playing, as well, sometimes. The players have a real respect for her as well.

Also, they respect the fact that we're trying to help tennis. They really do. It's amazing how a lot of the players love the fact we're trying to make a difference in these communities throughout the country. Maybe they play for me once in a while because we have a relationship. As everyone knows, relationships are important. I always thank them if they play, but that's after the fact, after they sign up, they've been drafted, they've signed. If I happen to see them at a tournament, if I want to send them a text message or something, I will say, Thank you for playing. But I do not get involved in

recruitment or anything.

ILANA KLOSS: You know, I think, look, there's no question that having Billie as the co-founder of this league, heavily involved, is a major plus and a major asset. But I think in a way, you know, Billie Jean has always led and she's been an amazing mentor to a lot of players.

I think they see what she has done by giving back. I think, you know, part of it is giving back to the sport, part of it is being on a team, because it is a different experience, something that they don't get to do very often. I think every time they do do it, they really have a great time. So I think all of those things are important.

And don't forget, they're well-paid. I mean, the marquee players and the roster players are paid. I think it's a combination.

But there's no question that having Billie Jean involved and behind it is a huge asset. But I think it's more in a role of a mentor and, you know, teaching people that it's really important to respect the history and what came before you and also it's hugely important to give back and get more kids involved in the sport, that when you do give back you actually end up gaining a lot.

I think it's a combination of, you know, three or four things.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I challenge them. If any of you watched the women's final, when Serena was speaking, she said, "I got you, Billie." You know, I've been challenging her to go ahead of my 12 singles, and she tied me in Australia. Then I saw her in Australia. I said, Well, I expect you to beat my record now in singles. I'm always challenging the players to do better. I'm a big believer in that.

They look at you like you're crazy sometimes, but they get it. If I can instill that in them, maybe they'll pass their different knowledge and different motivation and inspiration they can give others.

Q. Ilana, do you get many rejections?

ILANA KLOSS: Yeah. I mean, you know, I think we go after every single player, from current to past. Sure we do. But, you know, we keep going back. Billie Jean always taught me that when somebody says no, it just means they don't have enough information. That has served me very well in my role, whether it's getting players or sponsors or anything. I think it's a great attitude to have.

So, sure we do. Sometimes it doesn't fit. We've had some players play who really truly are

not team players and they don't have a great experience. So they try it and we move on. But I think, you know, what we're trying to do is get some of the very best players in the world to visit communities that they might never visit otherwise.

I think so many events have left America, tournaments, the sport now is truly global. Asia, Russia, new Europe, it's huge. We're able to fill a void in America and we think it's hugely important for young kids to be able to see the very best in their backyard and in their local communities. You know, that's why we feel that these players are really bringing something special to these local communities who might never get live professional tennis.

But, again, yeah, I mean, we get rejected all the time.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Don't take it personally.

ILANA KLOSS: That's another thing Billie Jean said, Don't ever take it personally. So we move on.

The great thing is there are so many great players, not only the marquee players. I think sometimes people forget we are able to bring in some of the up-and-coming top kids, bring them to professional tennis, their first experience. Maria Sharapova, 14 years old, played World TeamTennis. You know, you can go through the list of players.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Roddick.

ILANA KLOSS: I think our job is to really, you know, showcase the young, the current and the past. So we focus not only on the marquee players; we really do try to focus on all levels. I think sometimes the roster players get forgotten, but they make a huge contribution to the team.

BILLIE JEAN KING: They're the backbone night in and night out. We have like 2000 rankings for the men, 1500 rankings for the women. There are so many great players that aren't appreciated. I think we're a great format to highlight those players as well.

We've got Vijay Amritraj's kid (Prakash Amritraj) playing for Philadelphia this year. His dad played a lot of TeamTennis. It's pretty nice. Now getting the second generation of TeamTennis players, it's nice. I like that, too. It's fun to see the kids grow up and end up playing something one of their parents played. I think it's terrific.

You know, we really depend on you, the media, to get our message out. I know Ilana and I

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want to thank you for being on this call, but more importantly really supporting the team, really trying to help sell tickets and get the information out there correctly and make a big difference to us. We know it's tougher on you all the time the way the world's going. We really appreciate everything you do for us.

Q. Ilana, the Philadelphia Freedom have changed venues. What will determine whether they stay at Villanova?

ILANA KLOSS: You know, I think our intention is to stay at Villanova long-term. That has always been one of the premiere sites for tennis in Philadelphia, the Advanta Women's Championships was there for many years. It's actually a venue that we have looked at for quite a while.

BILLIE JEAN KING: We couldn't get it.

ILANA KLOSS: We couldn't get it due to I think improvements, basketball camps. So I think our goal is to be there long-term.

Look, we had a great experience at the mall. Again that is part of taking tennis to the people. When you have a condensed season of three-and-a-half weeks, you have 73 matches to get in, having an indoor venue is huge because you know that this match is going to happen and there's not going to be any delays.

We love the venue. We think people in Philadelphia are familiar with it as it relates to tennis. So, you know, a lot of thought went into making the move. I think we are looking forward to staying there long-term.

Q. Billie Jean, I wanted to get your impressions on Serena Williams passing you last week.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I think it's great. I think her next goal now should be to beat Chris and Martina's 18 singles, then thereafter she can go on to Steffi Graf. There's no reason Serena Williams shouldn't be the greatest woman player that's ever played.

Every generation I think gets better usually. Up to this time the greatest singles, doubles and mixed player has been Martina Navratilova. I think the greatest singles player up to this time has been Graf. There's no reason that Serena can't surpass some goals of people.

I still think it's very important. I think everyone emphasizes the majors so much. In the old days when he we played, we emphasized the tour a lot more. That's when we had over 40

tournaments and TeamTennis in this country, when we were doing our best. It really gets back to making sure we have tennis in the community, TeamTennis, Fed Cups, Davis Cups in our communities because it's the only way we're going to get our kids inspired. I think they have to see live. They cannot just read about it and cannot just see it. But I think reading about it's important for their imagination. I just wish we had more tennis in this country.

The one great thing about TeamTennis is our format is used in collegiate intramural tennis now, campus tennis. Our format, I don't know if you realize it, how over the years they're using our TeamTennis format more and more and more in tennis, particularly at the grassroots. I think it's really going to help young people get into our sport.

I do not think our sport can be big in this country if it isn't a team sport when they sign up to play. That's been my mantra forever since I started because I grew up in team sports. I think I understand the psyche of America. I think when children sign up to play, it's got to be team. That transition is a very hard thing to do because lessons, you got to get rid of the word 'lesson'. I think if you're put on a team as a child, like you are in soccer and other sports, I think the children are going to stay in the sport and have more fun if they're on a team. They want to play with their friends and have fun.

Q. Billie, you touched on it earlier, but can you describe the growth of the sport here in Philadelphia from what you see.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I grew up going to Philadelphia since I was 15. Are you talking about different sports?

Q. Tennis.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Tennis? We need more tennis in Philly. We're the only professional tennis in Philadelphia, TeamTennis. That's what Ilana was alluding to when she talked about how many teams we lost between a lot of tournaments going to Asia, new Europe, wherever. It's amazing. We need to keep professional tennis there.

Philadelphia has always had such a rich history in our sport from the very beginning. You think about Bill Tilden. When I used to play the grass court circuit, it was Merion Cricket Club,

Philadelphia Cricket Club, Germantown Cricket Club, it was all in the area of Philadelphia.

So tennis really has been, as far as the United States of America, it's been in Philadelphia as long as any city in this country. It's played a huge role in our sport, whether we've had our indoors, the Advanta Championships for the women, playing the Virginia Slims Tour there back in the old days at the Palestra, you know, it's got a huge, really rich history. So we've been very fortunate in Philadelphia. I want to keep a team there. Obviously, we have a signature song already.

ILANA KLOSS: That's pretty cool that Elton John wrote a song for Philadelphia.

BILLIE JEAN KING: It's pretty nice we have that song, too.

Q. Billie Jean, what do you think the state of tennis is in the United States? What are you proudest of in your life?

BILLIE JEAN KING: The first question is, sports are a microcosm of society. It just shows how much more competition there is in the world. When I was playing, we didn't have to compete against everybody in the world. Now it's a truly global sport, so the competition's much greater, just like it is for our children in every other area, whether it be in science or technology or whatever you talk about.

So we have to work that much harder. We have to get kids who are eager. We have to get good athletes in our sport if we're going to win globally.

Secondly, I'm not finished yet, so I don't know what I'm going to be most proud of. I know that TeamTennis will be way up at the top because I love coed teams. There's not too many coed pro sports in the world. I think we might have been the first. Don't quote me because I'm not sure. But we're pretty much up there.

I really think when you look at what I've done conceptually, I think it's one of my proudest things I've ever done. It's the coed, it's the gender equity, it's the contribution, and the socialization for young people, which I think is absolutely vital what we're teaching them without them realizing it, it's even more fun. That's the fun part, they don't know it. They're learning through experience.

ROSIE CREWS: Well, Billie Jean may not be finished, but our call is. Thank you, all, again for joining the call today. Thank you, Billie and Ilana, for taking the time.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Thank you.

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ILANA KLOSS: Thank you. Without you guys, nobody would know what we do. We greatly appreciate your support.

ROSIE CREWS: Thank you, everyone. Have a great day.

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