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The Battle of the Sexes

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE – The Battle of the Sexes
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I am a bit mystified by the amount of attention that is given to the Billie Jean King defeat of Bobby Riggs in the “Battle of the Sexes.” I remember it well, and it seemed to me to be some sort of fraud being perpetrated on the American public by a fifty-five-year-old con man in tennis shorts. Bobby Riggs was a hustler, and the “Battle of the Sexes” may have been the biggest hustle he ever pulled.

Did anyone really think that this blowhard could beat the great Billie Jean King? Certainly I didn't. Nor could I seriously regard it as sporting event of any kind. It was theater orchestrated by Bobby Riggs who manipulated Billie Jean King into a position that made it impossible for her to decline his challenge.

Riggs inserted himself into the discussion of the equality of women in sport, however his contribution was not a serious part of the discussion, but simply a means to exploit the discussion for his own purpose. He proclaimed himself the biggest male chauvinist in the world, ridiculed the idea that women were in any way equal to men, and scoffed at the idea of equal pay for women in sport.

Riggs was able to entice Margaret Court into a match on Mother's Day, which he won. Then, he threw down the challenge to Billie Jean King. Television, being television, got on board to exploit the Riggs pageant. The site of the match with King was the Houston Astrodome. ABC televised the event live, hosted by Howard Cosell, playing a caricature of himself. It was a perfect Roone Arledge faux sports production.

Riggs' bluster over his cartoonish “feminist” issues finally forced King to accept his challenge. His boasting was preposterous, but it was effective, eye catching, and suckered the media into doing his promotional work for him. For some reason, and there may have been many, Riggs was given major coverage. His boasts were repeated endlessly and his face seemed to be all over the sports pages and television. It was nearly impossible to escape his omnipotent media presence.

The event opened with King being carried into the Astrodome on a litter by four men, a la Cleopatra, while Riggs arrived in a rickshaw pulled by scantily clad young women. King presented Riggs with a pig, acknowledging him as the male chauvinist pig he claimed to be.

Riggs reciprocated with a “Sugar Daddy,” a candy sucker. It was a circus, no more and no less. King dispatched Riggs in straight sets and that was that.

For me, it was an interesting and amusing diversion. The outcome was a forgone conclusion. For the bookmakers, it was a chance to fleece gullible men who somehow thought Bobby Riggs at age 55 could beat the best woman tennis player in the world. They set the odds in Riggs’ favor and no doubt profited handsomely. When it was over, there were some men who refused to accept reality and insisted Riggs had thrown the match.

Some have argued that this spectacle was in some way a referendum on Title IX. In point of fact, it had nothing to do with Title IX or its enforcement and in no way affected it. Title IX was passed the previous year, and its enforcement was still several court cases and administrative decisions down the road.

And yet over the last forty years with the success of Title IX and the growth of women’s sport at all levels of competition, the King/Riggs circus has become a marker of sorts. As the claim that the event was a turning point in Women’s Sport was made, and as it was described repeatedly as a symbolic event, more and more people have come to accept it as such.

What people believe to be true is often more important than the reality of events. These myths overtake the facts, casting them in a new light, giving them a meaning they did not have in the original iteration. Myths are a set of beliefs and a lens through which we see reality and interpret it. Myth in this sense is not a judgement about truth; it is simply a belief that shapes perception.

Myth gives meaning to our world, and we use it to navigate through the forest of facts and information. The historical accounts of the “Battle of the Sexes” have embraced the mythic interpretations. The biographical sketches of Billie Jean King all cast the event in Houston as some major turning point in history.

Now, the myth surrounding the “Battle of the Sexes” is about to get yet another infusion of power from Hollywood with the release of the feature film at the end of this week. The mythic power of the event is such that the estimated size of the television audience that watched it on television has grown over the decades from initial estimates of 60 million to recent reports that place the number at 90 million viewers.

Prior to the release of the film, the studio promotional machine has been in high gear. Billie Jean King is being interviewed in all forms of media. The recollections of the circus in the Astrodome

are being told over and over again across all media platforms. The significance of the event is being stated over and over again, although it is not always clear what precisely that might be. In most accounts, the King/Riggs challenge match is identified as a historical turning point of considerable significance.

I certainly don't remember it in that way, but as a historian, I know that when a critical mass of people come to accept a particular version of events, then it becomes "true." What actually happened in Houston in 1973 is no longer the issue. What people believe happened has supplanted any meaning the original might have had and that carries significance in its own right. So be it.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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