

# BILLIE JEAN KING

b. November 22, 1943

*“I think self-awareness is probably the most important thing towards being a champion.”*

For her contributions to the advancement of women's sports, Life magazine named Billie Jean King one of the “100 Most Important Americans of the 20th Century.” A tennis champion and advocate for gender equality in sports, King has become an icon and a legend.

Despite her mother's attempts to steer her toward more feminine pursuits, King demonstrated exceptional aptitude in sports at a young age. She purchased her first tennis racket at the age of 12. Of her first tennis lesson she recalls, “I knew I'd found what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

In 1961, at age 17, King won her first grand slam title at Wimbledon in the women's doubles tournament. She became known for her aggressive style and personality. In 1966, she won her first of 12 Grand Slam singles titles.

An outspoken advocate against sexism in sports, King hoped to use sports for social change. She campaigned for equal prize awards for male and female tennis players after receiving \$15,000 less in prize money than her male counterpart in the 1972 U.S. Open. King threatened to boycott the 1973 tournament. The following year, the U.S. Open became the first major tournament to award equal prize money to male and female champions.

In 1973, King became the first woman to defeat a former male Wimbledon champion in “The Battle of the Sexes.” The Women's Tennis Association named King its first president that same year. In 1974, King cofounded WomenSports Magazine and began the Women's Sports Foundation.

King struggled to come to terms with her sexuality. During her 22-year marriage, she had an intimate affair with her assistant, Marilyn Barnett. Pressured by the threat of losing her career, King remained in the closet until 1981 when Barnett sued her for palimony. Though King won the lawsuit, the court battle left her financially and emotionally drained. Despite calling the affair a mistake, King lost almost all of her commercial sponsors.

King publicly came out in 1988. Since then, she has helped further the visibility and inclusion of the GLBT community. She currently serves on the board of the Elton John AIDS Foundation and the National AIDS Fund.



**Considered one of the greatest female athletes, Billie Jean King has won 12 Grand Slam singles titles.**

**glat**  
**HISTORY**  
**MONTH**

[www.glbthistorymonth.com](http://www.glbthistorymonth.com)

Copyright ©2007 – A Project of Equality Forum