

THE LIFE & TIMES OF BOBBY RIGGS



**THE
LAST
SURE THING**

BY TOM LECOMPTE

THE LAST SURETHING

THE LIFE & TIMES OF BOBBY RIGGS

BY TOM LECOMPTE



SKUNKWORKS PUBLISHING
EASTHAMPTON, MA

© 2003 Tom LeCompte. Printed and bound in the United States of America. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information please contact Skunkworks Publishing, 116 Pleasant Street, #10, Easthampton, MA 01027.

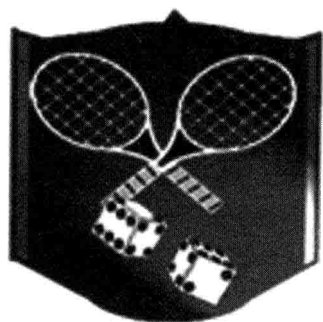
FIRST EDITION

ISBN 0-9711213-0-7

LCCN 2002096085

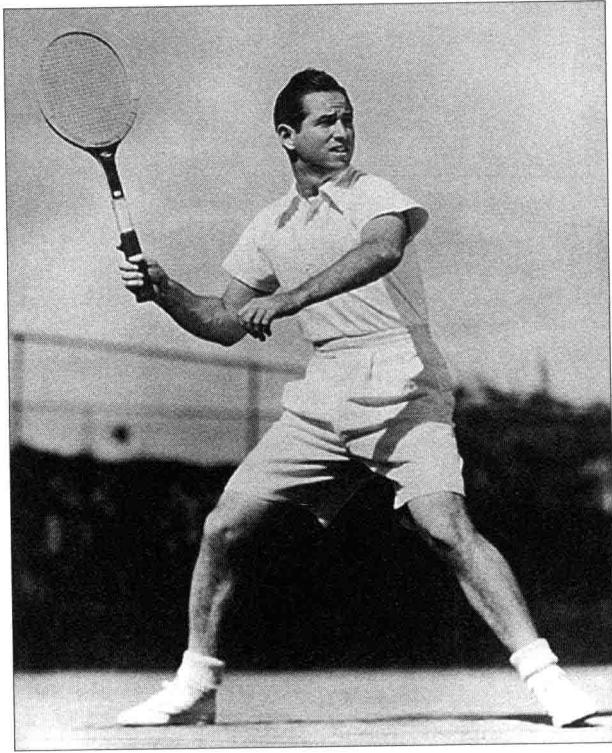
www.bobbyriggs.com

Cover Design by Stacey Davis, Blend-In, Venice, CA



**THE
LAST
SURE THING**

TO MY FATHER:
“STRAIGHT AND TRUE”



Publicity photo of Bobby taken around 1940.

Foreword

Asked once what he'd like his epitaph to be, Bobby Riggs joked: "He Put Women on the Map." Doubtless, he will forever be remembered as the motor-mouthed antagonist to Billie Jean King in their "Battle of the Sexes" challenge in 1973, a match that became a watershed event in women's sports and made tennis history as the most-watched match ever, with more than 30,000 inside the Houston Astrodome and another 90 million worldwide watching on television.

But Bobby Riggs was more than that.

Showman, hustler, huckster, Bobby Riggs was one of the great characters in modern sports—a hardscrabble kid in a highbrow, "sissy" game; the son of a fundamentalist minister; a compulsive gambler; a self-proclaimed male chauvinist whose only mentors in the game were women; a short, wispy-haired fellow with a squeaky voice, a bad haircut, and horned-rimmed glasses who became, somehow, a sex symbol.

Stories about Bobby are legion—stories that manage to grow a bit funnier, a bit more preposterous with each retelling. How he won his first racquet in a game of marbles. How on his first and only trip to Wimbledon in 1939, he won a small fortune on a longshot bet that he'd win the men's singles, men's doubles, and mixed doubles titles. Or how, as an over-the-hill, 55-year-old player, he hustled games by playing around an obstacle course of chairs

scattered on his side of the court. Or while wearing an overcoat and snowshoes. Or leashed to a lion cub.

Bobby's contests were not limited to tennis. In 1984, he challenged professional golfer Marilyn Smith to a game in which he was allowed to throw the ball at the green 18 times during the match. In 1975, Bobby ran a 50-mile race across Death Valley against long-distance runner Bill Emmerton, a race in which Emmerton gave Bobby a 25-mile head start. In 1974, Bobby bet daredevil Evel Knievel \$25,000 that he could ride a motorcycle from Las Vegas to Twin Falls, Idaho, where Knievel was to attempt his ill-fated jump across the Snake River Canyon (Bobby arrived in time to see Knievel's rocket-powered motorcycle sink beneath the canyon rim, and said, "Oh, my god! Evel is gone and my \$25,000 with him!"). In 1983, Bobby played a game of tennis strip tease against six women from the Washington, D.C. Board of Realtors—a piece of clothing per point.

The stories themselves became commodities. For a price, you could have your own Bobby Riggs story. At a hundred dollars a shot, Bobby would take on all comers in these goofy handicap matches. After taking their money, he would hand back an "I Was Hustled by Bobby Riggs" button. It was a badge of honor, like being able to claim you had struck out against Roger Clemens. If you didn't have the time, energy, or inclination to actually play tennis, you could send Bobby the \$100 and he'd send you back a button. By the time of his match against Billie Jean King, the stories had become the man, each one adding to the myth, the enterprise that was Bobby.

"If I can't play for big money, I play for a little money. And if I can't play for a little money, I stay in bed that day," Bobby told *60 Minutes'* Mike Wallace in 1973.

Bobby was the "Bad Boy of Tennis" long before players such as John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors inherited the mantle—a nickname slapped on him by the press in the Thirties because of his brashness, his penchant for dice and cards, and his feuds with the tennis establishment. The game was a sport for amateurs then, and those who ran it expected the players to be modest and wholesome. There was no prize money. A system of under-the-

table payments evolved that allowed the players to make ends meet, while perpetuating the power of the amateur authorities.

Bobby, however, was too brash and too blatant about taking the covert payments. At one point, he was nearly banned from the game—not for his gambling, which today would have gotten him ousted from sports faster than you can say, “Pete Rose,” but for “professionalism.”

After a stint in the Navy during World War II, Bobby turned professional. Along with Jack Kramer, Pancho Segura, Pancho Gonzalez, and a handful of other players, he barnstormed across the nation playing tennis in a series of one-night stands in auditoriums, hockey rinks, high-school gymnasiums, any place they could fit their portable canvas court. The success of these tours in the Forties and Fifties laid the foundation for the rest of the game to turn professional in 1968.

Bobby officially retired from tennis in 1952. He married a rich girl and got a regular job. His days as a top player behind him, he should have faded into obscurity. He likely would have had it not been for his intense competitive drive, his knack for showmanship and self-promotion, and a little luck. Following the end of a turbulent 20-year marriage, his “comeback” in the early 1970s launched a whole new tennis career for him—one short on athleticism, but long on bravado.

As sport, the Bobby Riggs-Billie Jean King match meant absolutely nothing. This was about spectacle, not tennis.

Nevertheless, for the fledgling women’s tennis tour and the larger women’s movement, it was a watershed event. It was both a social and political statement, a declaration of presence. And for a nation weary of the Vietnam War and the ordeal of Watergate being played out each day on television, it provided a much-needed distraction.

Afterwards, Bobby discovered he could make a good living just being himself: playing tennis exhibitions, doing his wacky challenges, traveling the country, hustling at whatever and with whomever came his way. So what if most people considered him a wise-guy, an aging buffoon? He was having the time of his life,

and attracting more attention than he ever had when he was at the top of his game.

Had it not been for that one spectacular loss to King, he might also have been remembered as a gifted athlete, a sportsman, and a genuine champion. Though scrappy and brash, he dominated the game in both the amateur and pro ranks. He also had a knack for being in the right place at the right time, with a career that traces the evolution of the modern game.

Bobby died Oct. 25, 1995, from prostate cancer. He was 77. Though no one would call him a beloved sports figure, he was in his way lovable—a genial rogue, a perpetual adolescent who was able to both aggravate and endear. He was a character, a man addicted to competition and the challenge of a contest—any contest. It was this love, this addiction that propelled him to the top of the tennis world and later made him an international celebrity and a social icon.

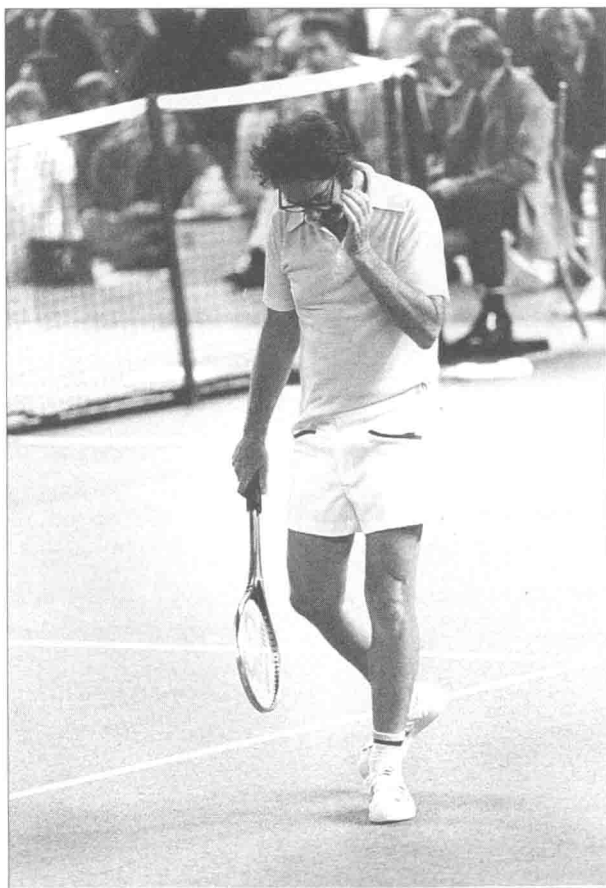
Writing his own best epitaph, Bobby once said, “The best thing in life is to win. The second best thing in life is to lose... at least you’re in the game.” In Bobby’s case, he usually won, but he made sure he was always in the game.

Contents

Foreword	iii
1. <i>A Pig Lost in the Astrodome</i>	3
2. "Strangers to the things that disturb us"	13
3. <i>Tennis: Game of Kings and Sissies</i> 1918-1932	25
4. <i>A Man's Game</i> 1932-1936	47
5. <i>Playing By Their Rules</i> 1936-1938	69
6. "Who's going to feed the Fire Dragon today?" 1938	89
7. "I felt I had really arrived." 1939	105
8. "Never did a champion lose his crown more gracefully." 1940	127
9. <i>Of Nerve and Endurance</i> 1941	145
10. <i>A Wonderful War</i> April 1943-September 1945	161
11. <i>The Quest for the \$100,000 Plum</i> 1945-1947	181
12. <i>Duel of the Decade</i> 1948-1949	195
13. <i>The End of the Road</i> 1950-1952	213
14. "Give me a millionaire every time." 1952-1954	233
15. "There's no winning here." 1952-1971	249
16. <i>The Greatest Salesman of All Time</i> 1952-1971	271
17. <i>Hype of the Century</i> 1972-1973	287

Contents

18. <i>Both Separate and Unequal</i>	
1973	313
19. <i>The Merchants of Tennis</i>	
1973	323
20. <i>The Unthinkable Happens</i>	
1973	351
21. <i>Tennis, Everyone</i>	
1973-1976	367
22. <i>The Happy Hustler</i>	
1973-1983	377
23. <i>"We can get through this."</i>	
1974-1991	399
24. <i>Nature's Cruellest Trick</i>	
1991-1995	413
Afterword	429
 Photo Credits	 437
Reference Notes	438
Acknowledgements	461
Index	464



After letting the whole thing get so big, Bobby suddenly realized that his life from then on would be about losing to Billie Jean King.

1

A Pig Lost in the Astrodome

Everyone's gone: the pretty girls, the reporters, the wheeler-dealers, the groupies, the deadbeats, and the hangers-on. All gone. In an oversized suite at the Astroworld Hotel in Houston it's just Bobby Riggs, alone with the sound of his own breathing and the steady drip of water into the tub. In the silence, he tries to soothe his aching limbs and contemplate how everything had gone so wrong.

Just a couple of hours earlier, he was the toast of the town, the center of attention. What began as his little con, his male-chauvinist pig rant, had snowballed into a nationwide obsession. For weeks, everywhere he went he was surrounded. People wanted to shake his hand, to wish him well, to get him to say something funny, or to tell him to drop dead. Some just wanted to bask in the reflected glow of his dervish charm.

Now, all his plans lay in ruins. Like a grand illusion constructed by a master magician, it had suddenly disappeared in a flash of light and smoke.

With the screams of thousands still ringing in his ears, he replayed points in his head like they were a bad dream. He saw himself running for a ball—a ball he had run for a million times before. He knew just what to do. The point was his. But suddenly the ball's past him. He was nowhere near it. Point, Billie Jean King.

Point after point after point.

It was as if he were having an out-of-body experience. Disbelievingly, he recalled the missed groundstrokes, the blown volleys, and the double faults. *Double faults!* There was a time he went months without double-faulting. His whole game was based on not making mistakes. He even had a name for it: *Airtight Tennis*. Don't waste energy. Don't waste a shot. Don't waste a point. Don't give anything away. Let the other guy make all the mistakes.

Not tonight. Not this match. This time, it was he who made all the mistakes.

Here was Bobby Riggs, the best pressure player in the world playing in the biggest match of his life. What does he do? He blows it. It wasn't even close. Billie Jean won in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. All she had to do was show up. Unbelievable.

Sitting there, he felt tired. He felt sore. He felt angry. But most of all, he felt... *old*.

It had all started as a provocation, a taunt. The women on the Tour had been agitating for years for a more equitable share of the prize money from professional tennis. Tennis officials and tournament promoters took the position that the women didn't deserve it, that they played an inferior game to the men. Bobby agreed, and decided to prove it. He threw out a challenge that he, Bobby Riggs, an over-the-hill, 55-year-old player with one foot in the grave, could beat the world's best female player.

He did.

Four months earlier, on May 13, 1973, he defeated—no, destroyed—top woman pro Margaret Court in less than an hour, 6-2, 6-1. The press dubbed it the “Mother's Day Massacre.” In winning, Bobby struck a blow for middle-aged men everywhere and, with his sexist prattle, a raw nerve among women. Suddenly, he became a cultural icon, the center of a national debate that pitted men against women, young against old, husbands against wives, bosses against secretaries, fathers against daughters.

Bobby Riggs, however, was no ordinary tennis hacker fumbling through a mid-life crisis. Twenty-five years earlier, he had been the best player in the world. He won at Wimbledon, twice at Forest Hills (now the U.S. Open), and was a three-time U.S. professional

champion. Known for his exquisite touch and movement, Bobby Riggs was a tenacious competitor and a strategist who made a career outsmarting bigger, stronger opponents.

People had been selling him short ever since he was a boy: "The kid's too small," "The kid's too weak," "The kid's too loud," "The kid will get what's coming to him." What they didn't know, what none of them knew, was that he was programmed to be a champion. Growing up the son of a fundamentalist minister, tutored by his sports-crazed older brothers, competition had been a way of life for young Bobby. His brothers taught him how to hit, how to catch, and how to run. Bobby's earliest memory was of running a race against an older boy in the neighborhood, a race arranged by his brothers in which Bobby's opponent got a head start. As he grew older, the fierce desire to win became a life force in him.

Then there was his nerve. Bobby thrived under pressure. Indeed, he depended on it. Over the years, he proved time and again that he could never be counted out of a match, no matter how overmatched or how far down.

And, of course, there was his gambling. After all, what is gambling but competition in its most refined form? Who has the ability? Who has the nerve? Who can lay it all on the line and rise to the occasion? Bobby's competitiveness and his compulsion to bet became inextricably intertwined. Betting became fuel for Bobby's competitive engine. If the magnitude of the moment couldn't keep his interest, a good bet always did the trick. To prove it, Bobby once said he never played a tennis match in which he didn't have a bet riding on the outcome. Though certainly an exaggeration, there were enough bets on enough matches that it could have been true.

So what did Bobby know about women's liberation? Nothing, really. What did he care? They were just good lines, a handy gimmick when his second marriage blew up and he was looking for something to do. He had been out of circulation for 20 years. He had quit tennis, slicked back his hair, put on a suit and tie, and got a "real" job. He had raised a family and lived in the suburbs. He had gone straight and played the other guy's game.

But he never lost his competitiveness and his love of the spotlight. Once on his own, he had something to prove. He knew