

Roland Garros

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Paris, France

Billie Jean King

Press Conference



ROLAND-GARROS

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, and thanks for attending.

You can ask your questions.

Q. I am from Norway, and this is the first time we have a finalist at Roland Garros.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Ruud, baby.

Q. Most people don't know we have a time winner of the US National Championship, Molla Mallory.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Okay.

Q. Do you know anything about her? Have you ever met her?

BILLIE JEAN KING: I missed meeting her, but I have met many of them. Right now I'm in the middle of doing another book on women's tennis. I just finished my book, autobiography. But I have also been working on a second edition of the history of women's tennis. She's in there a lot, because I always love my history.

Now I'm going, what do I know about Mallory? I did not get to meet her but I did get to meet many, many -- most of the players I met were probably from the '30s on. I think Mallory, was she in the '20s?

Q. '20s.

BILLIE JEAN KING: First World War? That's my memory, yeah, but that's good. I hope you mention it, because a lot of times, particularly the older players, and particularly women, are forgotten. I don't think a lot of people even know Suzanne Lenglen was the first superstar. Forget gender or forget male or female. It's great. We should be talking about Mallory.

That's a good point, especially now that Mr. Ruud, who is not rude, he's great (smiling). He's adorable. I love it when Scandinavians do well. It's good. Norwegian is good, Norway, equality, very good.

Q. In these days, I have heard Gilles Moretton talking about trying to go back to the traditional Davis Cup. Since Davis Cup and BJK --

BILLIE JEAN KING: Cup?

Q. -- are more or less in sort of the same path with the same company maybe behind, do you think he's right to try to get back the Davis Cup the way it was? Are you happy about the Billie Jean Cup, the way it is? What would you do to eventually change it? He suggested -- and this is the last part of my question -- he suggested that each slam should put 10 million Euros to find better prize money and take the thing under the umbrella of the ITF. What do you think?

BILLIE JEAN KING: Take it under the ITF or get it away from? I'm not clear. Work together, you mean?

Q. The slams and the ITF all together. (Question about going back to the traditional Davis Cup.)

BILLIE JEAN KING: It's very interesting you say that, because everybody is in an uproar. They did not change the format, because everybody was complaining about it took too much time the old way. They were complaining about the money, which has been rectified.

So the ITF went and did like so much research with the players, with associations, with everybody. They said, You've got to shorten it. You've got to have equal prize money, you have to shorten it, you have to do all this. They did all that, and now everyone is unhappy.

I think it always should be discussed, always, because there is no reason not to change something if we think it will work better for our sport.

The thing I want for our sport, which I don't think a lot of people think about enough, how do we get young people, how do we keep the audiences to want to come? Because we know with computers and IT and AI and all that now, how are we going to get them to come to matches? How are we going to get live audiences? These are things we have to work on hard now.

What do the kids know? They can only concentrate seven seconds. I think it's something we have to think about.

As far as the Davis Cup, Billie Jean King Cup, I think we should look at it again. I want you to know why they changed it. Why did you change it? We spent years talking to everybody, they are not happy, it takes too much time. So they changed it because they listened,

and everybody is unhappy.

So I think we should just always go to the drawing board. I know Dave Haggerty and Heather, all the people are happy to sit down and listen always. I must tell you, working with them has been a huge surprise to me. They are fantastic.

They have so much to worry about. They've got all the countries, you know, developing our sport at the grassroots level. Then the ITF tournaments, these kids are trying to get started, they help them with coaching, obviously the prize money, help give them money. I think Ons Jabeur spoke, if it hadn't been for the ITF, she wouldn't have had these opportunities. When you get in there and start to learn all the things they do, my perception has definitely changed.

To your point, let's just look at it again. Always. Always be open, always be open. And listen to each other. Please.

Q. Final today, Coco Gauff against Iga Swiatek. I know you have been here a few days, spent a little bit of time with them. What do you think of them as players, players for the future, and people?

BILLIE JEAN KING: I think they are amazing. I think they are fantastic. I think they both have different personalities, different games, which I always think is good.

Iga, you know, when I saw her win here during -- I always say during COVID, I wondered how she's going to hold up. She held up amazing. What's she up to, 35 straight matches or something?

What makes her interesting is her forehand is so different from her backhand and her serve is getting better. She's actually quite quick. I wasn't sure about her, how fast she was, but she is pretty quick. That's what you want in a champion. She really wants it.

But so does Coco Gauff. That's what you want. You feel they are in it, they want to be the best. They are not going to be satisfied with less.

I love the fact that Coco uses tennis as a platform for social change and to help others. Of course, do I like that? Of course I like that (smiling). I always want every generation, both men and women, to step up, because sports is politics. Politics is sport. So anybody who doesn't think so, I don't agree with them. They could be right; I could be wrong. Sports is politics. Because people go, Well, you're in sports. It's different.

I don't know why people separate sports all the time. They talk about entertainment. They don't think it's sport. It is sport. We are part of the entertainment package.

Everything is your audience when you go out to play. Everything. At least that's the way -- I always think the audience is everything. Your fans, that's it. And you guys, telling the stories.

Q. There has been a lot of talk at this tournament about scheduling and equality between the genders. One reason given for not favoring women's matches is the length of them versus men's matches. One potential solution to that, in theory at least, would be women playing best-of-five sets. I wondered what your thoughts are.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I have been saying forever we should only play two out of three sets. As the players get older, I want them to be able to play. Nadal is one -- do you want him to stop? I never want him to stop.

They create such a following in our sport. I want to make it possible for them to win. I think three-out-of-five, you can lose by attrition. If you're older, it's harder.

I'm big on quality over quantity. So I have always felt everybody should play two out of three. Now, if you want to get into should the girls play three out of five? We'd happily do three out of five. We are very happy to. Too much programming. They can't cope. No, we don't want you to.

You know, men run tournaments usually, although we have exceptions now, we are starting to have exceptions.

I just think we should play two out of three, men and women. At least we have the tiebreaks the same at the majors now, right? You guys, just go back to the people, the fans. How can we make it easier?

Also, we should not allow the same outfits on two players when they are playing. Can you imagine going to a football game or basketball or some other sport and not -- can you imagine? We are so rigid sometimes. Because we have done it this way we are always going to do it this way. We have to wear white or -- no.

Put the names on the back too. When you walk into a match, how do you know who is playing? Everyone assumes we know. That's an assumption, that's snobbery. Nobody knows who these players are.

I sat at the US Open one year when Lendl was playing Connors, who you think everybody knew. They didn't know. I had eight people around me saying, Which one is which? Then the tennis people go, Oh, it's so easy. Look at the board where there is a little nick, that's who is serving, that's how you can figure -- I'm like, Oh, boy. That's really taking care of the customer. Not. We should make it easy on the customer.

Another thing I like are numbers, because when a player

gets older and have been exceptional, you can retire their number, and they have them forever. Like Jackie Robinson in baseball, he was the first Black who played in Major League baseball in 1947, his number has been retired, it's number 42. You go to any baseball stadium, you see 42. One day a year, they all wear 42. Doesn't matter what town or who they represent. You know what? People talk about that. It creates interest, and they learn about equality, equity, all the things that matter in real life.

We don't market it. There are so many things we could do. You have to have back stories too. People want to know about the person.

Also, in women's sports, for instance, people who are fans of women's sports use the sponsorship, whatever they are, 25% more than the guys. Do you guys know about that? We get 4% of the media, women. Why would you know about us? If we don't have the same amount of stories told, if we don't have the same amount of time and effort on us, no one is going to know about us. Every human being is interesting if you take the time to ask some questions, right?

So I would just be writing a lot more about women, I'd be writing a lot more about women, about back stories of the players. People are interested in them as human beings, not tennis players only, not how they hit a backhand, a forehand. They want to know about the person. We could market our sport so much better.

Wouldn't you like to see the names? Oh, that's so-and-so, he's playing. I have seen that kid. Is he that Norwegian, that kid over there? Don't make them guess.

I don't know. I have always been that way, because I come from team sports. I see how much more excited the audiences are and how much they get invested in the players. I want investment in our sport and the game, and make them excited. I want them to get the kids in the sport, bring back the grandmothers and grandfathers, I don't care.

I mean, tennis is the most unbelievable sport. We are so fit. With nothing else, you could write about how fit we are. It is amazing. Nobody has a gut. Not one person has a stomach. I mean, they are so fit.

I would love to see the back stories and how they train. I guess Netflix is going to do something. Formula 1, with that Netflix thing has changed everything, the back story.

I've got a niece who never knew anything about car racing. She watched Netflix. Now she's just totally got caps. Netflix. We have to do more of that. We have to get the word out. Make it fun.

Richard Evans and I have always talked about the

names on the shirts for 5,000 years. We should have a team season. Team season, individual season. Football, No. 1 sport in the world. Team, you get invested. It's your city, your country. That's why Davis Cup and Billie Jean King Cup should be huge. It's the World Cup of our sport. World Cup in football, it's a big deal, right? Should be huge.

Don't get me started. You have heard this from me before. It's not new information.

Q. I wanted to, and this is somewhat connected, I think, to what you were just talking about, but ask you your thoughts on the discussion that was raised about scheduling, Amelie Mauresmo, tournament director, was asked about why there have only been nine...

BILLIE JEAN KING: Is this her first year? I don't make any judgments first years. Go ahead. I know she did one...

Q. There was one of the ten night sessions involved, women's matches, and one of her explanations was that she thinks maybe there is less appeal currently to women's tennis than there is...

BILLIE JEAN KING: It will stay that way if we don't have more matches, that's for sure.

Q. That's part of what I wanted to ask.

BILLIE JEAN KING: No, I think Amelie, she's done a great job, and I think she will make some changes next year. I always give -- let's say you have just been a new writer or a new broadcaster for the first time. I always give them two to three years. Then I make a judgment.

I think you have to have time to understand -- it's hard. People don't really understand what you guys go through unless they have been through it. I know that. I just give them a couple years first and then I will make a judgment.

But she's in an amazing position of power. I think we should have two matches a night and start early. Can you imagine if Nadal -- I was thinking that Ruud was going to get started at 3:00 in the morning. I was worried. So we can't do that. That's why I think two out of three sets is better also. You really want to make it great for your audience.

Q. I did want to ask not so much about Amelie but the notion of, you made a quick reference to this, but why it is important and almost like a cyclical, self-fulfilling thing, if you never put women's matches on --

BILLIE JEAN KING: You have to do it.

Q. -- prime time, why that might affect the way the view is, how famous some of these players are or how invested the audience might be in the players.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I agree. You've got to put them when it's prime time, and you have got to figure it out and you want to give equal opportunity to both genders.

Always. You always want to make sure you do the right thing by each person. They should have the same amount of women's matches as they do men's. Real easy. Right now we are playing two out of three sets, we will get out of there faster.

I think the men should change that. If we keep treating us like second-class citizens we will stay second-class citizens. You want to make everyone feel important.

We should have more matches, but I think Amelie will take care of that next year. Knowing her, she's a winner.

Q. Two very different questions. You have really been speaking indirectly or tangentially about the media but the media has come under great criticism both in general but also very much in tennis. Could you speak about the importance of the media within our sport or...

BILLIE JEAN KING: You know how I feel. Why do you think I'm here today? I'm talking to traditional, so-called media, right? Most people think of this right now, and I always do, because you guys are the ones that told the story when we began.

If the traditional media hadn't told our stories in 1971 when we started our tour, the women, we would not be where we are today, would not be having this discussion about matches, actually, at Roland Garros.

So I thank you a lot, because I know you go through a lot. What I don't like is when I keep hearing that the players aren't available to you. I think that's ridiculous. To me, if you are a professional athlete, this is part of our job, and also make it interesting for you and give you insight.

So you understand what we are thinking and feeling. That's what this is about. It's about the human element.

So I will thank you again for the thousandth time, because I know. I lived with you guys back in the day. I used to sit around and talk and try to convince everybody that we are important and we are fun, and fight for equality through that. I will continue to do that.

I mean, it's like, okay, let's pretend we are all at a race, and here's the starting line, and the women are going to be starting 50 yards back and the men are going to be on

this. How are we ever going to catch up?

It's really important that for every human being, like putting Black people back here and the White people up here; that's not right. Everyone should be starting at the starting line together, okay?

It hasn't been -- society isn't like that. So we have to keep fighting to make it like that.

Q. As an athlete and a pioneer and person with a platform, you have had this incredible life. What has been the best part of being Billie Jean King?

BILLIE JEAN KING: Everything is relationships. It's like knowing some of you, having just, you know, being with the players. You know, I got to see Françoise Durr this year, I got to see people I really care about and love. That's everything. It's everything.

It's really about the relationships. Not how many titles you have won.

Q. You were talking about this a bit earlier, I got the feeling that the tennis players are using a little bit less their platform to speak out about what's happening around in relation to pastimes. What is your opinion about that? How important is it that tennis players speak out on war, politics, on economy?

BILLIE JEAN KING: Well, everyone is different, and some people don't mind talking about it and fighting for it. Others don't feel comfortable or whatever.

I just go one person at a time, because everyone is different. I would like them to, but I also know it's just not for them sometimes. I will sit with a player and listen to them.

I can tell they really are too nervous about talking about whatever it is they are interested in, whether it be Black Lives Matter or equality or LGBTQ. A person can only do something when they are ready. I think it's important.

What I would like is the WTA and the ATP -- first of all, you all know I wanted us together since the '60s, right? Most of you are too young. And they said no. The guys always said no. Then they boycotted Wimbledon in '73. I said, Do you want me to go talk to the girls about being with you? It will be really a much stronger statement if the women also boycott, the top women. No, we don't want you. I went to Arthur, all these different guys. Nope. You guys just stay out of it.

So we are in the Gloucester Hotel, 1973 -- it's in the book if you want to read it -- and they all think we are going to boycott. No, I kept saying, We are there to form an association. No, you are not. Yes, we are. You guys

were -- I know you weren't there then, you're too young. I said, No, we are going to do this association.

So I think we have to have stronger rookie schools for the WTA and the ATP. They have to learn the business. Athletes always say, Billie, what do you suggest I learn or what should I do? I said, Learn the business of tennis. Learn the business you are in.

Here's a question I always ask them. I said, did you play 250 or 500? Yeah, yeah, I played. I said, Did you ask the promoter, owner of the tournament, how he or she did? They are going, What? What do you mean?

I said, They work all year long so you get paid and you have a tournament for one week. Did you get paid? They go, Yeah, of course I got paid. Well, do you know if the promoter made money or lost money? They go, I don't know. I never thought about that.

I said, Well, they kind of took a risk for you, didn't they? I mean, I have owned tournaments. I have owned leagues, tournaments, I'm involved with the Dodgers, the Sparks, Angel City FC, which is a football team. A lot of other things in sports.

I love the business side. I love the promotional side, the marketing side. I love all of it, because you need all of these aspects to make our sport the best it can be.

I think tennis is "the" most unbelievable sport that could be three times bigger than we are. We are about No. 5 or 6 in the world, it's because we are global, but what could we be is what I always think. We could be huge. Could be huge. People like teams, they are more invested in teams than individuals. I like a team season and an individual season.

I think mixed should be huge. We put it on the back burner. Are you kidding? For the future, mixed should be huge. It was my favorite, favorite event with Owen Davidson, particularly. We put it on the back.

I'd be marketing the heck out of that. You just can't market something for a year. It's a long haul to finally go -- but that would be another great event. I'd put a lot of marketing and money behind it. You take care of at least two genders, now we have more than two genders, but you take care of the bulk of everyone.

I don't know. I daydream all the time about this stuff and think about it. Also knowing the business side helps me think differently, I think. Very few players -- and some of you are very good with the business side, some of you are not.

I used to do high school conferences for the kids that did the yearbook, which is writing and what you're involved in. They say, What's the most important thing we should

learn about sports? I said, The economics of it. When you can understand the economics, you will write better. You will write so much better.

They go, Really? I said, Okay. You asked. That's my opinion. Then players ask, and I go, Learn the business. Have you thanked the promoter? Every week, no matter what. Even here. Go up and thank everyone.

You guys, how many people work? I always watch everybody's work, the ball kids. Do you see those ball kids out there? They are having fun. Throwing down these games? Somebody should just do an article on that. They are so cute. I always watch the ball kids and the umpires and everything.

I know people like having linespeople. I think we should have the other. Although I don't like anyone to lose a job. I like it for the jobs, but that's -- I just like... Yeah?

Q. You mentioned players, professional players having to provide joy to the audiences --

BILLIE JEAN KING: You're right. Entertainers.

Q. -- as entertainers. But how they should do that, if they are not enjoying themselves the whole season that they must face every year? We have seen many players like Ashleigh Barty retiring at the age of 25, being No. 1 of the world. Many other players lately suffering --

BILLIE JEAN KING: Mental health?

Q. -- depression, mental health.

BILLIE JEAN KING: That's been always. Now we can talk about it.

Q. There is a way out of it. Yeah, we know since the old age it has happened.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Of course, everyone has been suffering from it. In the old days, can you imagine? You're too young. But I can tell you in 1970, I could not talk about mental health. We would talk about it among ourselves and try to help each other.

WTA has quite frankly helped since the '90s. I used to talk to Kathleen Stroia ad nauseam, We need to make sure the mental and emotional part of a person, which is probably the most important part, should be taken care of. They do it privately. You don't all hear about it.

You can't believe the things they have done; getting lawyers, helping them get therapists. I mean, but they are not going to ever tell you that. That's the challenge. But they do do that. I can say it because I can.

I want you to know that the WTA, really, and I don't know about the ATP. I don't know them well enough. Does somebody know about what the ATP do for the men? Do they make sure they have mental health for them? I don't know.

The WTA has had it since the '90s. Kathleen Stroia, head of the health services, could explain it if you want to do a story on that.

Q. I wonder if you got the chance to take a look at Martina Trevisan.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I did, and she came up to me. We had a nice discussion. She's great.

Q. What did you guys talk about?

BILLIE JEAN KING: She just wanted to meet me. She was so sweet. I said, No, no, let's talk about you. I said, Are you excited now? She said, Yes, I got to play the French and my ranking is going up. She's got spirit. I think she's going to do great. But she loves it.

See, I always look at a player. Do you really love hitting the ball? Do you love to play? That's what sustains you. Don't you think Nadal loves to play tennis? It's oozing out of his body every moment. I mean, and he respects the sport.

That's what you want, every player. She does. Can you tell she respects it? You can tell she knows she's very lucky right now that she has this opportunity. I think she's fantastic. I think she's going to do well.

Q. You were talking about stories. You know she healed from anorexia, came back to tennis, and now she's playing great and she's happy again. My question is: Do you think that Martina is good for the game?

BILLIE JEAN KING: She's unbelievable for the game. I just want to know if the game is good for her. Because if the game isn't good for a player, they are not going to cut it.

But she's great for the sport. That score is not indicative of the match at all. That was really a hard match. She just gutted it out. She was just -- that was good. She's another lefty. We had like two lefties when I was playing. I love lefties.

Q. I wanted to clap on you when you say you wanted to give more access to journalists.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I yell at them all the time.

Q. This is something we are fighting for, and the agents. We have a lot of obstacles. 20 years ago we

could go out for dinner with some players. Of course, times have changed.

BILLIE JEAN KING: That's not going to happen anymore. I wanted to come and at least talk with you instead of these superficial answers.

Q. What can you do to push the agents, the players to have more contact with us? Because we like to write about their human personalities.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Yes.

Q. And it's impossible if we just see them during a press conference, with 200 people all together, one question.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I hear them, what do they say. Also, I still want a really strong rookie school at the WTA and the ATP. I went to the WTA five years ago in Australia. I said, You guys, we're losing it. Players don't have any concept anymore of anything.

But if we have a rookie school, if they don't pass, they can't play on the tour. That means they have to pay attention. Otherwise they will say, Yeah, I did it. But they didn't really pay attention and listen actively.

So that's, to me, you have got to get them when they are young. They can't be on the tour until they understand their obligations as a professional athlete. And one of the things is to see you guys every day and maybe do one interview or two with each individual. I don't know.

But as a professional athlete, I don't know. They have a whole different perception than my generation. You guys, without you, I mean, I know they have social media now, but your outlets have social media. I keep telling the players, They are not just writing one article about you. They have social media, as well, they do. So you're getting double duty.

But they don't -- I don't know. I think you give them that understanding if they are in a rookie school. They have to go to school. They have to learn about the tournaments, have to learn about the business of tournaments. They have to learn what your jobs are. You have to have different people come in and talk with them. They get to ask you questions what your job is like instead of you having to ask. No, they need to learn about other people.

But one thing is really difficult when you're in an individual sport, if you grow up in tournament tennis as a child, I find, if they haven't done other team sports, they are the ones that really don't get it as far as what we are talking about. But I find if the kids went to college, like Lisa Raymond, won NCAAs twice, which is a big deal in the country, she was very good about understanding

others. She was on the team. She also went to school.

But you have to get them to understand it's not just about them. It's about us. Here is what I think sometimes about you guys. I would think you guys are trying to make a living just like the tennis player, right? Do you think they ever think about that? I always say, Just think about when you look at a person who is a journalist, a writer or a broadcaster, they are trying to make a living just like you.

I don't think they ever think like that. They look at me like, Huh? But if we have a rookie school, you'll talk about those things and allow them to start understanding they are not the only ones in the world.

It's very youthful. Youth thinks the world revolves around them. When we become an adult is when we know we have to fit into the world that we are in. That, to me, is from teenager to an adult. It's like, I'm waiting when the adult appears.

That's why I like players who use tennis as a platform, be thoughtful. I think Coco Gauff, what she said yesterday on the court, was amazing. She also has unconditional love at home. When kids have unconditional love at home it's huge. They do better in life, I find. They just do. You have your own lives. You know what I'm talking about.

Thank you, everyone. Thank you for being in our sport. Thank you for writing about us. Everybody who is involved, I really appreciate it, because I know it wouldn't happen without you. Thank you.

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