

Sugar Daddy

and the Match that Changed the World

During a recent visit to the Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I., I came upon a very prominent display featuring a cheesy yellow windbreaker boldly emblazoned with “Sugar Daddy,” and it all came rushing back.

Bobby Riggs, aka the Sugar Daddy, was widely known for his unapologetic self-promotion, a willingness to place a bet on almost anything, but, most of all, for his historic role in the famous, or infamous depending on your perspective, Battle of The Sexes singles match versus Billie Jean King — promoted as “The Lib vs. The Lob” — at the Houston Astrodome in 1973 in front of 30,000+ spectators.

It was a 3 out of 5 set winner-take-all format with \$100,000 to the victor. But, with the exception of Riggs, his faux male chauvinist persona fully embellished, the money was not the issue in a match that would air on world wide television and attract more than 50 million viewers, shattering any previous TV ratings for any event of any kind. French Open champion Li Na had similar numbers on Chinese television alone this year, albeit the beneficiary of a 38-year technological revolution. Such was the magnitude of the '73 Battle.

King rebutted Riggs' initial challenge, so, cleverly enlisting Sugar Daddy candy as his sponsor, he convinced the top-ranked woman, Margaret Court, to play him instead — on Mother's Day, naturally — to prove to the world that a 55-year-old man could beat any of the top players on the then financially struggling women's professional tour. The timing was compelling since the Women's Liberation Movement had been steadily gaining traction, and there was much to lose and little to gain from the women's perspective.

Whatever his eccentricities, this was not your average over 50 male tennis player. Riggs had been a Wimbledon champion, where he not only placed a \$500 bet on himself to win the singles one year, but on the men's doubles and mixed doubles as well. And he did just that, earning himself, by today's standards, a cool \$1.5 million. He had also been the world #1 and a member of a winning U.S. Davis Cup team.

Court, a tall, rangy Australian, and *the* big women's hitter of the day,

had cavalierly accepted the challenge without sufficient preparation or, as some would say later, a fitting appreciation of what was at stake. The Sugar Daddy, always the calculating showman, lowered her guard further by lovingly presenting her with a dozen red roses prior to the warm-up.

The cagey Riggs dropped her, lobbed her, off-speeded her and completely took her out of her power game to win, unexpectedly and easily, 6-2, 6-1, turning the fledgling women's game on its head and simultaneously igniting women's lib groups around the country seeking redemption.

Riggs, who claimed he took 450 vitamin and mineral supplements a day to “stay young,” and the Sugar Daddy candy people, were wide eyed at the marketing possibilities going forward after the Mother's Day Massacre, as it came to be known.

At the urging of everyone and anyone with a stake in the future of the women's tennis and women's rights, Billie Jean King stepped up and agreed to The Battle, to be played four months later in front of, as it turned out, the largest live single tennis audience ever.

The magic was gone this time, and Riggs lost, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. The women's game was saved, the tennis boom of the 1970's was off and running, Billie Jean was \$100,000 richer and the women's movement breathed a sigh of relief. Most believe that the Sugar Daddy was also handsomely rewarded — no doubt negotiated prior to the match by the calculating Riggs — for hatching the promotional tennis event of the century.

I first met Bobby Riggs in the mid-eighties at a celebrity event hosted by the Jimmy Connors Tennis Center at Sanibel Harbour. He was still getting mileage out of his now iconic Sugar Daddy jacket with his mouth going, in good fun, a mile-a-minute. I also recall him talking more trash that evening over a couple of beers with his buddy Jimmy — who also liked a friendly wager to make things interesting — about that night's poker game before they departed for an undisclosed location.

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Photo by D.B. King

I didn't see him again until the following year when he was, would you believe, headlining the Marco Island Seafood Festival. Such was his enduring across-the-board promotional currency more than a decade since playing in the match heard 'round the world.

I was helping fellow pro Doug Browne move into his new gig on Marco when, nearing the club entrance, we spotted what appeared to be, and quickly realized was, a bale of marijuana that had apparently washed ashore. Something along the lines of, "No, no, no. Don't even think about it," occurred to both of us, thankfully, simultaneously. We later learned that a major bust had taken place somewhere in the Ten Thousand Island maze the night before, which was widely known as a popular off-load destination from down south.

With absolutely no idea that the master tennis hustler himself was on island, we couldn't possibly have imagined what other bizarre circumstance would transpire in the next few hours.

While glancing over a local ad rag at lunch, I saw it, "Bobby Riggs, the Sugar Daddy, appearing today and signing autographs from 1:00-4:00." What?

"Doug", I blurted out, "Riggs is here. Let's get over there and talk him into an exhibition match with you tomorrow." This was too good to be true. Could we pull it off? After all, how amazing would it be for the Hideaway Beach Club's new pro to stage an exo and meet-and-greet with Bobby Riggs himself on his first day!

His autograph not being what we were interested in, getting an audience with Riggs was a challenge. Passing muster with his considerably younger, totally loyal, bodyguard girlfriend — a one woman phalanx bent on making damn sure we sincerely had Bobby's

best interests in mind, which we would soon learn were indeed *his* interests — took some time.

After dutifully establishing our respect and sincerity, Riggs agreed to a one-set match with the following provisos, which he presented to us one-by-one, each requiring agreement before he would proceed with the next. "First, it'll cost you \$500 cash. Okay? Second, you only get one serve. Okay? Third, I get to hit into the alleys. Okay? Fourth, I win. Okay?" We nodded and okayed our way through each. Riggs now warming up to us and his fee, shook our hands as we all laughed together at the frivolity of it all. The match was on.

Doug, true to his word, made sure that Bobby, now 67 years young, won 7-5, but only after slipping him five obligatory C-notes before they even stepped on the court. Despite no promotional opportunity at all, Riggs was immediately recognized, sporting his jacket, on that sleepy Sunday morning. It didn't take long for him to have a sizeable audience to banter with, which he did happily while good naturedly harassing Doug from across the net at every opportunity. Doug informed me recently that those early Hideaway members still remember that day fondly and boast that they were there.

Bobby Riggs passed away in 1997. He was a world class tennis player, once a world #1, a record-breaking Wimbledon betting shop beneficiary, a seminal figure in the tennis boom of the 70s, and, ultimately and ironically, a positive element in the advancement of the women's rights movement. He was a one-of-a-kind, fun, all-around good guy, and it was an absolute pleasure to have briefly crossed his path. ■■