

From “Jockocratic Endeavors” to Feminist Expression

*Billie Jean King, Eleanor Sanger Riger,
and Women’s Sports on Television*

“Women have real problems that cannot be solved by *I Love Lucy* and *The Dating Game* and some sports event or some other jockocratic endeavor.” So said Florynce “Flo” Kennedy when she appeared on *Yes, We Can* in early 1974. When expressed by the cofounder of the National Women’s Political Caucus and the National Black Feminist Organization, founder of the Feminist Party, and creator of the Media Workshop on a daylong program dedicated to women, this assessment of television’s shortcomings carried particular weight. As discussed in chapter 4, *Yes, We Can* was an unprecedented break with commercial television traditions. Rather than programming that typically involved “six hours of sports” on a given day, which was, in Kennedy’s estimation, “hardly of interest to any woman,” Boston station WBZ produced and aired a different kind of special event broadcast. *Yes, We Can* addressed women viewers for sixteen hours with content presumed to be of interest to them, including career counseling, health care, Black feminist activism, and nonsexist childrearing, as well as highlights from state government hearings about the status of women.

Kennedy’s criticism represented prevailing attitudes of feminist leadership of the time. The assumption that television sports addressed men only and accomplished nothing on behalf of women reflected a commonplace outlook within the women’s movement. But as important as programs like *Yes, We Can* were, and in spite of negative feminist response, sports television became a vital arena in which feminist politics were articulated and proven viable. When it began showcasing women’s athletic events, profiling women’s athletes, and hiring women athletes as commentators in the early to mid-1970s, television proved invaluable to the popularization of women’s sports. It also provided opportunities for women to express the feminist potential of sports.

This chapter explores the growth of women's sports on television throughout the 1970s and, despite feminist misgivings, its potential to promote equality, occupational and personal satisfaction, and empowerment for women. Two women in particular, professional tennis player Billie Jean King and ABC Sports producer Eleanor Sanger Riger, played a vital role in shaping how television would come to envision women's sports during this critical period. Jointly and individually, they made inroads into employment for women on sports television behind and in front of the camera; they explicitly articulated feminist ideas through television coverage of sports; and they understood and exploited television's abilities to serve the interests of female athletes while framing women's sports in ways that appealed to viewers. Yet despite these many victories, King's and Riger's careers also illustrate the many difficulties women faced while working in sports television during the 1970s. Perhaps more than any other sector of commercial television, sports television operated as a masculinist enclave. In seeking a place there, women provoked patriarchal anxieties about female assertiveness, competence, and occupational prestige.

SPORTS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Even though the world of professional and amateur athletics operated as a convergent site for a number of feminist concerns, there was little visible conversation within the women's movement about the need to focus activist energies on sports. Feminist historian Susan Ware hypothesizes that some of the reasons for this low level of interest were ideological. To many feminists, sports stood for masculinist values of competition and aggression and exemplified "crass commercialism," all of which were antithetical to core tenets of Marxist and radical feminism.¹ A 1974 article in *off our backs* exemplified this position when it cautioned feminists about the co-optation of the movement by capitalist forces. The article singled out Billie Jean King's celebrity as evidence of the all-encompassing commercialization of feminist politics. When Lincoln Bank of Philadelphia announced new nonsexist lending and employment practices, the bank appointed King to its board to oversee the project. The hiring of King, to the radical feminists of *off our backs*, was nothing more than another tactic by the "patriarchal banking system so that they can get more of women's money."² King operated as a front for capitalist interests intent on neutralizing the revolutionary threat of feminism and profiting from consumerist markets invented for "liberated" women. From this perspective, King's visibility did not register as a political gain for feminists but instead meant that businesses could "sell all the stuff you buy little boys to little girls."³ King's media presence did not help matters. Since "the Media State has never shown the women of America a real radical feminist and it never will," readers were advised to "beware of men bearing gifts even if they look like Billie Jean King."⁴

Fears about capitalist co-optation were not the only reason for the disconnection between feminists and sports. Concerns about the objectification of women and specious biological arguments about women's inferiority complicated feminist celebrations of women's bodies. Issues of embodiment were not only theoretical but also practical and born from lived experiences. Many early leaders of feminist organizations, according to Ware, were "physically inactive and/or had no exposure to or interest in sports" and therefore did not have firsthand experiences of empowerment that came through sports. The geographical realities of the women's movement also had a part to play in the matter. With the origins of the movement centered in New York City, an urban environment that was "hardly a hotbed of athleticism for women," prominent feminists acted in accordance with the prevailing culture of their location and failed to connect to athletics as a meaningful experience.⁵

It was not just feminists who accounted for the lack of sports activism in the women's movement. Women athletes were also responsible for the separate interests of organized feminism and organized sports. Since the majority of female athletes succeeded "on their own by distancing themselves from traditional definitions of female behavior," they did not easily adapt to or see the need for feminist collectivity. In addition to behaviors produced through the culture of competition, distancing oneself from feminism was a pragmatic survival strategy for some women in the world of athletics. A clear and obvious relationship to feminism invited homophobic judgement and gender policing; leaders in women's physical education shielded themselves from scrutiny with various adaptive behaviors and appearances. Feminist identification put their hard-won gains and their relationships with "important male allies" at risk and made them vulnerable to being perceived as "strident, unfeminine, or worse (i.e. lesbians)."⁶

Despite the obstacles to merging feminist organizations and athletics, sports did play an important role in publicizing key feminist events and in raising feminist awareness. Nowhere was this more evident than in the 2,600-mile torch relay conducted in conjunction with the National Women's Conference in 1977. The relay started in Seneca Falls, New York, home of the first women's rights convention in 1848, and ended at the conference location in Houston, Texas. As Ware argues, the relay provided visibility for the conference and made for effective public relations that "captured the public imagination."⁷ Regardless of the popularity of this event, the issue of "athletic equity" was not "deemed important enough to be a major focus of the Houston plan of action, although a small band of sports activists tried to push the issue."⁸ The question of sports as a feminist concern, as exemplified in the 1977 National Women's Conference, was characterized by both its promise for and its marginalization by the women's movement.

While feminist organizations were ambivalent about embracing sports, television was relatively quick to see the positive potential of the female—even

feminist—sports star as an asset. As Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin argue, the viability of female athletes as celebrities reached new heights in 1996, when they reached “full iconic status.”⁹ It was at this moment that female sports provided “solutions” to women’s problems, a valuable quality in an era of intensified consumerist ideas promulgated by “media culture” in “late global capitalism.”¹⁰ While contemporary sports celebrity is informed by an economic climate that emerged in the late twentieth century, there is a longer-standing connection between mass media and the development of athletes as stars. Sports sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves traces the popularization of sports to coverage in American and British print journalism in the 1920s and the 1930s. The introduction and widespread adoption of radio added to the popularity of sports by introducing coverage of sporting events into the home with an immediacy and excitement that came with the sounds of live action and commentary. While radio was the medium in which “achievements were celebrated, and the making and breaking of records dramatized,” television intensified this effect and advanced the process of transforming sportsmen and sportswomen alike into celebrities.¹¹ Hargreaves makes the case that while men in sports “predominated as well-known personalities,” women achieved international fame in the 1920s, as exemplified by swimmer Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926, tennis prodigy Helen Wills, and skater Sonja Henie.¹²

The 1970s marked a transitional stage in media relationships with women athletes. Commercial television in the US built upon radio’s earlier interest while anticipating female sports icons that would emerge in the mid-1990s. By amplifying the celebrity status of women athletes and by associating feminist ideals with female athleticism, the television industry reinvigorated sports television. Women athletes provided television with new events to televise, gendered narratives to develop, and opportunities to experiment with aesthetics and formats. During the seventies, women athletes clearly made for good business, and their profitability presaged the full-blown commodification that was to come. But they were not yet inextricably linked to consumerist solutions for women’s issues. As a result, they introduced to sports television issues of equitable pay, career opportunities, and workplace respect for women while providing women athletes with a forum in which to articulate issues of sexism in their sport.

BILLIE JEAN KING AND TELEVISION’S BATTLE OF THE SEXES

Of all of the athletes who defined a new type of female sports celebrity in the 1970s, none was more famous or more connected to television than Billie Jean King. King also figured prominently in the world of feminist politics. She was also one of fifty-three high-profile women who signed their names to the famous “We Have Had Abortions” statement. Published in July 1972 in the first issue of *Ms.*, this

document listed women who had abortions or who supported legalized abortion. This was but one public statement King made in support of women's reproductive rights. In a 1972 *Washington Post* interview that preceded the *Ms.* statement by several months, King made her position on the subject clear by declaring, "I feel strongly about abortion." Her feminist ethos was founded on the principles of women "having equal choice," a perspective that linked reproductive rights with career success and equal pay. Her personal story testified to the cause-and-effect relationship, which headlines such as "Abortion Made Possible Mrs. King's Top Year" made abundantly clear.¹³ In 1971, after she underwent her abortion early in the year, King went on to win nineteen tournaments and earned more than \$100,000 in prize money, a first for a female athlete.

Economic inequality was a key point of reform for King. Her awareness of differential pay for women and men came in 1968 in relation to her status as a professional tennis player. After her win at Wimbledon in Women's Singles that year, King was shocked to find out that her male counterpart, Rod Laver, had received £2,000 to her £750 prize money. When she recalled this moment in a 2013 interview, she noted that she "didn't have any idea we were going to get different prize money" and "thought it was totally unfair." After 1968, the disparity between men's and women's professional earning potential in tennis was increasingly obvious, with "horrendous" ratios of prize money at "10, 11, 12 to 1." This inequity, along with the lack of women's events at professional tournaments, further motivated King's activism.¹⁴

King's arguments for equitable economic compensation centered on women's worth in the public sphere. Although rooted in a key tenet of liberal feminism, they exceeded a strict political framework. Rather than identifying financial success and income equity as a sole mark of feminist achievement, King understood exclusionary traditions in sports as intertwined forms of racism, classism, and sexism. In a press conference following her victory at the 1973 Battle of the Sexes match with Bobby Riggs, King told a seemingly simple story about her political awakening: "I love tennis very much. I wanted it to change ever since I started in this sport. *I thought it was just for the rich and just for the white* and ever since that day when I was 11 years old and I wasn't allowed in a photo because I wasn't in a tennis skirt, I knew then that I wanted to change the sport" (emphasis added). While King's comments have circulated widely since this press conference—on her own Twitter account, in interviews, and in inspirational quotes scattered across the internet and other media—they have assumed a revised or truncated form that emphasizes gender politics and excises issues of race and class.¹⁵ Her remarks at the 1973 postmatch press conference afford a more nuanced perspective on the exclusionary nature of sports and suggest King's awareness of oppression beyond a single issue of gender. Her comments also suggest that experiential as well as material aspects of exclusion are significant, a notion that has been overshadowed by issues of fair financial compensation for which King is now known.

Equal pay for female athletes was an issue that King tied to celebrity culture and its affective impact. In an interview with Dinah Shore on *Colgate's Women's Sports Special* (ABC, 1974), King articulated the connection between the amorphous qualities of fame, glamour, and celebrity with clear-cut monetary worth for women athletes. Shore first observed that women's sports had "come such a long way" in both spectatorship and women's participation. She then asked King, "What do you feel is the biggest step forward that women's sports have made?" King responded by identifying "two significant steps: the money as well as appreciation from the public." As a result of gains in both areas, female athletes, in King's estimation, felt like "stars and entertainers for the first time in their lives and have a lot more self-respect because of it."

Increased public interest in women athletes helped King argue for their worth. Differences between the games women and men played, which were based on assumptions about women's inferior physical stamina, justified unequal prize money. Wins in women's pro tennis matches depended on winning two out of three sets versus wins in men's matches, in which three out of five sets constituted a win. Shorter matches rationalized paying women players less than their male counterparts. King countered this formula for assessing players' worth through women players' star quality and entertainment value. In a 1972 *Sports Illustrated* interview, King justified demands for significant pay for women by identifying the "big business" of sports and the ways that athletes were increasingly part of an "entertainment industry." King concluded that "if we can get the money, we deserve it."¹⁶ To illustrate this point, King consistently emphasized in the press and in media appearances her growing fan base and resulting ticket sales. King's celebrity was clear by the mid-1970s. In comparison to her earliest match, which drew two spectators, her matches now drew crowds that numbered in the thousands.

King's media savvy made her, as Ware succinctly describes it, the "right feminist in the right sport at the right time."¹⁷ King famously beat Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes," a televised tennis match that aired on ABC on September 30, 1973. The event was a highly anticipated, well-publicized one that demonstrated the might of female athletes, made a compelling case for the viability of women playing sports on television, and proved the correctness of Title IX. ABC publicized it as a feminist battling an egotistical misogynist. This concept sensationalized the match and hyped its entertainment value while, at the same time, it expressed ideas about gender and women's legal rights that were at the forefront of contemporary cultural conversations. ABC's approach, which hybridized spectacle with cultural relevance, both tested the viability of women's sports on television and set a new precedent for how television would present sports.

The King-Riggs match happened only a year after the passage of Title IX, the "early days" of the law when "public awareness of the law in general and its impact on women's sports in particular" was not clear or widespread.¹⁸ Title IX served as a remedy to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and addressed discrimination in education.

It was broadly conceptualized through "admissions, counseling, course offerings, financial aid and scholarships, facilities and housing, health and insurance benefits, and discrimination based on marital or parental status."¹⁹ The sheer scale of Title IX and strategic efforts to downplay certain elements of the legislation so as not to draw undue attention and counterattacks meant that "discrimination in sports was simply not on the radar" in its first few years of existence.²⁰ Title IX's impact on sports only became clear and well publicized in early 1974. At this time, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the regulatory body for college athletics, began intensively lobbying against Title IX to defend the primacy of men's football in college sports. These efforts resulted in the Tower Amendment, a legislative proposal that would restrict Title IX's influence on college athletics.²¹

This timeline meant that, at the time of the Battle of the Sexes match in 1973, Title IX gains were not yet part of the general public's consciousness.²² According to Ware, no publicity for the event made mention of Title IX. While the King-Riggs match predated common awareness of Title IX's relationship to sports, it increased visibility for women's sports and for the value of women athletes, which bolstered positive public opinion about Title IX in the years to come. Once Title IX's impact on women's and girls' sports was recognized, King served as a public and persuasive figure in the successful fight against the repressive Tower Amendment. In 1973, she used her newly minted status as a sports celebrity to testify in support of the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA), legislation that provided financial grants to secure the aims of Title IX.²³

Amid legislative battles over Title IX and the growing participation of girls and women in sports, television reassessed the viability of broadcasting women's sports, the value of female viewers for televised sports events, and the benefits of employing female sports talent as stars and commentators. Nowhere were these shifts in the industry more apparent than in the Battle of the Sexes match. The game unsettled traditions of sports television with new types of gameplay, storylines, and audience appeals as well as unconventional means of producing, selling, and marketing the event.

With the King-Riggs match, Tandem Productions, the independent television company cofounded by Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, entered the world of sports television. While best known for socially relevant situation comedies, Tandem applied its unconventional approach to business to this special event program. It bought the rights to the match from Hollywood promoter Jackie Barnett for \$75,000. In a stance similar to one it would later use to get *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* to air in 1976 (discussed in chapter 3), Tandem was prepared to bypass the networks, if necessary, to procure the best possible deal. If a network would not pay its asking price, Tandem planned to "arrange either an independent network or a closed-circuit presentation of the match."²⁴ ABC made a deal with Tandem, paying \$700,000 for the two-hour, live television broadcast; the deal proved profitable to both the production company and the network. Tandem



FIGURES 5 & 6. Graphics reflect the “Battle of the Sexes” theme: the score board header and a split screen of Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs at match point. ABC, September 20, 1973.

reached a \$1,000,000 payday with an additional \$300,000 guarantee from the Houston Astrodome, and ABC recovered what it had paid to air the match by moving ad time in a “fast sale,” with advertisers paying \$80,000 per minute.²⁵

While figures indicate both the anticipated and proven success of the event, critics were unhappy with the production quality of the program. In wondering, “Where Was the ABC of Yesteryear?” *Variety* compared the match negatively to ABC’s previous broadcasts. In the 1960s, ABC established itself as an innovator in televised sports by utilizing new technologies to cover major events. The network’s handling of the Olympics, in particular, established their reputation. ABC broadcast the first televised coverage of the Games in the US in 1960. In 1964, they flew back footage from events in time to put them on the air the same day. Their coverage of the 1968 Summer Olympics produced several firsts: record-breaking remote coverage with the greatest “number of hours, personnel and pieces of equipment,” color broadcast, and satellite transmission that made live viewing of events possible.²⁶

Variety may have lamented a decline in quality associated with ABC Sports, but King and Riggs provided an entertainment event in keeping with the network’s established style. When Rooney Arledge became president of ABC Sports in 1968, he ushered in a new era of sports television that “privileged building stories over displaying events and assumed viewers might watch the tales it packaged no matter their interest in sports. It humanized competitions by presenting them through familiar narratives (rivalries, records about to be broken, battles against the elements) and by making their participants relatable.”²⁷ The production of the King-Riggs match prioritized drama and spectacle rather than the technical intricacies of tennis play. In doing so, it drew spectators, both in person and at home, who were not tennis fans or even sports fans.

Although by this point outsized narratives and exciting visuals had become the cornerstones of ABC Sports programs under Arledge’s guidance, the Battle of the Sexes drew particularly pointed criticism. *Variety* attributed what it considered substandard production values to the celebrity-driven aspects of the event

and complained that ABC "certainly weren't shy about using their ground level camera to show us the celebs in the \$100 seats."²⁸ By privileging the celebrity element of the match, ABC minimized attention to the on-court action. Other criticisms of ABC's coverage focused on fundamental technical elements, including poor camera placement that failed to highlight the finesse and athleticism of the match, Howard Cosell's "ineptitude" in announcing plays, and the infrequency of score information.²⁹

Whatever the flaws in the broadcast, viewers were not deterred. With an average audience of forty-eight million viewers and at least seventy-two million viewing the broadcast for some part of the coverage, the "wildly promoted event," set in the "carnival atmosphere of the Houston Astrodome," "dominated TV viewing."³⁰ Trendex reported a 34.2 rating and a 52.4 share for the match. NBC and CBS programs that aired at the same time lagged in ratings, with CBS's *The Waltons* earning 14.4 and 22.0 and NBC's *The Flip Wilson Show* earning 12.0 and 18.4.³¹ ABC's ratings win proved women's sports to be a sound investment and female sports fans a new audience to be considered. As Travis Vogan argues in his history of ABC Sports, if dramatic and spectacularized formulas "quickly became clichés" and were therefore "easy to discount as commercialized pandering," they also "function[ed] through engaging the cultural codes that make TV so important."³² Regardless of its commercialized aspects, the King-Riggs match captured the changing gender politics of the day and had tremendous viewer impact. It signaled a new stage of development for ABC's sports broadcasting, which would require that resources be allocated to women on the playing field, in television production, and in the audience.

A "LIBBER-LOBBER" AND TELEVISION CELEBRITY

King emerged from the Battle of the Sexes a celebrity. More than that, she attained "sex symbol" status, something she acknowledged, though as an "advocate of women's liberation" she did not "know what to do about it." A 1974 *Boston Globe* profile on King describes how, since the match with Riggs, King had been the recipient of "mash notes, sexy suggestions and passes thrown by amorous makes [sic]."³³ Although not an out lesbian by this point—something that would not happen until her personal assistant Marilyn Barnett filed a palimony suit against her in 1981—King implicitly presented an unconventional gender identity and incompatibility with heteronormativity, something that coverage about her sex symbol status both suggested and managed. The *Globe* article described King's "fetching" appearance when she wore a pink sweater, printed flowered blouse, and gold jewelry as something that made her look, "well, feminine." In this assessment, King's feminine allure proved a surprising counterpoint to her athleticism rather than confirmation of queer identity. King "looked like anything but one of the great athletes of our times." The *Globe* reporter indicated that, despite her feminine

appearance, King had not been to the hairdresser or "wor[n] a speck of makeup" and that "clearly, she thinks little about" her sex appeal.³⁴

Characterizations of King's "sex symbol" status affirmed her athleticism and her feminism. King countered media constructions of feminists as unlikable, unattractive activists who aggressively worked to destroy long-standing social institutions. She instead operated "out on the firing line, commanding respect on the tennis court and in the competitive field of commerce."³⁵ Her athleticism, discipline, and striving made her a feminist celebrity who meshed easily with all-American notions of accomplishment and individual endeavor and reframed negative associations with feminism.

When ABC hired King at the end of December 1975, her celebrity feminist credentials played an important role. In the publicity surrounding the hire, King was described as a "libber-lobber," a new type of hybridized feminist-sports celebrity that sports television eagerly embraced.³⁶ Immediately following the Battle of the Sexes, King was hired as a commentator on ABC's *Wide World of Sports* (1961–98) and various sports specials, and as host for *Women's Sports Special* (1976). At this same time, King also developed a syndicated show, *The Billie Jean King Show* (1974–78), with ABC Sports' Jim Packer as executive producer.³⁷

King's success in television indicates the acceptability of feminist celebrity when it underscored capitalistic terms of success. King parlayed the interest in her contract negotiations and lucrative television contracts, as evinced by articles like "How Green Was Her Volley" and "Billie Jean Courts Fat TV Contract."³⁸ But despite the conservative fashioning of King's celebrity and publicity that used King's accomplishments to tout television's progressiveness, King brought critical attention to gendered inequalities under capitalism and sexist employment practices in television. When she negotiated her contract with ABC, King underscored the issue of income parity for women in television, just as she had with professional sports. Rather than responding to media speculation about the exact dollar amount of her "fat TV contract" with ABC, King sidestepped the sensationalized aspects of her salary. She instead repeated the simple mantra that she used in her demands for equal prize money in tennis: "I won't take less than the guys."³⁹

ELEANOR SANGER RIGER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S SPORTS AT ABC

Producer Eleanor Sanger Riger was a driving force behind the decision to hire Billie Jean King. Throughout her career, Riger helped introduce women's sports to television and agitated for increased roles for women in its production. Riger worked at ABC from 1965 to 1969, moving up the ladder from manager of client relations to producer of promotional films to writer and producer. In 1973 she was hired at ABC Sports, the first woman "to hold full producership and executive position in network television sports."⁴⁰ In this position, Riger produced numerous



FIGURE 7. Eleanor Sanger Riger behind the camera (date unknown). (Eleanor Sanger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection SSC-MS-00286).

segments for *Wide World of Sports*, including the US–East Germany Swimming and Dual Diving Event from East Berlin, World Weightlifting Championships, the National Figure Skating Championships, Women’s World Cup Skiing, European Women’s Gymnastics, and the Pro Bowler Tour. She produced and wrote “two landmark prime-time specials on women’s sports;” the *Colgate’s Women’s Sports Special* (ABC, 1974), hosted by Dinah Shore; and the second edition of the *Colgate Special, The Lady Is a Champ* (ABC, 1975), hosted by Billie Jean King. Riger also produced and coproduced segments for the 1976 Summer and Winter Olympic Games, for which she won two Emmys.⁴¹ Throughout the 1970s, Riger would play a pivotal role in asserting the viability of women’s sports at ABC Sports and identifying actions the network needed to take to compete in the increasingly profitable area of televised women’s sports.

With the express purpose of guiding the network in its “development of sports programming for women,” Riger was hired in response to NOW’s FCC license renewal challenge to WABC-TV in 1972.⁴² With a career so deeply enmeshed in liberal feminist activism, Riger worked toward equal employment of women and increased representations of women in sports television. While these approaches made inroads, they were not without limitations. By focusing on inclusion of women in existing systems, as Jennifer Hargreaves argues, liberal feminist approaches fail “to examine the extent and nature of male power in sports in the specific context of capitalism” and “to incorporate the ideological and symbolic dimensions of gender oppression.”⁴³ Riger, however, did not only depend on the admission of greater numbers of women to the ranks of sports television as a corrective to its sexism. She also worked to reformulate what women’s sports on television looked like, to change production standards to accommodate women’s athletes as television workers, and to alter the ways that women’s sports were presented to audiences.

Riger’s unaired project on Olympic figure skater and US national champion Maribel Vinson Owen illustrates her investment in elevating women’s achievements in sports and her methods for articulating women’s athleticism on-screen. In 1976, Riger coauthored a biographical teleplay on Owen. It was under consideration at 20th Century-Fox television but was never produced. Riger’s script told a dramatic story of Owen’s struggles to gain recognition as an athlete, her disastrous marriage and years of abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband, her attempts to sustain her professional aspirations alongside domestic obligations and child-rearing, and her untimely death in a plane crash. In the midst of this compelling melodramatic narrative, Riger stressed the structural issues of patriarchal power that had shaped Owen’s life and balanced uplifting, pioneering story elements with sobering reminders of what Owen and other female figure skaters of her time experienced. These athletes were deprived of access to facilities and coaching, mistreated by fathers and coaches (often the same person), and forced to relinquish their careers far too early when they married (often to abusive husbands).

As she would in other programs she produced, in relaying Owen's story Riger maximized televisual techniques to balance emotional storytelling with athletic accomplishments and skilled athleticism. One scene features Owen in a practice session in which dramatic music plays under the voices and sound effects and then moves to multiple moments of training. At this point, Riger offers detailed instructions on camerawork in a script that, until then, was largely composed of narrative content rather than staging and shooting directions. She directs the camera to focus on the "intricate twists and turns of the skate; the intense concentration of skater and coach; the beauty of the precise and fascinating movements which are the basis of all skating."⁴⁴ The technical aspects of production included in Riger's script involved relatively complex camerawork, sound design, and editing. They underscore her priorities in representing athletic performances: to pair emotionally rich storytelling qualities of an athlete's struggle to succeed with the intensive physicality of the sport and the spectacle of athletic achievement.

PIONEERING WOMEN'S SPORTS IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND THE CAMERAS

While women were making gains in television production, they still lagged behind in sports television. Riger's concerns for women's advancements in sports television were as much about the workplace as they were about programming. In 1973, when ABC Sports hired Riger as a producer, network news had already hired "hundreds" of women as writers, producers, and reporters but sports television had none in similar positions. "Why was I the first? Why was it such a rare thing—a news item—when I got the appointment?," wondered Riger. Her questions were rhetorical ones, as she understood full well the fictions that kept women from this job: only male sports were "salable" on television, women lacked interest in and had no "feeling" for sports, women lacked the "intelligence or dedication or stamina required for the admittedly demanding routine" in television sports, and women could not cope with the grueling travel schedule required for the job.⁴⁵ Riger worked to counter these myths and to close the gap between women working in sports television production and other areas of television production. To accomplish this, Riger linked the pioneering accomplishments of women athletes with the capabilities of women for sports television work. Through this connection, she argued for the suitability of women for sports television on both sides of the camera.

To Riger, the success and talent of women as athletes, on-air talent, and behind-the-scenes production staff were all related. She saw the increase in collegiate athletic programs for women—556 colleges with athletic programs for women in 1974–75 and 806 in 1976—as a reason for ABC to pay more attention to women's sports. The growth of athletic programs, set in motion by Title IX, provided evidence for a steady supply of interest in women's sports and made programming

women's sports a low-risk proposition. Television sports and college athletics, to Riger, were inextricably linked. She argued that "the most important factor for the future involvements of women in sports on television is the accelerating worth of college sports for women," since men's college sports served as the "backbone" of participation in the Olympics and in "major" professional sports, which, together, made up "99 percent of the sports television programming."⁴⁶ Riger also capitalized on the growing celebrity of women in professional sports to pitch women's involvements in television sports. She repeatedly made the case to ABC that the very qualities that made these athletes interesting to viewers would translate to their work on television as commentators and hosts. Their personalities would draw audiences to the broadcast just as they had to their sports matches.

Unsurprisingly, given both her public support for Title IX and her celebrity status, Billie Jean King was a crucial figure in Riger's plans. King's celebrity and her authority as an athlete-activist broadened her appeals beyond tennis and garnered viewer interest across multiple sports events, making her a credible television personality. This was particularly so after the Battle of the Sexes, a time when Riger urged ABC to make the most of the success of the King-Riggs match. In a November 13, 1973, memo to Roone Arledge, president of ABC Sports, Riger expressed the need to move quickly. The "quite urgent" circumstances, according to Riger, involved increased competition among networks to hire King and an unprecedented opportunity to address growing demand for women's sports on television.⁴⁷

Riger equated King's unprecedented athletic accomplishments with her own groundbreaking status as a woman producer hired to help shepherd ABC into the untested arena of women's sports. In advising Arledge to hire King, Riger emphasized the investments ABC had already made, the role women would play in ABC's future success, and the benefit of continued investments in women:

After all you have done in trying to get more recognition for women's sports by hiring me and [producing] that kind of programming, that we should lose the biggest attraction of all would be terrible. You really built Billie Jean up with the telecast of the King-Riggs match. You took a gamble on the price and it paid off. . . . I am sure you wouldn't want to see all the momentum ABC Sports has built up dissipated by an NBC coup with Billie Jean King. Certainly with women's Olympic Sports like gymnastics, skating, skiing, track and field, swimming and diving, volleyball and rowing becoming more and more popular because of our television exposure, we would be at a disadvantage in this area too.⁴⁸

Given Riger's logic, it was not enough for women in sports to occupy more programming time: it was also necessary to train and cultivate the expertise of women working in production if ABC was to remain competitive.

By 1974, Riger felt that, with the growing number of female athletes, the financial security of major advertisers sponsoring programs, and the ready-made audience of "sports-conscious women" and men who would watch women's sports on

television, ABC needed to invest in production via female employees. With key elements in place for ratings, profit, and content, the only "real challenge" facing ABC was its need to "develop female commentators" who could announce women's sports "both on action coverage shows and more feature-oriented programs."⁴⁹

After sponsoring a Women's Sports Special in 1974, produced by Riger, Colgate conducted a study that found that women were increasingly inclined to watch women's sports. This information was somewhat surprising to them, since they "didn't know if women would really want to watch a show about women athletes" and had commissioned the special with some reservations. The study, surveying attitudes before and after watching the show, found that "the special generated definite increases in interest among women in watching TV programs dealing with women's sports" and that all of the sports featured in the special "showed attitude gains." Although Colgate tracked women's interest in sports television for the purpose of corporate profits, the proven impact of Riger's special also helped create change that benefited women, albeit in capitalistic terms. The special demonstrated the viability of women's sports to a major company who could sponsor and fund future programming; it also made the company rethink its conceptualization of women consumers. Sally O'Brien, director of market research at Colgate, reported that the company could no longer depict women in "some never-never land, or where she's in that tacky old role some marketers still think women are playing, or where a product is positioned as some kind of father figure." Instead, ads would need to acknowledge that "housework isn't fun and games" and to recognize the interests of women had outside domestic work.⁵⁰

Riger leveraged corporations' changing perceptions of women into increased and improved programming of women's sports. When companies wanted to capture a new market of women viewers, as Sears, Palmolive, and Fabergé did when they sponsored women's golf, tennis, gymnastics, and amateur athletics, Riger transformed their interest in women as consumers into opportunities for women to work at ABC. She used corporate sponsorship to persuade the network to "develop a whole new slant on its sports programming, both expanding the coverage of women's events and bringing women into the behind-the-scenes production and on-air talent areas."⁵¹

THE COLGATE WOMEN'S SPORTS SPECIAL: RIGER'S PLANS IN ACTION

Broadcast on January 10, 1974, on ABC, the *Colgate Women's Sports Special* realized Riger's goals for women's sports television. The special employed female celebrity sports figures as on-air talent, displayed women's athleticism through high-impact production values, and invited audience identification with inspirational moments of women's athletic triumphs. In the buildup to the special, Riger emphasized the program's ratings potential to promote the program and to



FIGURE 8. Billie Jean King and host Dinah Shore appear in a promotional photograph for the *Colgate Women's Sports Special*. (Photofest)

encourage ABC to increase their investments in women's sports. She argued that the prominent female sports figures featured in the program would inspire women and girls to participate in sports, which would then create an ever-increasing audience, thereby ensuring a payoff for ABC Sports in the years to come. In the byliner to the program, Riger explained these benefits: "Television exposure will generate interest in women participating in sports themselves and in watching their sport on television. Star building in the media has enhanced the popularity of men's sports—it has to do the same for women's sports—for both sexes."⁵²

In the special, host Dinah Shore emphasized the unique power television had to create sports celebrity. In an interview with Billie Jean King, Shore described television's ability, through compelling technical and emotional production elements, to personalize sports and demonstrate the achievement of the individual athlete. The "enormous close-ups" showed the experience of the "tension and pressure" of the athletic event and made the viewer "realize here's a human being battling for victory but also battling for a large amount of money and for a little niche in history." This presentation meant that a sports event "really takes on tremendous significance it never had before," with enhanced "star quality," which "television has been able to do beautifully." Riger's approach to producing the *Colgate*

Special was coordinated with what Travis Vogan describes as ABC's investment in moving "sports television's previously narrow aesthetics scope into the realm of cinematic storytelling."⁵³ In order to differentiate itself from its competitors, ABC Sports privileged production elements that created narratives of triumph over obstacles and cultivated the celebrity status of athletes.

The *Colgate Women's Sports Special* opens with a voice-over by Billie Jean King, in which she advises the viewer to "be sure to stay tuned for this exciting women's sports special," a teaser that offers the anticipatory pleasure of King's presence. Dinah Shore, in direct address to camera, promises viewers a perspective on "great women athletes" and invites them into "a world of exhilaration, excitement, and beauty." This invitation is followed by a montage featuring Princess Anne, King, and gymnast Olga Korbut, along with female athletes racing horses, golfing, bowling, high diving, ice skating, and running relay races. "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free" accompanies the montage. This lengthy introduction emphasizes select dramatic and emotional moments across a range of sports events. An element of Korbut's routine on the uneven bars is captured in slow motion and plays with the lyrics that describe flying "like a bird in the sky," followed by a shot of women in the audience clapping and cheering. The final image of the montage is a freeze-frame on an Olympic hopeful track and field athlete crossing the finish line of a race. This montage establishes women's triumphs across sporting events, highlights women's sports fandom, creates identification for the at-home viewer, and signifies the emotion of iconic moments in women's sports.

After this affective opening sequence, Shore voices over a still shot of King holding aloft the trophy she won at the Battle of the Sexes. With a soundtrack of a cheering crowd playing under her voice-over, Shore describes the match as a "great triumph for women in sports." Shore emphasizes the importance of the event through audience enthusiasm, which she describes as "the cheers of thirty-five thousand spectators in the Astrodome," and the "decisive" nature of King's "victory" over Riggs. During this description, camerawork animates the still shot of King. It starts on a close-up of the trophy and then pans down and widens out to include King's face. These aesthetics memorialize a landmark moment in the still shot and create a dynamic, exciting feeling through camera movement.

The next scene features footage of King's entrance into the Astrodome and underscores the spectacle and gender politics that defined the match. As a rebuttal to Riggs's male chauvinist pig persona, King is carried into the Astrodome on a jeweled and feathered litter carried by shirtless men. Shore introduces the segment as one that highlights King's own experience. "Here's how she remembers it," Shore says. A series of dissolves follows, with images of King's presentation of a pig to Riggs overlapping with one of King's serves. Melding the publicity circus surrounding the match with gameplay reminds viewers of the athleticism King brought to the event. This strategy helps counter criticism that identified the match with, as *Variety* put it, the "Dawning Era of TV's Gimmick Sports."⁵⁴ According to

detractors, the King-Riggs match reinforced the idea that only a "certain kind of match," rather than the sport of tennis itself, was worthy of television's time and money.⁵⁵ By briefly acknowledging the publicity-friendly moments but framing retrospective game analysis through King's experience and images of her performance, Riger's special downplayed the "gimmick" qualities of the match. It underscored the significance of King's win and the value of women's tennis instead. It did so by emphasizing the feminist stakes of the match, the high level of King's investment, and the strategic plays King made to win.

After an introduction to gameplay on the court, King takes over the voice-over and, in keeping with Riger's approach, stresses the emotional stakes of sports and the identification between television viewer and on-screen athlete. King provides a play-by-play of key moments in the match and describes her approach to the match, which depended on fatiguing Riggs quickly and playing a short game. "I have to get this first game. That's all I kept thinking. I have to get this first game," recounts King in voice-over. She adds to this assessment a first-person rejoinder, "Come on, make him move. Make him move." This voice-over provides viewers a subjective experience of the match and access to the athlete's emotional and psychological state. During one volley with Riggs, King talks to herself, much as she would have during the match: "Oh, I'm so nervous. Come on. Get the ball up. Get to the net. Get in there. Hustle. Get in. Get your racket up." Later, King describes Riggs as an opponent in terms of emotion and strategy that matches King's self-assessment. According to King, Riggs was "a little nervous," as evinced by his "really white" face King saw when they changed sides. King's evaluation of Riggs's gameplay draws attention to his strategy for defeating women: "This is the serve he thinks gets every woman. It's a nothin' serve."

The segment on King exemplifies a "perceptive analyses of motivations," a quality that is central to Riger's producing. This technique lets viewers experience sports events they have already seen on television in a different way; this second viewing emphasizes the subjective, emotional, and tactical elements of the athlete's experiences. King's voice-over, for example, gives additional insight into a well-known sports event. It underscores the physical and psychological challenges of the match, punctuates Riggs's sexism, and heightens tensions both players felt as they took this so-called gimmick match very seriously.

By privileging athletes' perspectives, Riger made room for analysis of the structural and cultural aspects of gender discrimination in sports. During a segment on horse racing, jockey Robin Smith acknowledges that female jockeys are typically weaker than male, a physical difference that was used to bar women from the profession. She also asserts that the qualities that make for a good jockey are gender-neutral ones. Once she gets on the horse, she feels both "light" and "strong." Smith's physicality is transformed into a positive asset, a source of personal empowerment and pleasure, and is redefined as a nonissue for her professional capabilities. Rather than physical strength, which carries gendered

differences, "it's finesse, it's communication, it's using your head" that wins races. Smith also reconfigures feminized emotional states that mark women as unable to cope in a world dominated by men or physical risk. Smith describes fear, a "spontaneous reaction," as something she experiences when she sees an opportunity to take the lead in a race. She then acts on that emotion to compete. Smith presents herself as an able competitor not through special accommodation or the dilution of the sport but through an instinctive response that could be attributed to either women or men.

The special's segment on marathon running dealt with the exclusion of women in two ways. First, it refuted the importance of women's physical differences from men. Second, it validated feminized cultural norms around competition and training. Until Roberta Gibb ran the Boston Marathon without registering in 1966, major marathons in the US barred women from participating. In 1972, women were finally allowed to participate in the Boston Marathon. When Nina Kuscisk, one of the thirteen women who participated in the New York City Marathon in 1973, appeared on the Colgate Special, she described her motivation to run long distances as "natural," as a challenge to "see how far you could go on your own two feet." Boston marathoner Kathy Switzer also attested to the individual achievement of running and the "satisfaction" of self-sufficiency. Women and men both, in spite of any physical differences, ran against a "universal foe" of distance, weather, and their own limitations.

The only significant differences Kuscisk and Switzer acknowledged between women and men were cultural rather than physical, which sidelined key arguments used to discriminate against women marathoners. In calling attention to women's behaviors, Kuscisk validated them according to a cultural feminist model that, according to Rosemarie Putnam Tong, celebrated the "values and virtues culturally associated with women ('interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust . . .')." ⁵⁶ As she trained in Central Park, Kuscisk noted that women ran in groups, "running together and really enjoying it," and checking in with each other on progress and the day's experience. This communal behavior helped transform the masculinist qualities of competition and individualism traditionally associated with sports into a positively feminized experience that defined women as different from but not inferior to men.

STRATEGICALLY SELLING WOMEN'S SPORTS

In a 1968 profile published in Smith College's alumnae newsletter, Riger expressed her preference for certain sports. "Perhaps as women we don't have the feeling for sports men have," she said, "though for some sports I rather think I do. I don't know that I would like to produce a football game, but I find horse racing and tennis just as attractive."⁵⁷ Riger's "feeling" for horse racing and tennis rather than football potentially reinforced sexist assumptions about

her professional capabilities. Neil Admur, the *New York Times* sports writer who wrote the profile, offset Riger's career success, something that "most men would envy," with conventional notions of her femininity.⁵⁸ Admur described Riger as a "vibrant, attractive blonde" and discussed her marriage and children before listing her awards and other career achievements.⁵⁹ Situated within this framework, Riger's comment about her preference for certain sports threatened to underscore a polarized world of gender in which a female sports producer would be disinclined or unable to take on a thoroughly masculinized sport such as football. But Riger's positive attitude about horse racing and tennis and uncertainty about football were calculated. By the time she was interviewed by Admur for the *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Riger had, in fact, already worked in football. She had produced NFL segments on the *Today Show* in 1961 and served as associate producer for *The Pros*, a "pilot for halftime on NFL Pro Football" on CBS in 1962.⁶⁰ After that she would become increasingly involved in football. She worked as a writer-producer-director for ABC's *1968 NCAA Football Highlights*, a fifteen-minute special aired in 1969, and produced regional and national football games on ABC into the late 1970s, thus belying her purported lack of interest in the sport.

Riger clearly did have the capability and inclination to produce football broadcasts, so the "feeling" she had for some other sports expressed genuine personal interest and served as part of a strategic plan for elevating women's sports. Having already worked on productions that garnered a Peabody and two Emmys at the time of the alumnae magazine interview, Riger was a proven authority on what made for good sports television. From this position, she championed horse racing and tennis for their "attractive" qualities, particularly their inclusion of women.⁶¹ According to Riger, the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich demonstrated that "growing interest in sports participation by women is being reflected in the numbers of women who are sports spectators as well."⁶² ABC Research supported this assertion; it found that more than half of the viewers for ABC's prime-time coverage of the 1972 Olympics were women. With this information, Riger focused on Olympic events that "attracted particularly high numbers of women viewers"—gymnastics, volleyball, track and field, canoeing, crew, and equestrian disciplines—as the basis for her Colgate Special.⁶³

Equestrian competition proved particularly interesting to Riger, primarily because of its rare lack of gendered handicaps for women athletes. As Riger wrote in her proposal for a prime-time Colgate-Palmolive sponsored special, it was "one of the few sports where men and women can compete with each other on an equal basis."⁶⁴ Because of this unique value, Riger fought for increased budgets and high-impact productions for it. In planning for the World Show Jumping Championship on August 16–20, 1978, held in Aachen, West Germany, Riger presented Dennis Lewin, coordinating producer for *Wide World of Sports*, with a plan for a "meaningful film supplement" for the event.⁶⁵ With "electronic coverage" that was

"all pretty much high and wide," Riger proposed that ABC provide her with a film crew to "supplement" this unimaginative existing footage.⁶⁶ Riger emphasized the importance of the Championship to help justify her request. Aachen was not only the "most prestigious and most famous show in the world" but an unprecedented moment for gender neutrality in sports. As Riger emphatically wrote in her treatment of the championship for ABC, "THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THAT MEN AND WOMEN HAVE JUMPED TOGETHER. PREVIOUSLY THERE WERE SEPARATE CHAMPIONSHIPS."⁶⁷

For all her ambitious plans, Riger was also a pragmatist who suggested economical solutions to achieve her vision. She acknowledged that ABC would want to keep costs down and attempted to assuage their concerns about the expense of the supplemental material she suggested for Aachen coverage. Rather than shooting sync, Riger planned to record voice-overs from the riders with a Nagra recorder. She also budgeted for the sound equipment as a rental to avoid customs and transportation fees involved in using an ABC-owned recording device. With the goal of giving the coverage "more meaning" and with the likelihood of the American team and individual riders winning gold medals, Riger argued for the need to produce a nuanced and carefully considered segment on the event, or "added dimension" rather than "run-of-the-mill supplementation." Riger's proposal for this "high speed signature piece" reflected the approach she would repeatedly call on to advance women's televised sports. Through carefully considered aesthetics, Riger created "spectacular pieces" that highlighted women's athleticism and the excitement of their sport.⁶⁸

WORKPLACE SEXISM IN SPORTS TV

From the very start of her career as a production assistant in 1957, Riger recognized that the television industry valued women for their willingness to work hard. Riger was hired for her first television job at *The Open Mind* (PBS, 1956–) because of her high grades. In Riger's opinion her academic achievements were not a mark of her intelligence but instead an indication of "a reputation for hard work." The demands of that first job prepared Riger for gendered double standards of television production work. Riger learned that when working in "any job above the secretarial level women have had to prove themselves in a way a young male college graduate entering business has never had to do." Although keenly aware of the unfair burden placed on women in the workplace, Riger used women's compensatory work ethic to promote their superior value. She noted that she personally preferred employing women to work with her because they "worked much harder and with greater conscientiousness and initiative than the average man."⁶⁹ While potentially exploitative of women's insecure position in a sexist workplace, Riger's attitude also helped demonstrate women's capabilities and made visible unjust workplace conditions for women.

The difficulties Riger encountered in television production were magnified by working in sports. As the formation of a Women's Action Committee at ABC in 1972 demonstrates, the network was not inclined to acknowledge the needs of its female employees or to reform sexist practices without a watchdog group. As discussed in chapter 1, NBC women formed the first of three women's groups that sprang up at each network's headquarters in the early 1970s. The Women's Action Committee comprised women employees who represented women's concerns to management and instituted an affirmative action program, sensitivity training, and a Grievance Committee. They also programmed lectures that addressed "interests of interest to all ABC women," such as the ERA, gender discrimination in language, assertiveness training, and legal advice on workplace discrimination. In its January 1976 newsletter, the Committee awarded the sports department one of its "brickbats" for its "continued locker room morality" and called out an unnamed ABC executive who "expect[ed] his secretary to take care of his dirty squash clothes."⁷⁰ Whether manifesting in the working environment of the department or the leisure activities of powerful male employees, sports television contributed to a hostile and belittling workplace for women at ABC. Perhaps no one working in television knew the propensity for sexism in television sports better than Riger. According to Riger, "Television was mostly a man's business," and the "locker room rationale" (the argument that all-male enclaves were unsuitable for women) made careers in sports television particularly difficult for women.⁷¹

While Riger achieved success at ABC Sports, as evinced by the numerous Emmy wins for her work as producer there, she encountered obstacles to career advancement. She experienced behaviors on the part of her bosses and network executives that she regarded as workplace discrimination. By 1976, she sought legal representation in anticipation of negotiating a new contract with ABC. She supplied her legal counsel with documentation of her "constant struggle to get more assignments and more live assignments."⁷² She tracked decisions and kept records of various moments in training and job assignments denied her. In a file she labeled "ABC Sports—Historic Discrimination," Riger kept dozens of memos she had written to executives at various levels in the sports department—including John Martin, vice president, Roone Arledge, president, and Chuck Howard, vice president of production—asking for more producing experience that would expand her skill set. These requests started as early as 1975 and carried through into the 1980s and the end of Riger's career in television.

Riger made the sexist practices of television public in 1977 when she recounted her experiences at ABC in Judy Fireman's *TV Book: The Ultimate Television Book*. In "Women in TV Sports," Riger's contribution to the edited collection, Riger contrasted the experience she had in films and pretaped shows with the relative lack of experience she had in other forms of production. ABC's reluctance to assign her live broadcasts made Riger "suspect that uncertainty about whether a woman is up to the pressures of the live telecast" motivated decisions to prevent her from

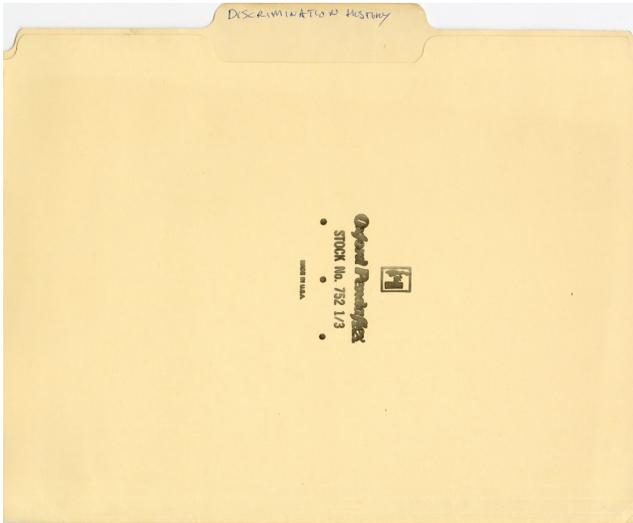


FIGURE 9. Eleanor Sanger Riger's file folder that held evidence of discrimination she faced in her job as producer at ABC Sports (Eleanor Sanger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College, SSC-MS-00286)

producing such events.⁷³ This prejudicial assessment kept Riger from developing women's sports as she wished and prevented her from highly valued opportunities to produce live events.

Riger's frustrations centered on a general unwillingness of ABC Sports executives to grant her on-the-job experience that would position her to take on increased, improved, and varied assignments. In addition to assumptions about a woman's capabilities to deal with high-pressure broadcasts, ABC cited Riger's inexperience when rejecting her requests to produce particular events. This alleged inexperience was something that ABC created, perpetuated, and used to justify denying Riger opportunities and experience, thereby creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Riger kept logs of her producing credits versus those of other producers and retained handwritten notes made on memos from her bosses at ABC that indicated stalling tactics and outright rejection of her requests for work. These documents corroborated Riger's claims about the disparity between her opportunities and those afforded her male coworkers and the network's consistent practice of confining her to lesser productions.

In one of the earliest memos kept on file, written in November 1975, Riger asked Chuck Howard, VP of programming for ABC Sports, for the opportunity to build her proficiency in live broadcasts in anticipation of the 1976 World Series of Women's Tennis. Riger had already been passed over as a producer of the US Women's Open golf tournament in July 1975. Given that women's sports were the "logical

place" where she should work, Riger was troubled that she had missed out on such a high-profile event and felt it had cost her an opportunity for professional growth. Women's golf tournaments in the mid-1970s were scarce and, as "the most difficult of live shows to produce," would have been an invaluable experience for Riger as a producer. Riger presented the upcoming tennis series as compensation for missing this earlier opportunity and pitched her involvement as vital, since tennis was "the most likely women's sport to get increased production." Well aware of ABC's prioritization of women's sports at this time, Riger called upon her mandate as the woman who was hired to help ABC expand and improve its coverage of women's sports. She assured Howard that if she were given the chance to produce the World Series of Women's Tennis, then when ABC Sports covered "more women's events live," Riger would "be prepared to work on them."⁷⁴

In early 1976, Riger continued to push for inclusion in live event production through her proficiency in women's sports coverage. Fresh from an Emmy win for her role in ABC's coverage of the Winter Olympics in Innsbruck, Riger wrote to request that she be just as involved in the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics. But this time she would focus on women's rowing, basketball, volleyball, equestrian, gymnastics, swimming, and track. Riger felt she could bring "a certain amount of expertise to the women's events" and that her "talents would be better utilized" in these live events than "in the film unit exclusively."⁷⁵ In August of the same year, Riger again utilized a strategy of calling upon a recent triumph to ask for a better assignment. She reminded Roone Arledge, president of ABC Sports, about the significance of the Colgate Special, which was "good to do and made a necessary contribution."⁷⁶ With Colgate "having done their bit on that," Riger hypothesized that "the future lies in live reportage of events."⁷⁷ She wanted to produce segments on women's sports, but major coverage would not happen "until 1984," presumably in conjunction with the Olympics. In the meantime, Riger asked to be assigned to regional college football games and track and swim meets. She reinforced this request in another memo a few days later to Howard, in which she expressed her interest in producing live football broadcasts and mentioned multiple attempts to broach the topic with Arledge and others.

By November 8, 1976, Riger had renewed requests to work on live football events. When asking to produce the Harvard-Yale game, Riger called on personal connections to Harvard. The retiring athletic director was a friend of hers, her son was applying to Harvard in the next year, and her family had long-standing ties to the school. In a memo to Chuck Howard, Riger explained that the experience "would be sort of a nice relationship since my father was class of '15, and four great-grandfathers etc. going back to Zedichiah Sanger, Class of 1771," had attended Harvard.⁷⁸ Validating her interest in and abilities to produce the Harvard-Yale game through patriarchal lineage was a necessity. Riger had not attended Harvard and did not personally possess insider knowledge that would enrich the production. She did, however, strategically deploy this disadvantage. She reminded Howard

that if she had wanted to attend school in her hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Radcliffe would have been her only option. Harvard did not admit women at that time. By calling on her past experiences with institutionalized sexism and loss of opportunity, Riger implicitly, but none-too-subtly, called out the same problems she faced at ABC.

Despite Riger's persistence and multiple rhetorical strategies, her requests to work on live production were repeatedly rejected. In a December 1976 petition to produce the Colgate Triple Crown, Riger again called upon her previous association with Colgate as her qualification to continue working on their sponsored events. Howard wrote back to inform Riger that he was planning to produce it. For the 1977 *Women's Superstars*, a special rematch from an earlier *Battle of the Network Stars* program, Riger asked to be involved in order to "improve."⁷⁹ Dennis Lewin, coordinating producer, responded by informing Riger that, after discussing "various possibilities," Roone Arledge "wanted to see [producer/director] Doug Wilson do it."⁸⁰ Rather than being deterred by these rejections, Riger continued to ask to work on live broadcasts as well as on tape in 1977. Throughout the year she wrote memos that asked her bosses to assign her to a number of live events, including the Kentucky Derby and Preakness, baseball regionals, NCAA Football, and the Pro Bowler's Tour.⁸¹

By March 28, 1978, the situation had not improved, and Riger expressed her frustration to Arledge about the upcoming production schedule. With no live shows assigned to her for three months, she was concerned that the quality of some of her recent producing efforts was being used against her. Riger challenged perceptions about her shortcomings as a producer; she described a lack of support provided to her by others (namely men) on the production team and rushed production timelines. A recent National Figure Skating Show, which Arledge had found "choppy without enough transition," was compromised by flawed supervision of the project: she had received "little guidance" from Lewin and had been erroneously told that she could fix problems in postproduction with a larger window of time than she was granted. The production values of the show were further compromised by the "experimental direction" of director Terry Jastro.⁸²

This correspondence marked a turning point in Riger's career and her attitude toward her job. Rather than accept blame, Riger pointed out the disappointing efforts of others working on the production and the challenging circumstances of producing over which she had no control. She asked for better support staff that would allow her to "do as good a job" on live events as "any of the Associate Producers who have been given the chance."⁸³ She also asked "to be brought along with a reasonable amount of help to develop a strength in doing live shows," a request that marked a new approach in Riger's appeals to management. Whereas Riger had previously called upon her own strength and successes in previous productions, in this communication with Arledge she began to identify external forces that impeded the type and quality of work she wanted to undertake.

Riger took a proactive stance to address her lack of experience. In early 1978, she offered to take on bowling and other lower-prestige programming in preparation for higher-level productions but was informed by John Martin, vice president of ABC Sports, that she "was too 'good'" for such assignments. When she was kept off the production schedule, she cited Martin's objection and sardonically commented, "I guess I'm too good to work for three months."⁸⁴ Riger also bypassed her usual channels of communication at the producer level and voiced her concerns to higher-level members of the executive ranks. In January of 1978, Riger wrote directly to Martin to provide him with evidence of being refused production experience. She enclosed with her correspondence the memos she had previously written to Arledge, Howard, and others about her "interest in becoming a more productive and valuable producer at ABC sports." While she felt "fortunate" to be assigned to three football regionals in fall of 1978, this opportunity was the exception to the rule. She recounted the "discouraging" responses she had to other requests and the lack of response to other memos. She also expressed how "anxious" she was to talk to Martin, along with the management at ABC Sports, "about the chance to do more live shows and more responsible *Wide World [of Sports]* shows."⁸⁵

Involving Martin seemed to improve Riger's opportunities in producing live and electronic productions, yet when Riger continued to campaign for opportunities she was met with rejection at best and hostility at most. In a memo to Martin on August 6, 1979, Riger voiced her appreciation for being assigned to produce the Women's and Men's Gymnastics Trial, the Prescott Rodeo, and the Lumberjacks and Firemen's competitions and asked to do the same for surfing shows based in Hawaii. Riger used what had become by this time her strategy: approaching multiple executives at different levels of power within the sports department. She informed Martin that she had asked Howard and others if she could produce the surfing shows and asked for Martin's "consideration and help in this matter as well." Martin wrote in response, "Don't get greedy now!"⁸⁶

CULTIVATING WOMEN ATHLETES AS SPORTS COMMENTATORS

Although many of Riger's career ambitions were thwarted, she tirelessly championed other women and created a mentoring workplace, particularly for on-air talent. She saw her training and support of commentators as a major contribution to ABC and emphasized it as one of her "assets" when she communicated her worth to her bosses at the network. When writing to Martin in 1978 in an exchange of memos concerning the stagnation of her career, Riger argued that she "work[ed] well with talent and [took] great pains and effort to help color people and announcers." She backed up these assertions with a long list of color commentators—including high-profile talent Al Michaels and Frank Gifford,

female commentators Cathy Rigby and Andrea Kirby, and male athletes-turned-commentators Ron Johnson, Mark Spitz, and Verne Lundquist—who would attest to her skill and dedication to talent development.⁸⁷

If ABC understood the value of “expanded programming” because of viewer interest and commercial investments, Riger argued, they should regard the development of women in production as equally important. Women athletes should be hired and trained as play-by-play announcers and color commentators, as their expertise and “point of view” would “add to the excitement of the telecast.”⁸⁸ Play-by-play announcers “describe the pertinent action” of the game “without delving too far into minutiae,” while color commentators offer analysis based on their own experience in sports and create narrative arcs, often with emotional elements, for gameplay.⁸⁹ In supplementing the technical aspects of play-by-play announcing, color commentators help attract viewership, elevate viewer enjoyment, and provide a sense of “quality” and “enhanced entertainment value.”⁹⁰ Both are vital to the success of televised sports, and Riger felt women could fulfill both roles.

When proposing retrospective highlights of the Olympics to be aired in December 1975, Riger approached both Bruce Jenner (Caitlyn Jenner, who was then known as Bruce and publicly presented as male) and Dorothy Hamill as on-air talent who would speak to the Olympic experience even before she approached ABC with the details of her production plans. When she did propose commenting teams to the network, she suggested that if Hamill was not available speed skating champion Sheila Young could be the next person to consider for the job. Thus Riger built into her proposal a (presumed) male and female pairing of the commentators and alternate plans for the female (but not male) commentator. This extra care preserved the gender balance in on-air talent and testifies to Riger’s priorities: creating space for women in sports broadcasting and naturalizing their presence there. When Riger promoted women for commentator jobs, she was not just providing them with important career opportunities, she was also shaping representations of women athletes. The language of commentary on televised sports is steeped in ideological assumptions about gender and race and “tends to weave a taken-for granted superordinate, adult masculine status around male athletes. Typically women are “linguistically infantilized and framed ambivalently” according to physicality and traits (e.g., aggression that makes them good athletes but atypically gendered women) and fall at the bottom of the “hierarchy of naming” (e.g., are called by their first rather than last names and are referred to as “girls” rather than women).⁹¹ More women commentators, even when paired with men, promised to correct those issues.

Riger converted the profitability of women’s sports into opportunities for women to work in television in positions previously considered unsuitable for them. She fought for Olympic gymnast Cathy Rigby as a color commentator and argued for Rigby’s potential in spite of criticism about her on-camera persona and delivery. As she did in many cases of athletes who were working on television for the first

time, Riger volunteered to undertake Rigby's training. She had briefly assumed responsibility for the task when Rigby worked as a commentator on a gymnastics event in Moscow. Riger felt that Rigby did "very well on her on-camera pieces" and was careful to explain any flaws in Rigby's performance. The production context was a challenging one: a "horrendous editing fiasco" caused an eight-hour delay in the voice-over, which started at 11:30 p.m. and ended at 3:00 a.m.⁹² Considering the circumstances, Riger felt Rigby had performed well.

Riger also addressed the volume and pitch of Rigby's voice. She noted the differences in male and female voices but minimized concerns about the "difficult contrast" created "with a male announcer off camera." When Rigby appeared with a male cohost on camera, Riger told Chuck Howard that "the softness of her voice is not so jarring in contrast with the male voice."⁹³ Riger's assurances about the quality of women's voices for broadcasting address long-standing anxieties about women and sound technologies. As numerous feminist media scholars demonstrate, women's voices have been scrutinized and deemed unsuitable for various sound technologies, from phonographs, radio, and telephones to film and television.⁹⁴ Amy Lawrence's historical overview of sound-based media notes that "woman's place has been an issue argued in marketing reports, hiring practices, advertising strategies, in sound studios and in programming. And her 'place' in sound media is measured by the presence of her voice."⁹⁵ In a 1975 *LA Times* article that focused on the growing numbers of women in sports radio and television, Rooney Arledge acknowledged that the "sound of women's voices" was one of the many "prejudices" facing them in sportscasting.⁹⁶ Under Arledge's leadership, ABC had invested in Billie Jean King with the hopes that she would make an "excellent" commentator. According to Arledge's criteria, King possessed knowledge that enriched play-by-play analysis as well as "a certain kind of voice, a heavy voice" that would "cut through crowd noise" and overcome "technical problems" of live broadcasting.⁹⁷

When advocating for women to join the ranks of ABC Sports, Riger called upon known signifiers of "excellent" production work while identifying additional qualities that were specific to her own experience and priorities as a woman in a male-dominated industry. In her first year as producer at ABC, Riger pushed to hire swimmer Donna de Varona as the "first woman commentator under contract to a TV Network for regular work on television sports." Her memo to Arledge underscored the value in the forward-thinking hire, with a subject line "ABC's First Staff Woman Commentator" and language that reinforced the payoff for ABC. Riger used her own hire as a "first" and the subsequent publicity it brought to the network as incentive for them to hire the "FIRST regular [female] commentator." Just as she had done with King's hire, Riger called on future demand and the possible loss ABC would experience if they were not the frontrunners in all areas of women's sports. She emphatically predicted the "expansion of programming in women's sports," which she saw evidence for in "clients' interest,

magazine coverage, public response." With this guaranteed future in women's sports, Riger painted a troubled future for the network if it lost a vital worker who could assist in their success in a competitive marketplace: "WE MUST STAY AHEAD! CBS is trying to make up ground and they already used Donna and are making noises about more work for her. We should really put her under exclusive contract or we will lose her."⁹⁸

Riger's comment positioned de Varona as a symbol of ABC's progressiveness and as a sought-after worker with strong qualifications for the job, all of which challenged assumptions of women's unsuitability for sports announcing. Riger took care to stress de Varona's professional capabilities. Her "talent and experience," evinced in local broadcasts and talk show interviews, and her knowledge of sports, including and beyond swimming, made her capable of commentating on a variety of events. Riger also credited de Varona with affective and interpersonal skills that were less typical qualifications for the job and instead were used to disqualify women from commentating. As someone who "knows and is liked by her athlete peers," de Varona possessed qualities typically associated with women and femininity—likability and cooperation—which Riger identified as assets for the job.⁹⁹

RIGER'S LEGACY, OR DOES IT MATTER IF A WOMAN WORKS IN SPORTS TELEVISION?

Unlike the legacy of her on-air contemporary Billie Jean King, Riger's contribution to women's sports on television is not an obvious one, in part because of the relative invisibility of production staff versus a sports celebrity and in part because of the lack of opportunities Riger experienced at ABC Sports. Even as Riger advocated for women in sports television, she met obstacles in her own career aspirations to the point that, in the late 1970s, she publicly aired ABC's discriminatory practices and took legal action. After that, she continued to produce for ABC, most notably segments for the 1980 and 1984 Olympics. In 1985, Riger shifted to part-time employment at the network, where she continued to produce high-profile events like the 1988 Summer Olympics but increasingly focused on lower-budget productions in cable television.

As her producing career shifted to cable, Riger continued to champion female talent in sports television. While she had worked in prestigious network programming, Riger felt that women's programming in cable offered an opportunity "for entertaining as well as enlightening women."¹⁰⁰ She worked on *Basic Fitness with Diana Nyad*, a ten-minute exercise segment for *Daytime* (1982–84), a four-hour programming block for women on cable television that, through a series of mergers, would become Lifetime Television Network in 1984. Riger was committed to the value of cable television for women and proposed, in 1982, "future programming" featuring Nyad.¹⁰¹ In 1985, Riger continued to work in exercise programs with women at the center, producing *ABC Funfit* (1985–86), hosted by Olympic

gymnast host Mary Lou Retton. She suggested ABC-Hearst hire Kaoru Nakamura, the "Barbara Walters of Japan," as someone who should become part of *Daytime* and arranged for videotapes of Nakamura's show in Japan to be viewed by the head of programming.¹⁰² In 1983 she wrote to James Spence, the senior vice president of sports at ABC, to express how "impressed" she was in his interest in "developing female talent" and his "perceptive way of going about it" and recommended a "serious training program for new and also most current talent" that she would supervise.¹⁰³ In 1984, Riger also put herself forward as someone who could develop European programming for ESPN.¹⁰⁴ While few of her plans came to fruition, Riger continued, to the end of her career, to identify areas of growth for women's sports on television and paired her own ambitions with those of other women who wanted to break into sports television.

In addition to her influence on sports television, Riger's legacy was one of making visible the gender-specific circumstances women had to deal with across professions. In 1981, Riger joined the board of directors for the Wonder Woman Foundation, an organization that awarded grants to women over the age of forty so they could pursue their occupational goals. The organization's recognition that women's careers were frequently delayed because of marriage and child-rearing resonated with Riger's own experiences. She knew that her time away from production in the late 1960s had put her behind her male contemporaries when she was hired as a producer by ABC in 1973. In a 1977 letter to Roone Arledge, Riger described the disadvantages she faced with the gap in her career at ABC: "Unfortunately the years I missed were those years of training in live production which production assistants and associate producers received at ABC Sports. I have observed how associate producers like Terry O'Neil, Terry Jastrow, Bob Goodrich, etc. have been brought along by this route. I hope I can still be allowed to catch up."¹⁰⁵ By 1979, Riger negotiated for better pay, realizing that she did not have "that many more maximum earning years."¹⁰⁶ In addition to the professional development she had less time to experience, Riger's shortened wage-earning lifetime was something she felt keenly.

Last, and not least, Riger offers instructive lessons about unprecedented television careers for women. With the sexism endemic to sports television and the feminist activist pressure that brought about her position, Riger was often treated as a token hire at ABC. Despite this constraint, Riger influenced the aesthetics of sports programs, proved an important advocate for female talent, and served as a meaningful mentor to women working in sports television. Riger did not just pressure ABC to make room for women within the traditions of sports television, she sought to alter the terms of these traditions. She challenged what defined a viable worker, a marketable athlete, and a ratings-winning broadcast in sports television. She used ABC's investment, regardless of motivation, in her pioneering role to argue that in order to succeed in a competitive new era of sports television, the network needed to value women as viewers, the subject of programming, and workers in the industry.