**Billie Jean King, My Father, and Me**

On Saturday mornings in the late 70s and early 80s my father woke my middle sister and I to play tennis with him.

“We have to get there early, or all the courts would be taken,” he said.

We nodded and slurped down Cheerios and orange juice before heading out in the mud brown Pinto we inherited from my father’s father. We drove over to one of the local courts or travelled to a neighboring town’s woodsy park with a large tennis area. Tall trees and playground equipment made the park my favorite spot. After a half hour or so of drills I could escape the scorching morning sun and crouch in the shade to play with the lime green tennis balls. Sometimes I wandered off and rode on the swings or walked under the canopy of the leaf-lined trails.

Tennis wasn’t my thing with all the running back and forth chasing a ball I never could seem to catch in the center of my racket. I didn’t have the height, the strength, or the form for a good serve and sometimes the racket flew out of my grasp and sailed into the neighboring court when I attempted my backhand. Unlike me, my sister had some talent and went on to play on the high school tennis team.

It didn’t matter to Dad though how good we were or if we enjoyed it. He liked tennis, and so, we would like it, too. We were expected to play without complaint (and we did, or at least so he couldn’t hear us, anyway). On the way home, he always pulled into Dunkin Donuts and picked up a mixed dozen. In the backseat of the car, I licked the chocolate glaze and savored the soft sugary confection.

At our house we watched hours upon hours of tennis, too. Really, he watched it. I laid on the floor in front of the television with the background music of popping volleys as I daydreamed of traveling to seemingly exotic and foreign-to-me places like Flushing Meadows, New York, Wimbledon, London, England, or Melbourne, Australia—anywhere besides boring suburban South Jersey.

The US Open filled the Labor Day weekends of my childhood. I did needle point, looking up occasionally when the opponents got introduced as they walked onto the court or when the announcers’ voices grew frenzied during the game. I loved listening to the sound of the players’ names, the more unusual the better: Vitas Gerulaitis, Martina Navratilova, Boris Becker, Bjorn Borg, Andre Agassi, John McEnroe, and Billie Jean King. Dad admired BJK’s tennis achievements, her push for equal tournament prize money, and equal treatment of women overall.

These things mattered to him, a traditional and religious man, but also a father of future independent women, too. Over the years, when people asked Dad if he wished he had a son he replied, “I have *three* daughters.” Then he smiled as if he was the richest man in all the world.

In 1973, when the “Battle of The Sexes” tennis competition between Bobby Riggs and King aired, I had just turned 4. Although too young to remember, I am fairly sure my father would have tuned in to ABC for “the headline event.” When the movie version came out in 2017, I drove to the theater thinking of my father and sister and our Saturday morning tennis time. As the film’s final scenes played, I got a little weepy—even though the ending of the movie is not sad. I longed to call my father and ask if he had indeed watched the Battles of the Sexes match and what he thought of the spectacle. But I couldn’t ring Dad anymore. He died in 2014.

Yet, his presence still surrounds me. As the youngest daughter growing up in a cookie-cutter development in the Philadelphia suburbs with a stay-at-home mom and a father who worked on the other side of “the bridge” for his aerospace job, my sisters and I frequently heard, “Whatever boys can do, *girls* can do better.” It was his main mantra along with, “You can do anything you put your mind to;” “There is no ‘can’t’ in this house;” and “education is an investment you make in yourself.”

Those phrases made up the chorus of our young lives and were Dad’s way of preparing—fortifying—his daughters to live in a world that was not always easy, and not always fair to women. He could see gender roles were evolving and knew our lives would look different from his and our mother’s.

Mom, a nurturer and a gentle soul contrasted with our perfectionist father who encouraged us to work hard and excel in our schoolwork. At report card time, he often overlooked the As to zero in on the lone B. He urged us to push ourselves to be our best. Those expectations created anxiety in me that would take time to work through. Honestly, on some days, I still am.

Yet, years later I found the fortitude I needed to rebuild my life after losing a child and becoming a divorced working parent raising two sons mostly on my own. During that uncertain times, Mom and Dad listened to my worries, sheltered the boys and I for a time, and had unwavering confidence in my abilities to forge a new, better path.

I don’t know if Dad would have connected his love of tennis and his love for his girls, but I know for certain he believed in my sisters and me when we were too young to even know what we yet believed about ourselves.

And that is a legacy that will never leave us.