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# Casals far more than King's sidekick



By Joel Drucker *Special to ESPN.com*



*Frank Tewkesbury/Getty Images*

**The women's movement in tennis is largely due to Rosie Casals' inexorable quest.**

*"There are always two parties: the establishment and the movement."*

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

A dream, a passion, a skill. These three Rosie Casals possessed.

Then history intervened.

"Tennis was all I ever wanted," said the 60-year-old Casals, an inductee into the International Tennis Hall of Fame who reached a career-high ranking of No. 3 in the world in 1970. "In my little world, I wanted to be a tennis player. Even though there wasn't money in the game then, there was word of people who went to places like Wimbledon and Forest Hills. It was a great life."

Casals' formative tennis years came in her native San Francisco. A child of a working-class family, she played the game on the public courts of Golden Gate Park. And make no mistake -- she didn't merely practice, she played. Singles, doubles, mixed, against all shapes and sizes,

Casals taught herself a game that blended movement, all-court tennis and a passionate instinct for creative shot-making that would in time overtake just about anyone who has ever walked on a court.

"It seemed that every weekend we were playing one another in the final of junior tournaments," said Lynne Rolley, a former Casals rival from the Bay Area who's currently the director of tennis at the Berkeley Tennis Club -- the spot that in those days was also the epicenter of tennis in northern California. "Rosie was nice, she was sweet -- but boy, could she play. Get her moving, and she was unbelievably dangerous."

It was at the Berkeley Tennis Club in 1964 that Casals first met a woman who would change her life -- a change that Casals greatly aided. Billie Jean Moffitt then was a 20-year-old who the previous year had been ranked No. 4 in the world. Casals was dazzled by Moffitt's world-class aura. "Everything, from the rackets to the custom-built clothes to the game, that was the big time," Casals said. Nearly five years younger than Moffitt, Casals that year dubbed her "the Old Lady." But perhaps at some level, the nickname was less a statement about age and more about Moffitt's obvious but then-nascent leadership skills, a drive to take charge that would become even more visible soon after she became Billie Jean King.

Back in those days, there wasn't even Open tennis. Occasionally, top names such as Moffitt might get an extra hundred bucks stuffed in their shoes from patrician tournament directors, but it was hardly an easy way to make a sustained living as an athlete. "The first year I traveled, I made \$4,000 and thought I was rich," Casals said.

But even when tennis went Open in 1968, women were heavily outearned by men, in some events by a ratio of more than 10 to one. "We knew this wasn't right," Casals said. "Men were getting organized. It was time for women, too. We started squawking."

Then came a fortuitous confluence. The women's movement had gained steam throughout the '60s. As fate had it, 1970 would be the last year that cigarettes could advertise on television. One ascending brand of that time was Philip Morris' Virginia Slims, boosted by the slogan, "You've Come A Long Way, Baby." Gladys Heldman, the crusading publisher of the then-highly influential World Tennis magazine, was a longtime friend of Philip Morris CEO Joe Cullman. Cullman agreed to throw considerable dollars into a series of professional women's tennis events. Thus was born the Virginia Slims Tour.

As the world knows, the star was King -- the best player, the most visible spokesperson everywhere from congressional hearings to urban arenas.

But generals need colonels. Robert E. Lee had Stonewall Jackson. Martin Luther King Jr. had Ralph Abernathy. And for Billie Jean King, none stood taller alongside her than Casals. Starting with the kickoff of the Virginia Slims Tour in the fall of 1970 -- Casals won the first tournament that September in Houston -- the woman nicknamed "Rosebud" was front and center, not just as a self-proclaimed "militant activist" but also as a superb player. "We played our little bahoolas off," King said. The Old Lady played 210 singles and doubles matches in 1971, while Casals competed in 205. That was one of 12 seasons Casals ranked among the world's top 10 players.

All of this occurred at a time when the powers that be were threatening to ban King, Casals and their colleagues from Grand Slam events. "Rosie's a risk taker, a bit of a rebel," said Julie Anthony, another Casals rival who also was a pro in the early '70s. "She was willing to take chances. She and Billie Jean were the real pioneers. They were committed to making a real living out of tennis."

They also were aware they were a part of something even bigger. "The women's movement was getting attention then," Casals said. "So why not us? We didn't just play. This was a fight for what we believed was right. You get militant; you have to fight a bit. We promoted, we put on clinics, we talked nonstop with media. It was like a circus."



**Rosie Casals won 112 doubles titles in her career and was enshrined into the Hall of Fame in 1996.**

*Evening Standard/Getty Images*

In large part, the circus reached its zenith when King took on Bobby Riggs in the famous Battle of the Sexes held in September 1973. Earlier that year in May, King and Casals had flown back from Tokyo the day Riggs took on Margaret Court. Entering the Honolulu airport, they plunked a quarter into a box to watch TV, saw the last few points and then turned to each other in mutual recognition. "I told her, 'You're going to have to play him,'" Casals said.

Months later in the Astrodome in Houston, Casals stood alongside ABC play-by-play man Howard Cosell. Of course, she backed King. But she also predicted the score with exceptional accuracy. King won the match 6-4, 6-3, 6-3.

Casals' career continued for a long time. Although a knee injury hindered her singles results past the age of 30, Casals competed effectively well into the '80s. In 1988, at the age of 39, she paired with Martina Navratilova to win the last of her 112 career doubles titles -- a total exceeded only by Navratilova. It was fitting that precisely 50 percent of these victories came with King, with whom Casals won eight Grand Slam titles. But it wasn't just her on-the-court prowess that earned

Casals a spot in the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1996. "She made the sport better for everyone," Rolley said.

These days, Casals runs a company called Sportswoman, a group that puts on various sports and charity events for corporations, often drawing on the many close relationships and business partnerships she has made from a life in tennis. Casals is particularly passionate about a newly formed WTA Tour alumni group that she hopes will provide a greater link between young pros and experienced former pros who Casals believes can offer wisdom in all sorts of areas.

One of Casals' most active years was 1973. She was the first winner of the Family Circle Cup, a singles event that offered the then-unmatched first prize of \$30,000. She was in the thick of things at Wimbledon that summer when the WTA was formed. And then came the King-Riggs match.

Grace Lichtenstein wrote a great book about women's tennis during that year titled, "A Long Way, Baby: Behind the Scenes in Women's Pro Tennis." That the publisher had sought to crib an advertising slogan was a sign of how embedded the Virginia Slims brand was in the world of tennis and the ascending women's sports movement. But the publisher also made another choice. The woman on the cover is not Billie Jean King, Chris Evert or Margaret Court. It's Casals, snapping a serve, jumping up into the ball -- and looking to move forward.

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