



BOOKS

Second set

For transgender tennis star Renée Richards, the generation gap looms larger than the gender gap. Her latest book, *No Way Renée*, continues the story of her “notorious” life By Michael Giltz

Renée Richards walks gingerly down the gravel driveway of her upstate New York home. At 72, she’s still active and fit, though a far cry from the imposing athlete who stalked the net at the 1977 U.S. Open, two years after her sex-change operation.

Richards became an unintentional hero when she was outed after an amateur tennis match in La Jolla, Calif. She was 41 years old and had no desire to turn pro. But when tennis officials preemptively told her she couldn’t, Richards began a fight that would forever define her life.

“I was happy starting a practice in ophthalmology in California,”

she recalls. “Then they told me I couldn’t play, and all of a sudden I became the world’s activist for the sexually disenfranchised.”

Transgender people today may turn up in Oscar-nominated films and smash-hit sitcoms, but in 1975 the very idea of gender reassignment was shocking. The sex-change operation of Christine Jorgensen had made international headlines two decades before. But for all intents and purposes, Richards was alone.

“You have to put it in perspective,” she says. “Nobody had ever heard of doing anything like this. I was big. I was tall. I was not as strong as the 20-year-old women I was playing, but I was imposing. I was a pariah.” ▶

PHOTO: JIM G

Richards's newly released autobiography, *No Way Renée: The Second Half of My Notorious Life* (Simon and Schuster) revisits stories from her best-selling 1983 memoir, *Second Serve*. She writes of growing up as Richard Raskin, a boy wearing his sister's clothes, the years-long struggle to have a sex-change operation, and the decision to challenge the United States Tennis Association for the right to compete against women.

She then brings the story up-to-date, sharing her bemused accommodation to an ever-changing world, her career as an ophthalmologist, her drive to be a good father (Richards's word) to her son Nicky, and the search for love that continues today.

It's a story Richards is proud to tell and retell. And while she's not shy about recognizing the path she forged, she is hardly the firebrand activist some would wish a transgender poster child to be.

"I'm not an advocate," she says, reflecting on this publication's title. "I'm essentially a pretty passive person—a tennis player and a doctor. "I'm not politically or socially what ordinary people would call an activist."

Richards attributes much of her conventional thinking to her upper-crust education at Horace Mann college prep school

Billie Jean is King

The ultimate athlete was 32 years old and closeted when transgender Renée Richards sued for the right to play pro tennis against women. Here, she looks back and contemplates the future of gays in professional sports

It was an interesting time for all of us. I can remember trying to calm down all the players. If somebody speaks up—it doesn't have to be me all the time, but any of us—it's just amazing how everybody calms down.

When you personally get to know somebody, that changes everything. I think that's what happened [with Renée]. Some of the guys knew her as Richard. When she started playing, the other women obviously started talking to her and listening to her. All of a sudden, they'd say, "Oh, my God, she's so nice."

I think she should be so proud. Every generation passes the baton to the next. It had to be so horrible for her. [But] you do have to live your

truth; that's what Renée did. For her, that meant an extremely difficult situation.

Both Martina and I were still closeted [at the time]. Martina told me, "I knew when I was born that I was gay." I said, "What? You did?" I didn't know at all; I didn't have a clue. Martina and I were both going to be outed. I was outed, but she was going to be, and that's the reason she came forward. She was not going to do it [otherwise], believe me. It was really rough times for us.

It's the gay guys that have it even rougher. We need quarterbacks of football teams stepping up and saying, "This guy's gay, suck it up, get over it." I saw [former NFL commissioner] Paul Tagliabue at a Patriots game and he said, "Guess what? My son's going to be the head of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays." He was so excited, so sweet. One person at a time. Little steps. Little shifts.

I was talking to Ilana [Kloss], my partner, today. I said, "You know, it's so much easier than it was even 10 years ago." Every year it gets easier. Maybe it's just that we're more comfortable. "This is your partner? Fine, next," as opposed to [gasp].

It's amazing what Renée has done for transgenders. What a symbol for all of us, not just transgenders. Of course, she doesn't even like that. [Richards prefers the term *transsexual*.] She's stuck, but she knows it. That's what makes it more funny. Listen, when we go to dinner, I'll be asking her, "What are you doing, girl? You're the big momma. You've got to help the next generation and not make them feel like they're doing the wrong thing." —*Billie Jean King, from an interview with Michael Giltz*



Richards, Navratilova, and King at the International Tennis Hall of Fame

in Riverdale, N.Y., and Yale in the 1950s, where she learned the traditional values that she adheres to today. For instance, while Richards believes everyone deserves the legal rights of marriage, she can't quite force herself to think of two women as "married."

"I was born in 1934. Marriage to me meant men and women," she admits. "I have two very close friends three houses up the road. They're lifetime partners and they don't call themselves married."

She quickly adds that they may be bound by the same generational conventions she learned. "They're in their 50s. If they were in their 20s, they'd be demanding it. I know that," she says.

For her part, Richards thinks transgender people should not be able to compete at the highest levels, a belief she realizes undermines everything she accomplished. She suggests transgender females like Canadian mountain biker Michelle Dumaresq and Danish golfer Miranne Bagger play at club events rather than on national teams.

"The U.S. Olympic Committee has decreed in all of its great glory and intelligence that transsexuals can play in the Olympics if two years have passed since their operations—I think that's going to come back to haunt them," she says.

It's not new thinking. Transgender athletes today confront many of the same arguments Richards did 35 years ago. What constitutes gender? Are transgender people fair competition in women's sports? Which locker room do they use?

"Nobody had ever heard of doing anything like this. I was big. I was tall. I wasn't as strong as the 20-year-olds I was playing, but I was imposing. I was a pariah."

In the clamor Richards endured during her battle to compete athletically against women, she heard little complaint from the one group you'd expect, her competition.

"I called her and said, 'Can I come listen to you and your story? At least meet you,'" remembers Billie Jean King. "She said sure. I was there for four hours."

"When I look back on it, I'd say it was a remarkably warm welcome," Richards says. "It's not just that they were willing to play me; some of them have stayed close friends to this day. Wendy Turnbull, Virginia Wade, Ilana Kloss, Martina [Navra-

Do transgender athletes have an unfair advantage in competitive sports? You tell us. Here's how Renée Richards and Martina Navratilova compared when they were at the 1977 U.S. Open.



RENEE RICHARDS

Age 42
 Height 6 feet 1 inch
 Weight 147 pounds
 Previous U.S. Open tournaments none
 Serve left
 Seed none
 Result lost in first round



MARTINA NAVRATILOVA

Age 20
 Height 5 feet 7½ inches
 Weight 155 pounds
 Previous U.S. Open tournaments four
 Serve left
 Seed 2
 Result lost in semifinals

Figures from the United States Tennis Association

tilova] and Billie Jean and Mary Carillo—they're all very good friends of mine."

King filed an affidavit in court supporting Richards's entry into the U.S. Open. In 1981, Navratilova asked Richards to join her team of coaches as she prepared her epic rivalry with Chris Evert. Nineteen years later Navratilova would insist that Richards induct her into the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

she opted to live in Orange County, Calif., which hasn't voted for a Democrat in a presidential election since FDR's second term. The John Wayne Tennis Club was her local court.

In March 1999, *Tennis* magazine published an article titled "Regrets, She's Had a Few," implying this included her sex-reassignment surgery. Although Richards adamantly denies this is true, she admits to wishing it had not been necessary.

"I realize it's remarkable," she says. "[But] I would rather have not had this overwhelmingly diverse experience of being able to live half of my life as a man and half of my life as a woman. I would rather I were not born or imprinted into being a transsexual. Absolutely."

Richards acknowledges the effect she's had on transgender people and society at large. But that doesn't mean she approves of it.

"I don't even like the word *transgendered*. I didn't have a gender operation; I had a sex change. Now there's a new thing that the transgendered want to have their birth certificates changed so they can be women without having an operation. So it's all my fault." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.

RICHARDS: TONY KOROSZ/THE LIFE PICTURE/GETTY IMAGES; NAVRATILOVA: ABRHAM DEHUS/SAF/REX USA

From: drrenee876@aol.com
To: mgiltz@pipeline.com
Date: 4/4/2007 5:06:32 PM
Subject: Advocate article

Michael,i have been meaning to write to tell you how much I appreciated your sending me the article. I think you did an excellent job,one of the best,of many,since the book came out. Well done!
However,you got me in trouble with my friends three houses away. Very calmly Lithgrow[yes,his name is Lithgrow Osborne!] said to me at a recent party 'You know, renee ,chuck and I ARE married,and my father who was an elder[or something] in the church,was there.' Oops! Shows what i know.
However,Billie jean and her partner Ilana Kloss are definitely not married,neither are martina and toni. Is it different for men! who knows. You wrote a fine article! Best,rence

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