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“They Dare(d) to Compete”: A Historical Analysis of the Evert-Navratilova Tennis Rivalry

In 1999, Home Box Office aired an 80-minute documentary entitled “Dare to compete.” The historical narrative recounted the struggle of women in sport and highlighted what was described as one of the greatest rivalries in sports history, between Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova. According to Evert, the rivalry was intriguing because of their contrasts in style: as “America’s sweetheart,” she was a passive baseliner, while the Czechoslovakian-born Navratilova was an aggressive serve-and-volleyer. Although their perceived differences made the rivalry compelling, each player received distinct material effects as well. According to Hutton, it was Evert who received “all the adulation and endorsement contracts.”

In 1999, ESPN also commissioned what Dan Patrick described as “a prestigious group of individuals (believed) to be the most perceptive sports observers and journalists ever assembled” in order to determine the 100 greatest athletes of the century. The 48 sports experts were comprised predominately of sportswriters and sportscasters. In addition to the obvious focus on the United States, Billings notes that women athletes were noticeably absent among the top 100, comprising only 8% of the total. Since there were three horses named to the list, she adds that

at least there were more women than horses. As two of four women selected to ESPN's Top 50, the rivalry of Chris Evert (No. 50) and Martina Navratilova (No. 19) provides a unique opportunity for an historical analysis of women in sport.

This paper explores recent mediated coverage of the Evert-Navratilova tennis rivalry in light of historical evidence that documents their rivalry. Two questions will serve to guide the narrative: how is gender difference articulated through accounts of their rivalry; and how are gender differences understood within a historical context? Because of its historical significance, the Evert vs. Navratilova rivalry has been well documented by journalists, historians, and other sport scholars. In addition to popular and scholarly accounts, I draw upon primary accounts from newspapers and first-hand observations gleaned from my own career as a tennis professional. Having played on the USLTA circuit in 1973, I collected accounts of the initial meeting between Evert and Navratilova at a USLTA tour stop in Akron, Ohio. Unbeknownst to me at the time was that I would witness the unfolding of one of the greatest rivalries in sports history.

The representations of Evert and Navratilova reinforce their differences in relation to normalized perceptions of traditional womanhood. While Navratilova was described as "far from the traditional decorous Victorian woman," Evert was framed as fulfilling our expectations of traditional womanhood. For example, Evert appears on the cover of a 1977 issue of *Sports Illustrated* as "Sportswoman of the year," where she is featured in attire worn by women who played tennis at the turn of the century. That photograph (and others) underscore references to her highly-publicized (heterosexual) relationships with a variety of suitors, including: Jimmy Connors (her fiance in 1974); Burt Reynolds, first husband, John Lloyd, and second husband, Andy Mill. Taken together, media representations coupled with her more "feminine" style of play continually present Evert as heterosexual. In contrast to representations of Evert, Navratilova is described as employing a more "masculine" style of play. Unlike the girl-next-door image conveyed by Evert, Navratilova introduced a muscularity and fitness that intimidated many of the other players. Representations of Martina also mark her as "Other" based upon her defection from Czechoslovakia and her identity as a lesbian.
