

THE GREAT TENNIS HAPPENING

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Along with some 30,000 spectators on the spot and several million other television viewers, we watched the Great Tennis Happening last month between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King. As has been written, it was more circus than match, and Billie Jean out-gamed, out-garbaged and outfoxed the active but ageing Riggs. By mid-point in the second set, there wasn't much doubt about the final outcome. Whether or not the whole business wasn't a giant promotional put-on may never be revealed unless we can get Senator Ervin and his Watergate boys interested in holding another televised investigation.

From a technical and spectator standpoint, the production of the match was a bit disappointing. The only ones who could really see the action and follow the play were the courtside spectators; but they were too busy grabbing publicity, feeding at the snack bar and guzzling cocktails to worry about tennis. The grandstand customers in the outer reaches of the Astrodome must have spent an expensive and frustrating evening.

The television viewers had their own problems. By some combinations of lighting, color of the playing surface, air pollution and questionable camera work, every time the yellow tennis ball passed over the net into the far court, it disappeared completely. The linespersons and ball boys were unusually inept and often had their minds on other things. Added to all of that, the irritation of the interminable clacking of Rosemary Casals deriding Riggs and masculinity in general, and the constant abrasive chatter of Howard Cosell, the world's most obnoxious announcer, were enough to make many viewers dial out the sound and settle for sight alone. Unfortunately, Cosell's face appeared on the screen often enough to make even this almost unbearable. ABC has capitalized on Cosell's irritant appeal for much too long now, and we think the time is ripe for them to suggest he return to introducing welterweight semi-finalists in the second rate boxing emporia where he belongs.

As regards the match itself, it was at least entertaining. Whether or not any blow was struck for women's liberation against male chauvinism is highly doubtful, no matter what Casals may think. A top woman professional in any field is a formidable adversary. We once played 18 holes of golf with a lady pro in her very healthy twenties and got out-driven, out-chipped and outputted on every hole. Instead of humiliation, we felt rather proud about getting beaten only 6 up. After all, at 55, Riggs is past his prime. He was certainly not on his game for the occasion and, in plain view of everyone that night, he was obviously a sick man suffering medically from an overdose of vitamins and avocados. King should have beaten him in love sets.

Besides, ask any fifty-year-old married to a healthy twenty-year-old. There's no way.