

coach to coach

The Battle of the Sexes

With improvements in equipment technology and training methods, a modern day battle of the sexes match would be a fascinating contest.

By Sarah Morante

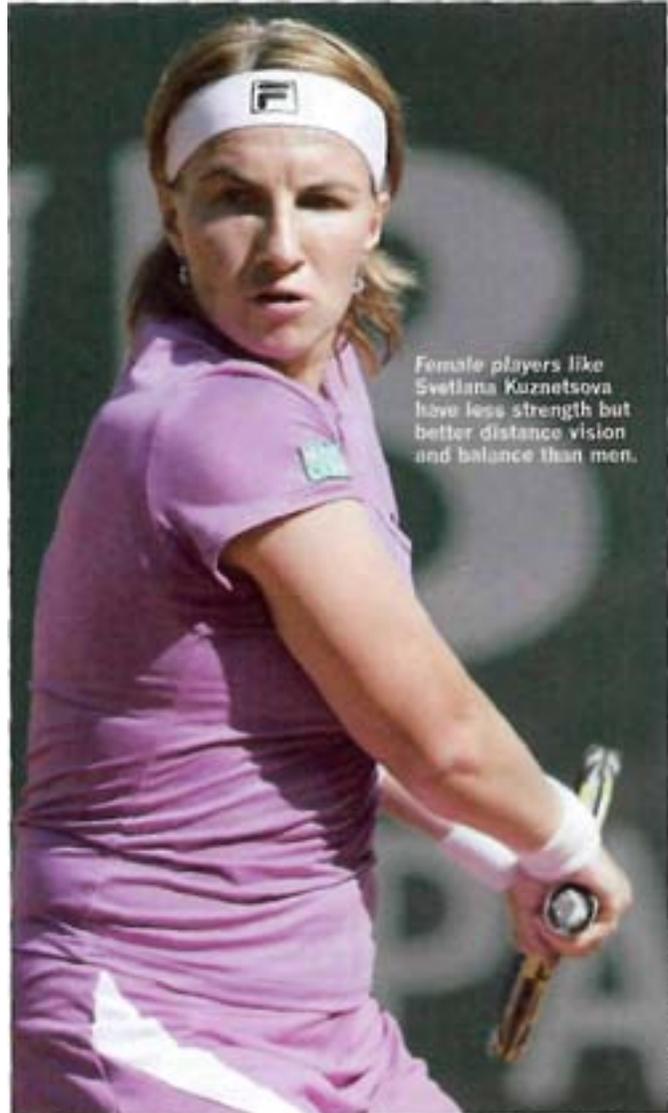
It's been over 30 years since that infamous match between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King - you may remember it well or you may not have even been born! At the time, the women's game came a distant second to all men's events and men were widely believed to be far superior athletes. However, in front of 30,000 spectators, Billie Jean King proved *to be too fast, too strong and too smart* for her male counterpart (although he was 26 years her senior), defeating him 6-4, 6-4, 6-3.

Since this match took place in 1973, the women's game has moved ahead in leaps and bounds, with women now receiving equal publicity, recognition of their skills and more recently, equal prize money at all four Grand Slam tournaments. Despite this increase in appreciation for women's tennis, the concept of another Battle of the Sexes has not been re-visited. We recently saw the mixed-court match between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal where one end of the court was clay and the other grass. A similar exhibition-style Battle of the Sexes match between players from the men's and women's tours would no doubt generate similar interest.

It would be interesting to see whether the increased speed of the game that has resulted from advances in equipment technology and training methods has widened the gap between men and women or whether the genders are closer than ever. When you see the likes of Serena Williams or Amelie Mauresmo in action with rippling muscles and so much power being generated, it would be easy to think a repeat of the Riggs-King match may be a likely outcome. However, males are in fact built with numerous physical and physiological advantages over women that all begin during adolescence.

Before the adolescent growth spurt, there would be an even playing field between boys and girls - possibly girls having the edge over boys at a given age since they develop earlier. However after the growth spurt, things start to tip in the man's favor. The 10-15% greater overall size and 50% greater muscle mass result in men being about 30% stronger than women. This obviously enables men to develop more power in all strokes and move around the court faster. Along with the greater size among men comes a larger heart and lungs, thereby increasing the amount of oxygenated blood that can be pumped around the body *to reduce fatigue*. Men also have less body fat than women which lowers the "dead weight" carried around the court and assists in hot weather. Tennis in hot weather further advantages men since they are able to sweat more to cool their body, preventing fatigue and heat illness.

Women have a couple of advantages, however they all seem to come with a catch. Women have better distance vision and depth perception but only during night - men are better during daylight. Furthermore, women have better balance due to a lower centre of gravity, however this means it is also more difficult to start a movement. Therefore, it appears men have a



Female players like Svetlana Kuznetsova have less strength but better distance vision and balance than men.

few physical and physiological characteristics that may make a Battle of the Sexes an uneven playing field.

To even the playing field, the solution may in fact be to change the playing field (as in the case of the Federer-Nadal match). Maybe a Battle of the Sexes could involve the lines of the court being moved inwards by a metre or two on the woman's end, maybe the man could have only one serve or maybe he had to use a wooden racquet? Whilst all of these possibilities may be designed to compensate for the hard facts that men are in general, physiologically superior to women, I very much doubt that any woman would psychologically merit any of these "weaknesses".

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