

# ▶ PORTFOLIO GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY



The Original 9 hold a dollar representing new contracts in 1970. Only Nancy Richey is facing photographer Bela Ugrin, who actually took the famous money shot.

inal 9's plans to gather in person this year were dashed. But they will still be celebrated across the world for the leap they took that helped make it possible for the tennis players on Forbes' 2020 best-paid women athletes list to earn a combined \$130.4 million this past year. It's not just a story of social advancement, but also of tremendous business success.

Here is their story, told in their own words and the words of others who were with them.

## THE OPEN ERA

**Beginning in 1968, pros and amateurs were allowed to play the same tournaments, and prize money, formerly paid under the table, became an official part of the game.**

■ **DONALD DELL, tennis organizer and agent:** It was very little prize money, first year or two, and the women were even worse because they were getting much less than the men. It was like one-tenth.

■ **JULIE HELDMAN, Original 9 member and daughter of organizer Gladys Heldman:** Systemic misogyny began to take over and by 1970, which was only two years into Open tennis, there were virtually no tournaments for women who wanted to make money.

■ **BILLIE JEAN KING, Original 9 member:** Larry [King, her former husband] says, "If you go pro, the men will get rid of you." And I said, "No they won't, they're my friends." He goes, "Billie, I am telling you the men will think you don't deserve it. And the old boy network will prevail because they own everything. They run everything." And he was right. And I was totally wrong.

■ **JANE "PEACHES" BARTKOWICZ, Original 9 member (as told to WTAtennis.com):** The cost of traveling to events was a real issue. I remember going to Europe, winning the first six tournaments I played — and actually losing money.

■ **JULIE HELDMAN:** By the time it came to August 1970 and the U.S. Open, there had been weeks where there were no tournaments to play, and everybody was very worried and upset. Billie Jean and Rosie [Casals] were trying to get a boycott going to stop the women from playing in Los Angeles where this terrifically famous promoter [Jack Kramer] decided they would only have enough prize money for the men. ... It was symbolic that one of the oldest tournaments around turned on us, and one of the guys who could have helped, turned on us: the Pacific Southwest and Jack Kramer.

■ **VALERIE ZIEGENFUSS, Original 9 member:** That was my backyard in Southern California. I loved that tournament. I upset Billie Jean in 1964. I had done well in the Pacific Southwest, but, you know, I didn't want to support that event anymore.

■ **JANE BROWN GRIMES, longtime tennis executive:** The real risk was going up against the establishment, the USTA, Tennis Australia, the Lawn Tennis Association and most of all the ITF. It meant that they risked not playing in the Grand Slams, which was the only place they were showcased and could get on court in front of a big crowd.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

# The Original

Undervalued and underpaid, nine daring tennis players turned pro 50 years ago, changing the course of women in sports forever.

BY BRET MCCORMICK

In the annual list of top-paid female athletes in the world, women's tennis players have dominated the rankings since 2010. Eighty-four percent of the spots on the Forbes-produced list during the past decade have gone to 22 women's tennis stars, and the top earner each year was a tennis player. Only one other ball sport had an athlete make the list in that span, American soccer player Alex Morgan.

Today's top-paid female athletes can thank the Original 9, a pioneering group of nine tennis players who made history 50 years ago this month: Billie Jean King plus Peaches Bartkowicz, Rosie Casals, Judy Dalton, Julie Heldman, Kristy Pigeon, Kerry Melville Reid, Nancy Richey and Valerie Ziegenfuss along

with 10th contributor Gladys Heldman, their shrewd and savvy organizer.

Some were rebels and feminists. All were driven by an oppressive, male-dominated tennis establishment to take a potentially career-ending chance by turning pro on Sept. 23, 1970, in Houston. They signed Heldman's symbolic \$1 contracts, a move that established the first women's professional tennis tournament. Within three years, that initial event had morphed into the Women's Tennis Association, the most successful women's sports organization in history. The Houston group's risk has helped inspire countless women to take a chance, to stand up for themselves, in the five decades since.

Because of the global pandemic, the Orig-

## CASH ADVANCE: WOMEN'S TENNIS PIONEERS

### JANE "PEACHES" BARTKOWICZ

■ **AGE:** 71  
■ **HOMETOWN:** Hamtramck, Michigan  
■ **BIO:** Bartkowicz was a dominant



juniors player but her pro career was short; she retired at age 21 a year after the Original 9 tournament in Houston, in part because of her aversion to the promotional work required to help launch the fledg-

### ROSIE CASALS

■ **AGE:** 71  
■ **HOMETOWN:** San Francisco  
■ **BIO:** Inducted into the International



Tennis Hall of Fame in 1996, the self-declared "rebel" won seven majors doubles titles alongside her close friend, King. Casals won 112 pro doubles championships overall, second all-time only to

### JUDY DALTON

■ **AGE:** 82  
■ **HOMETOWN:** Melbourne, Australia  
■ **BIO:** Dalton was the oldest member



of the Original 9 and a highly successful doubles player. She won doubles titles in all four Grand Slams and even after retirement continued to promote women's tennis as president of the Australian Fed

### JULIE HELDMAN

■ **AGE:** 74  
■ **HOMETOWN:** Berkeley, California  
■ **BIO:** Gladys Heldman's daughter, she was a talented pro player, reaching a No. 5 ranking twice. Heldman was a late addition to the momentous Virginia Slims of Houston tournament after realizing she didn't want to miss out on contributing



to sports history, despite an elbow injury. Heldman later became a lawyer and author, writing a book about her life, her mother and her Original 9 experience.

### BILLIE JEAN KING

■ **AGE:** 76  
■ **HOMETOWN:** Long Beach, California  
■ **BIO:** Famous for her on-court suc-



cess — she won 39 singles and doubles major titles, including a record 20 Wimbledon titles, and became the first woman athlete to earn \$100,000 in a season — and promotion of the sport and social justice cause, King helped found the WTA and World Team Tennis, is an International Tennis Hall of Fame inductee and a Presidential Medal of Honor recipient.

### KERRY MELVILLE REID

■ **AGE:** 73  
■ **HOMETOWN:** Mosman, Australia  
■ **BIO:** Reid won 26 titles, including the 1977 Australian Open singles crown and the 1968 Wimbledon and 1978 Australian Open doubles titles, during a successful pro tennis career in which she was a top-10 regular.



Queen Elizabeth II made Reid a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1979.

### NANCY RICHEY

■ **AGE:** 78  
■ **HOMETOWN:** San Angelo, Texas  
■ **BIO:** An International Tennis Hall of



Fame inductee, Richey reached No. 2 in the world in 1969 and won 69 singles titles in her two-decade career. She won Australian Open and French Open singles championships and four majors doubles

### VALERIE ZIEGENFUSS

■ **AGE:** 71  
■ **HOMETOWN:** San Diego  
■ **BIO:** Ziegenfuss won six titles as a



doubles player, as well as a bronze medal in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City with doubles partner, and fellow Original 9 member, Jane "Peaches" Bartkowicz. Ziegenfuss still lives in her

## A DOLLAR STILL MAKES A DIFFERENCE

**WOMEN'S PROFESSION-AL tennis as we know it today began when the Original 9 players signed \$1 contracts with Gladys Heldman in September 1970 to found a new circuit. In honor of the Original 9's 50th anniversary, WTA Charities continues to carry out the women's legacy by making a difference and giving back to communities around the world through values of progress and empowerment.**

Though the pandemic has ruled out an in-person celebration of the nine women this year, the WTA will launch a special 2020 celebration of the group through several initiatives, including a special acknowledgment during the U.S. Open women's semifinals on Sept. 10, a televised 11-part series with broadcast partner Tennis Channel beginning on Sept. 13, and a variety of dedicated stories found on WTAtennis.com and the WTA's social channels via #Original9.

The celebration will also spotlight a virtual celebrity reunion event with the Original 9 on Sept. 23 in honor of its "A Dollar Makes A Difference" fundraising campaign with the Billie Jean King Leadership Initiative. — **B.M.**

ly energetic, very accomplished as a promoter, had the biggest Rolodex in tennis, focused on her magazine, and had this steel backbone and was able to move mountains. But at the same time, part of that complex character was, that she could in a number of emotional situations, come to a crashing halt. She had two very different sides ... [she] smoked two to three packs a day, she also drank two double vodkas before lunch and two double scotches before dinner. It was a different time.

■ **PEARCE:** I was very disappointed to call Gladys

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

The rest of the time they were window-dressing.

■ **NANCY RICHEY, Original 9 member (as told to WTAtennis.com):** We were so discriminated against — I was at the point where I didn't care if I never played another Grand Slam. I felt we were kind of going down a dead end anyway.

### GLADYS HELDMAN

**The influential and connected publisher of World Tennis Magazine, who passed away in 2003, took on the issue of discrimination against women's tennis players beginning in 1970.**

■ **PAUL PEARCE, former executive director of the Houston Tennis Association:** I was sitting in my office one day, phone rang, and it was Gladys Heldman. She asked "Paul, do you think you can raise \$5,000 for a women's tennis tournament?" The question really hit me hard, to be quite frank, because the answer, I felt, was probably no. I told her, though, I was really excited. This is my job in Houston to promote tennis and what better way to do it than this? I said, "Gladys, I don't know if I can, but I'll sure try."

■ **JULIE HELDMAN:** [Gladys] was brilliant, high-

Bela Ugrin/Courtesy Houston Public Library

Getty Images (9)



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

back one morning to let her know I was only able to raise \$2,000. She said, “Well, I’ve got an idea. I’m going to a dinner party this weekend and Joe Cullman is going to be there, he’s the chairman of the board of Philip Morris.” She said, “Joe’s really active in tennis, and I’m going to talk to him and see if we can get some advertising dollars out of him.” She met with him apparently that weekend and convinced him to get involved and of course he made up the rest of the prize money. Instead of getting \$3,000 out of him, I think she got 5. That was compared to the \$1,000 Jack Kramer was offering the women in California.

### FIRST STEPS

**At the 1970 U.S. Open, an agreement to boycott the next tournament, the Pacific Southwest, and hold a separate women’s professional tournament in Houston was made. The blowback from the establishment was immediate.**

■ **JUDY DALTON, Original 9 member:** There were a lot of people that said, “Oh no we’re not going to take any chance.” [World No. 1] Margaret Court, she and Virginia Wade were playing the Dewars tournament in England and were getting paid a lot of money, so they weren’t prepared to take the chance.

■ **JULIE HELDMAN:** The night before the women were supposed to leave for Houston, I was at home and picked up the phone and it was Val Ziegenfuss who said, “I was just told by Stan Malless [head of the USTA sanctions committee] that if I played in Houston I would be suspended.” My mother was on her way, in an airplane, so I told her to “hold on when she gets here, she’ll fix it.” Then others began to call. [Malless] was phoning everybody, threatening everybody.

■ **PEARCE:** [The Houston Racquet Club was] applying for a sanction from the USLTA and we sent in our application and check, and apparently at the USLTA they were having fits and starts when they saw our application and found out what was happening. All hell must have broken loose. They were losing their grip on the women.

■ **KERRY MELVILLE REID, Original 9 member (as told to WTAtennis.com):** I think my parents were a little concerned about the risk we were taking, but I felt we had a strong leader in Billie Jean. I think that’s why a lot of us felt we had good legs to stand on — she was a top player, and she was powerful.

■ **CASALS:** There was really very little to look forward to if we didn’t take these risks. We didn’t see anything changing with the existing men’s and women’s tour, so this was really the obvious move that we felt was good for us, but also the future of women’s tennis.



Billie Jean King helped build the foundation for women’s sports today.

but I never felt, at least personally, that we were advocated to smoke.

■ **KRISTY PIGEON, Original 9 member:** Both entities, meaning us and Philip Morris, were presenting a strong, aggressive, successful woman that was going to speak her own mind and do what she wanted to do, and that was a first for the time.

### NEXT STEPS

**A critical meeting at Gladys Heldman’s home in Houston determined what would come after the original tournament.**

■ **DALTON:** When we decided to do the tournament in Houston, in order for us to do it we had to, in theory, become professionals. If the Houston one was a success, Philip Morris said they would give money for the next year for tournaments, so we had to A), vote on who was going to run the thing, and then Gladys said we had to sign something to say we had a contract with her, and she just said, “Oh, let’s just do it for a dollar.” We all signed the dollars. I’m the only one that’s still got the dollar bill.

■ **KING:** We just were desperate. ... During the tournament I was calling Larry who was back in California. I said, “If this works, great. But then what? We have no tour.” Gladys was great, I wanted her, we wanted her, but she kept saying no. I said to Larry, “Can you come out here and offer something?” We know Gladys well, she would go crazy if she thought somebody else was going to do it. We knew we had to entice her. So Larry came out and offered to run the tour. We had no money. [During the meeting at Gladys’ house] Julie [Heldman] gets off the sofa, runs into her mother in the kitchen or wherever she was and says “Mom, mom” and she runs into the room and says “You can’t have Larry do it, he doesn’t know what he’s doing!” And Larry and I look at each other across the room and go “Yay!” We voted for Larry or Gladys and everybody voted for Gladys. So, we signed our \$1 contract with her.

■ **PIGEON:** Gladys had the ability to pull it together. A brilliant person that was very capable of thinking outside of the box. As much as I liked Larry, it was a no-brainer to side with Gladys.

■ **KING:** [I told them] if you expect applause or to make a lot of money, then it’s not going to work. You’ve got to do this because you really want to do it for the future generations, and everyone said, “Great, let’s go.”

### THE MARKETING CONNECTION

**Gladys Heldman’s friendship with Philip Morris Chairman Joseph Cullman led to a perfectly timed sponsorship by the company’s new niche cigarette brand, Virginia Slims.**

■ **GRIMES:** It was really one of those lucky situations where three pieces came together and all three were critical. Without Gladys, it wouldn’t have happened. Obviously without the players it wouldn’t have happened. But they did need the money, they did need the backing. And Philip Morris was a great sponsor. [Later] they really put up a lot of money for PR, promotion, staffing, they sort of created a model for what you can do as a sports sponsor.

■ **ELLEN MERLO, former coordinator of public relations for Virginia Slims Tour:** [Cullman] was a brilliant businessman. He was the warmest, most optimistic-going person you could ever meet. He was just a superior human being. Very philanthropic and committed to inclusion.

■ **GRIMES:** In fairness to Jack [Kramer], he really felt he couldn’t sell the women so why would he pay the women? He wasn’t very subtle about it. It’s interesting that Joe Cullman, who was chairman of Philip Morris and a tremendous businessman, felt the reverse, that women’s tennis was a good product and something that he was willing to put his company’s money behind and promote.

■ **MERLO:** [Virginia Slims] was new, it was a fledgling product. The slogan was “You’ve come a long way, baby.” Today I think it would be frowned upon if someone tried to associate it with the feminist movement, but it definitely positioned itself that way.

■ **CASALS:** They spent a lot of money, and they taught us a lot of things, showed us how to sell ourselves, promote ourselves. They were a PR and advertising machine, and of course it was cigarettes,



Original 9 members gather with Billie Jean King and actress Emma Stone in 2017 for the premiere of “Battle of the Sexes,” about King’s 1973 match.

and this possibility of making all this money? They were just looking at the wrong photographer.

■ **DALTON:** I remember because I got to the final. I beat Billie Jean on the way. I won more money that week than I’d ever won, \$3,200-something.

■ **CASALS:** I ended up winning \$250 more than Stan Smith won at the

men’s tournament at the Pacific Southwest, so that was the exclamation mark on our tournament for the women, and to Jack Kramer.

### DOLLAR DAY

**The Original 9 sign \$1 contracts, leading to the famous photo at a press conference, and the first tournament, almost an afterthought, was played.**

■ **TERRY ST. JOHN, Houston Racquet Club:** I was told I was supposed to have a press conference, and I had never done a press conference before. We had a luncheon at noon, hors d’oeuvres and probably drinks too, and then Gladys was supposed to come up. She was meeting with the players down in the basement room and she was supposed to come up and make the announcement. They didn’t come up. I had to go down there twice to knock on the door.

■ **KING:** They’re all lined up for the photo, I’m around the corner talking to the president of the USTA [Alastair Martin]. I had asked him a couple of times, “Would you do a women’s tour? Because we’re losing out.” And he said no. I went to the phone because I thought I should be courteous to him and said “We’re going to sign \$1 contracts with Gladys.” He said don’t do it. I said “Well, you’ve given us no choice. Will you do it? Will you do a tour? I promise we won’t sign the contract.” He said, “No, we’re not going to start a tour and you’ll be suspended when you do.” I ran around the side and everybody was in line and either Nancy or Valerie had the \$1 bill and they handed it to me and here’s where you’re going to stand. I put my hand up immediately and they went click, click, so at least it was recorded for history.

■ **PEARCE:** I had a photographer there, a freelance guy that I’d used. The girls were actually looking at him and his photo went nowhere. And the AP photographer gets a shot of them from the side. You kind of look at that picture and you wonder, ‘What are they looking at?’ Are they looking at the future,

### RECOGNIZING AN OPPORTUNITY

**The tournament’s success gave Gladys Heldman evidence to show Philip Morris that sponsoring a tour would be a worthy investment.**

■ **PIGEON:** Gladys got to work. Together we wrote a letter to Joe Cullman asking if he would be interested in sponsoring [a tour]. I can only remember how we signed off on the letter: “Joe, show us some dough please.” She had an interesting way of dealing with people and being persuasive.

■ **DALTON:** It took all of October, all November and even up to December but I think there were five tournaments that were organized. Once Gladys decided to start all the tournaments, that’s basically when all the shit hit the fan. Kerry and I were suspended [by Tennis Australia], we couldn’t play any tournaments in Australia, we couldn’t wear the Volleys shoes we had, I couldn’t choose my Slazenger racket.

■ **MERLO:** I don’t know how many other sponsors would have taken a chance on women’s sports. It’s not that Virginia Slims was so smart to figure it out, it really was a personal friendship that led Joe when Gladys came to him to say, “I’ll give you \$5,000.” It wasn’t a huge investment, and it was meant to be a one-time thing, but it got so much positive press at the time. It made Time magazine; it was all over the place. So, when Gladys came back to Joe and said “We’ve got something here, will you sponsor a circuit if I can get promoters to host individual women’s tennis events?” and Joe said yes and then went to the brand manager and told him

“I just committed Virginia Slims to do this” and the brand manager was like, “You what?”

### CHANGING THE FUTURE

**Women’s tennis success over the next 50 years can be directly traced back to the Original 9 and the Virginia Slims of Houston tournament.**

■ **MICKY LAWLER, president of the WTA:** The global nature of the WTA has only increased and of course prize money is at \$180 million now. It’s a major, major tour. Could they have dreamt back then that we were going to be here today, with finals that offer \$14 million in prize money and just the entire business of women’s tennis with 704 million television viewers all over the world?

■ **RAY BENTON, longtime pro tennis promoter:** What other sport in the world is as prominent as women’s tennis? I would say women’s basketball and women’s golf have been inspired by women’s tennis, but I think women’s tennis has the most economic impact and the biggest celebrities, and Billie Jean’s impact on making that happen, history will prove that will be more impactful than what she did as a tennis player.

■ **KING:** I’m the one who gets the attention. And I always tell them, you know, there’s nine of us and we did it like a team and we really worked hard.

■ **BARTKOWICZ:** We were most concerned with the situation in tennis, obviously, but at the same time we felt change had to happen in other areas of society, too.

■ **PEACHY KELLMEYER, longtime WTA executive:** I think what those nine women did was they inspired others and I was one of them. I was at this rural college in Florida and giving young women the opportunity to get an education. If they had the guts to do what they did, then why couldn’t I do something about this and not just sit back? So, I had a lawyer who was quite a good tennis player and he offered to take it on [what became one of the first Title IX cases] pro bono and got it done.

■ **JULIE HELDMAN:** I’m completely proud. I believe that modern women’s tennis players have stood on our shoulders. We were brave because we were truly threatened. That bravery, I’m really proud of.

■ **MARTINA NAVRATILOVA, Hall of Fame tennis player:** For anybody to do that is particularly risky, but for women particularly, when things don’t go well, they pay a heavier price usually than men. At every level it was just such a huge move, so I’ll keep thanking them for the rest of my life.

■ **KING:** We were very ahead of our time in the way that we thought about everything and how we thought about equality. People don’t realize what that moment meant to them, never mind us. ✕

