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## Emma Stone serves up Billie Jean King

The infamous 1973 tennis challenge match that inspired “The Battle of the Sexes” between Billie Jean King (Emma Stone) and Bobby Riggs (Steve Carell) is an upbeat, triumph-of-the-underdog sports movie, and it is a lesson in taking a stand.

Riggs isn't the villain here — that role is played by Jack Kramer (Bill Pullman), the tennis promoter and head of the National Lawn Tennis Association, who sought to diminish, disparage and thwart women's tennis at every turn.

“Bobby is just a clown,” explains King.

It's gentlemen who truly disrespect women, like Kramer, who are most dangerous.

The movie begins with the women members of the NLTA surprised and horrified when it is announced that the prize money for the women's matches will be only \$1,500, while the prizes on the men's circuit will be \$12,000. The top women players resolved to form a league of their own.

It would be no easy road. There are obstacles galore. For one, they have no money, at least until they are rescued by the legendary Philip Morris sponsorship.

The Virginia Slims Tour is the perfect vehicle for a cigarette company looking to liberate women from taboos on puffing in public and to link smoking to other feminist freedoms of the 1970s.

Meanwhile, back at the country club, Riggs, a hustling has-been, is experiencing a few trials of his own. Once a Wimbledon winner, Riggs, now 55 and out to pasture, is reduced to playing for pittances on the senior circuit (for purses



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smaller than the women's tour) and winning outrageous bets he makes with other men at his club.

Married to a woman who is essentially his patron (Elisabeth Shue) and who forbids him from gambling, he is adrift.

Riggs has a work ethic, and he is a fierce competitor. He may be a compulsive gambler, but the gambling is the closest thing he has to

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a job — and the hucksterism is its marketing arm.

We can't help but wink at Riggs' Trumpian logic when he pronounces to the sad sacks in his Gambler's Anonymous meeting: “You aren't here because you are gamblers, you are here because you are terrible gamblers. You just need a thing, a hustle, an edge — you have to get better at

what you do.”

The opportunistic showman in Riggs smells money to be made from the spectacle of a feminist-vs.-chauvinist battle of the sexes — a spectacle that could put an end to women's tennis if gone awry.

King believes the best way to deal with Riggs is to ignore him. But the top-seeded Margaret Court (Jessica McNamee) bites the bait and loses, psyched out by Riggs' buffoonery and taunts.

Like a peace-loving sheriff at high noon, King is now obligated to holster up, pin on her star and put an end to the shenanigans.

Emma Stone delivers exactly the combination of focused competence and earnest wholesomeness that we experience from the real Billie Jean King, even today.

King's extramarital affair with hairdresser Marilyn Barnett (Andrea Riseborough) is treated in the film as a lesbian awakening. Yet it's creepy to watch this waif-like gremlin insinuate herself into King's life, because we know that Barnett will force King's outing through a palimony claim, foreclosing innumerable opportunities and sponsorships for King.

Sarah Silverman as the women's tour promoter, Gladys Heldman, the founder of Tennis World magazine, provides acid and clarity in presenting and resolving the many challenges faced by the women's tour.

It's refreshing to watch the women of this spirited movie, led by King, demand better treatment.

Sure, there were risks and sacrifices.

But whaddaya know, it worked.