

IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

Equity in Women's Sports with Billie Jean King and Clara Wu Tsai

In this episode of Ideas at Ford, Charles Blow speaks with sports icon and champion of equality Billie Jean King and Owner of the NY Liberty, Brooklyn Nets, and Barclays Center Clara Wu Tsai on the surge in popularity in women's sports, why conversations about equity and pay still need more attention, and how both athletes and fans can work to ensure an equitable future for women's sports.

Transcript begins.

ANNOUNCER: Please welcome Darren Walker.

[applause]

DARREN WALKER: Good afternoon. I am delighted that you are all here. You're all here not because you want to hear from me, but because we have a new iteration on a longstanding program at the Ford Foundation, "Ideas at Ford." And one of the reasons we created this program a decade ago was because we believe that we need ideas. We need fresh, innovative thinking. We need people who are prepared to engage in deep, honest, candid conversations about the most pressing and important issues of our day. And as we reflected on ten years, we thought it was time to refresh. And how could we refresh more than by finding a host, a host who is a most compelling public intellectual. A person who, of course, you know Charles Blow as the award-winning columnist, the author, the public intellectual who has challenged us to think not only about race and sexual identity, but inequality and issues of justice, not just in the U.S., but globally, worldwide. And so Charles, with the Ford Foundation, has designed the next iteration of "Ideas at Ford." And, as we contemplated the design of a program over the next two years, the idea of women in sports emerged as a priority. And, because there are two women in sports whose names I need not tell you, but I will. Billie Jean King and Clara Wu Tsai, who are both sheroes of mine, and both in their own right.

[applause]

DARREN WALKER: Billie, as the iconic trailblazer who transformed women's tennis. Clara Wu Tsai, who is the owner of the women's team, the men's team in Brooklyn, the Barclays Center—we love it when women own big projects and big buildings!

[applause]

DARREN WALKER: And so I am delighted, delighted, to introduce Charles Blow, your host for the evening. Charles Blow, join us.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: Welcome to “Ideas at Ford with Charles Blow.” That’s me! I’m Charles Blow. We have an amazing series of talks that we’ll be bringing to you this season. And it starts tonight with a very pressing issue that has kind of consumed the culture, which is equity in women’s sports. Billie Jean King, she’s a sports icon, a champion of equality. She was named one of the 100 most important Americans of the 20th century by *Life* magazine and is the first female athlete to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She’s also the founder of the Billie Jean King Foundation, Women’s Tennis Association, and Women’s Sports Foundation. And finally, she is part of the ownership group of the Los Angeles Dodgers and Angel City FC, and a member of the Advisory Board of the Professional Women’s Hockey League. Please welcome Billie Jean King!

[applause]

BILLIE JEAN KING: Hi. How are you? Great to see you. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

CHARLES BLOW: And my next guest is the governor and owner of the New York Liberty, owner of the Brooklyn Nets, a vice chair of BSE Global, and founder of the Joe and Clara Tsai Foundation. Please welcome Clara Wu Tsai.

[applause]

CLARA WU TSAI: Thank you!

CHARLES BLOW: So let’s jump right in. I’m going to have this question for both of you to answer. I want to get a big picture of how you framed the issue of equity for women in sports. Both the advances that women have made, but also the challenges that still exist for women.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I hope you’ve been to a Liberty game.

[applause]

BILLIE JEAN KING: Yeah! Good! Well, women’s sports are a microcosm of society, they tell us what’s going on with women all over the world. Really? We make a lot less. This year, though, I think we went over \$1 billion. Okay, the men: 83 billion. This is just North America. NCAA is just now starting to get very commercial on it. They were at, I think, 1.3 billion. These are all B’s now. If you’re, if you’re an M, you know the millionaires, that doesn’t work anymore. But it just shows

you what women's sports is telling the world. "We're trying to level the playing field." That's what we're trying to do. Everything we do, and make life not better just for us, but for the future generations. And we mean, we don't mean athletes, we mean women, women of color, women living with disabilities, and we don't have equality yet. Women don't. And it keeps varying. It's going to be 100 years, 300 years. COVID put us back another hundred years. So I don't know what it is. But all I know is I'll be long gone, but I'm going to give it every breath of my being now to help us move forward in that direction of equality.

[applause]

CLARA WU TSAI: Okay. Well, first I want to say it's a pleasure to be here. It is my honor to be here with you, Charles, and my really good friend Darren, and Billie Jean King. I don't know if you know this, but in 2023, the top ten highest-grossing tennis players in the world, five of them are females. And that would not have happened without Billie Jean.

[applause]

CLARA WU TSAI: And I guess I wanted to set that context because I think a lot about, you know, my position and my role as an owner of a WNBA team in a huge market like New York City, and I think, how can I use my power and my agency in the way that Billie has, but Billie is an athlete. It's incredible what she's accomplished, you know, on the field, but also what, you know, what she's done afterward. So she's incredibly inspiring. And I'm just so grateful to Billie.

BILLIE JEAN KING: We need businesswomen!

CLARA WU TSAI: Yeah. Okay.

BILLIE JEAN KING: That's you! If we don't got you, we don't make it!

CLARA WU TSAI: You're a pretty good business person too!

[applause]

BILLIE JEAN KING: I like it.

CLARA WU TSAI: You're really innovative. I get a lot of great ideas from you!

[applause]

BILLIE JEAN KING: How do I be sweet here? I always want each generation, no matter what you're in, what your career is, or whatever, not just to think about yourself, but to think about the groundwork you are laying for the next generations. And it's really, I mean, that's my whole life, really. When I was 12 years old, I had this epiphany—I played tennis one year, somebody introduced me to tennis and I'd never heard of it. Basketball was my first sport. Track and field, I

loved all the team sports. So Susan Williams in fifth grade said, "Do you want to play tennis?" And I looked at her, and I go, "What's tennis?" Says, "You're kidding me." I said, "No. What do you do?" She says, "You get to run, jump, and hit a ball." "Oh, okay." So we go out to her country club and of course, my dad's a firefighter. I'm like, "This isn't happening. I'm not going to. I'm not going to be a tennis player." So we also played on a softball team. And she told the coach, Val Halloran, "Hey, I took Billie out to play tennis." She says, "Oh, we have free instruction here with Clyde Walker every Tuesday." Now we're talking. And I go home and I go, "Mom, Dad, I need a racket. I want to play." It was really fun because I figured out at shortstop, I probably touched the ball six times in a game. I got to bat every ninth time in a game, and I could hit 100 tennis balls in less than five minutes. I'm going, "I love this!" And I also was at the Los Angeles Tennis Club at 12. And I looked around and everybody wore white clothes, played with white balls, and everybody who played was white. And I go, "Where's everybody else?" And so I made a promise to myself that day that I would fight for equality the rest of my life. And that's every time I have to make a decision, I go back to that moment as a child at 12 years old. Why am I in this game of life? Why am I here? I want to champion equality. I want everyone, everyone. I just go back to that moment when I get maybe a little discouraged or whatever. So I think it's really important. You decide what makes you tick. Everyone has to decide what makes you tick.

CLARA WU TSAI: What's really interesting is you can fight for equality but also have a good business.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Oh, they go hand in hand.

CLARA WU TSAI: Yeah, well, especially now.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Now, yes!

CLARA WU TSAI: I think you've written before, a lot of women like to do things with purpose, right? You know, there's the numbers behind a business, but I think in this case, we're finally at a situation where women's sports is truly a good business as well as something that you know, that you can do because it is also part of your values system ...

BILLIE JEAN KING: Yes, it is.

CLARA WU TSAI: Where you want to see society going ...

CHARLES BLOW: I want to stay on this issue of the business because it's a fascinating idea, and what I want you to help me to understand is the chicken and egg quality to this. On the one side, they say this is kind of a market demand issue, that there's not enough demand for women's sports, and therefore they don't get paid as much.

CLARA WU TSAI: Right.

CHARLES BLOW: But, there's also, as you have pointed out before, only 5% of all sports coverage is of women's sports. So how can there be demand if you never talk about the people who are playing the sport? So how do we detangle those two things when we talk about building the business of women in sports?

CLARA WU TSAI: Well, it's investment. So, if you believe in the potential of, in our case, in the potential of the WNBA, then, you know, you're going to invest in it. I think the most important thing for this sport was not just to make sure we had a great product on the floor, you know, that you were really building a team that could compete, but you also had to make sure that they're visible. I don't think owners should be like the face of a team, but in this case of the WNBA, where there is so little visibility and attention, I try to use my platform in this way to really shine a light to the women athletes and the quality of play. You know, in fact, I actually executive-produced a movie a couple of years ago called *Unfinished Business*. It's a documentary that basically covers the last 25 years of the WNBA. You know, it came upon a milestone, the WNBA has now been around for 28 years, but a few years ago it was the 25th anniversary, and this documentary traced the last 25 years through the lens of the New York Liberty, because the New York Liberty was one of the original eight franchises. In that same documentary, it followed the Liberty team in the first year that we moved them back from Westchester to Barclays Center. But the reason that I made that movie was because so little media coverage and so little storytelling has been devoted to women's sports, even though there is an appetite for it. That's one of the reasons I did it. But if you guys want to see it, it is on Amazon Prime and it's called *Unfinished Business*.

[applause]

BILLIE JEAN KING: It's very good, I've seen it.

[applause]

BILLIE JEAN KING: The NBA is, you know, 78 years old. We're really young, especially women's professional sports. And if you've heard of Title IX, well that's the reason we can have a WNBA. That's the reason we can have a talent pool of people that we can, like, you could draft. Before 1972, there's no way. Men always had scholarships. ~~Women~~ always had sports. Even in high school. Like, I went to Long Beach Poly. I don't know if anybody—that's in California. We had the most NFL players and the most MLB players ever. My younger brother, Randy Moffitt. Moffitt's our birth name, he played 12 years of professional baseball. And by the way, my parents didn't care for any good, and I think that's why we've done so well. We drove them crazy, because he and I are very intense. I want to be number one, he wants to be in Major League Baseball. And my parents are going, "Ugh." So they worked three jobs, with my dad took another job, my mom worked, and they never asked us if we won when we came home. How often do your parents ask, "Did you win?" Our parents did not. Why do Randy and I like pressure so much? Because he didn't put any pressure on us. We love pressure. Randy was a relief pitcher. What is that? That's—when you walk out there—that's just total pressure. Sports is pressure. I loved it. I want the ball, I want the ball. I don't want them to double-fault. I

want the ball. It's so much more exciting. So anyway, I think that's why he and I made it, because of the way my parents were. And we had access. And access is huge. That's Title IX provided access, but we have access at the public park. And everybody here, you know people who don't have the proper access. Not only did we have access to a ball field and a court, I got free coaching. Someone has to organize you—if you show up at a basketball court, if you really want to get into it and play, or a tennis court, someone has to help, help the child get organized. Or an adult, if you're an adult that wants to go start something. So it's so important. But what does it take? It takes money.

CHARLES BLOW: Billie Jean's talked about: you have to invest in the athletes. Well, you have been able to take care of the women. You have invested in the New York Liberty. You bought the team. You poured resources into them, you built a locker room, you built, you know, hired front office staff and performance staff. You ended up getting fined \$500,000. The biggest fine ever in the history of the WNBA. Let me tell you why this is. Because she dared to charter flights for her players. Because WNBA players were expected to fly commercial. Layovers, canceled flights. And so when you didn't do that, they fined you for it. Just so happens that that same year you made it to the playoffs, and also the next year. But why did that investment for you and how has that impacted the rest of the league?

CLARA WU TSAI: Well, I always knew that the WNBA could be a really good business, and especially the New York Liberty. Well, first of all, when you look at the fundamentals of the league itself and the team in New York, right, the very best basketball players in the world play in the WNBA. And this New York Tri-state area is actually the biggest media market in the world. And New York is a basketball-crazy town. So, you know, those, those alone, you know, made us think, okay, you know, there was a real opportunity here. In addition to that, as I mentioned, the New York Liberty was one of the original eight franchises, and it had a storied history. Actually, the Liberty made it to the finals four times in the first six years of the league's inception. And some of the best, most famous WNBA players actually played for the New York Liberty. So that's one thing I learned that I didn't know when we bought the team, how important it is. You know, the Brooklyn Nets, we're like 11 years into our Brooklyn identity. You know, the Knicks have been here for 75 years. I mean, I know in 20 years the Nets is going to really occupy a really important space in New York basketball. But building from that versus building, as from one of the original eight teams is a much different proposition. And I also love the women. And so, you know, if you love basketball and you really believe in these women, you're going to invest. So. Right. So one of the first things we did was move them from Westchester County Center, which is where they were playing. It was a gym that's fit like 2,000 people, and we moved them back to where their fan base is, funny enough. I mean, but, you know, in New York City, and we moved them to Barclays Center, which is the home of the Brooklyn Nets. We built a state-of-the-art locker room, and we invested in performance. And so it was a very slow process. But, you know, people think that we started to win over one year, but it was like a five-year process. And then also during that period through the draft and through free agency and through trades, we started to assemble this team of stars. And, you know, now some of them are, they should be kind of household names, I think to New Yorkers. But you know, Sabrina Ionescu, Courtney Vandersloot, who used to play on the Sky, Jonquel Jones, who was

an MVP, right. And then, of course, getting Breanna Stewart was really the feather in the crown. And I went to Turkey, to Istanbul, to actually go and recruit her. And it's so funny because never before had an owner, you know, come to talk to her.

BILLIE JEAN KING: You're kidding.

CLARA WU TSAI: And for these women, you have to invest in them, make sure they know that you think they're worthy. You know, that you really value them, and that you want to treat them like professionals. And so that's what we do basically, is set up the conditions for them to be great. Because if you talk to these players, what comes out of their mouth is, "I want to be great." And so they want it for themselves. But these women are, you know, they're so multi. They do everything, right. And so, when they want to be great, you know, you need to set up those conditions. And then, as I said before, I want to make sure that they're visible. I want to give them visibility. And then I also want to make sure that we set up conditions so that we can bring fans in. We invested in our in-arena entertainment so that our games become a destination. You know, you're, it's great play. But you've also got this mascot called Ellie who...

BILLIE JEAN KING: Love Ellie.

CLARA WU TSAI: And then you also have our Timeless Torches, which is our ageless dance team.

[Billie Jean reacts excitedly]

CLARA WU TSAI: And so we have to set them up to succeed, you know, by creating an experience for fans. And then, the other thing you want to do is make sure that your games are easy for people to watch. And so one of the things we did over the last off-season was sign an over-the-air deal with Fox 5 and My9, local over-the-air stations. So that means everybody in this Tri-state area, that 7.5 million households can watch Liberty games for free. You don't have to have cable. You know, you don't have a network. So ...

[applause]

CLARA WU TSAI: So, um, that's what we do to support our players. We invest in them and just think about how do we give them visibility and how do we bring the fans.

BILLIE JEAN KING: The ice hockey, the new league we started. We put everything free on YouTube. Everything. It's not free though.

CLARA WU TSAI: No, it's not.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Because someone has to produce. When someone says it's free. It's free for you, but it's not free. Okay? I just want everyone to know that.

CLARA WU TSAI: We are getting a fee. A small rights fee. It's going to go up.

BILLIE JEAN KING: At the beginning.

CLARA WU TSAI: It is not free. We told Fox 5 and My9 that these games are worth something.

BILLIE JEAN KING: They are.

CLARA WU TSAI: Yeah. And you know again chicken, the egg. So then you do this and when the viewership goes up you know it's good for them. And then the rights fees will continue.

BILLIE JEAN KING: You just have to get started though. It's hard. It's really hard.

CHARLES BLOW: Billie Jean, I want to talk to you about the importance of rivalries in kind of kickstarting the popularity of women in sports. You know, I remember being a kid and, you know, watching basketball, and it was all Magic Johnson and Larry Bird, and that was what drew everyone to the sport.

BILLIE JEAN KING: You know, the NBA was going bankrupt back before that. Okay. Because I was friends with Jerry, Dr. Buss, he owned the Lakers.

CHARLES BLOW: Right.

BILLIE JEAN KING: And he came to us, and he said, that's when they had the championships delayed, delayed on television. And so, what happened, that college game, Michigan State and Indiana State had the largest audience ever in college basketball. I think it could still be. I'm not sure. Yes, apparently it is.

CLARA WU TSAI: Right. I looked it up.

BILLIE JEAN KING: It's my understanding. Yes, but the difference was David Stern. The three of them together is what made magic. It was the business guy and the two great players and now Magic likes to be called Earvin—is also a business person. Like, unbelievable. He's very into business, which, you should see his documentary. It's fantastic. What he did and continues to do for community as well. But those three, and I remember sitting with David Stern at the U.S. Open, tennis, because he played tennis. He loved tennis. And I sat next to him in the president's box one day. And I said, "David, I have a favor to ask." I was like this.

[Billie acts out being nervous]

BILLIE JEAN KING: I was like, should I, shouldn't I? He says, "Yes." And I go, "You have to promise me one thing, just one thing." He says, "What?" And I said "You cannot let the WNBA fail. You cannot." And he says, "I promise." I don't know if you know that story, but he promised me.

CLARA WU TSAI: Right. And so...

BILLIE JEAN KING: And it is still going. It's going well.

CHARLES BLOW: So then how do we translate our present rivalry with the Caitlin Clarks and Angel Reeses? Also, this is the first time that women's March Madness outranked the men's in the finals. How do, how do you build on, and, yeah, we clap for that, how do we build on that momentum and build a thriving business, the way the NBA built a thriving business off the backs of these two people and their rivalry?

CLARA WU TSAI: So I would say that we are in a similar situation, and I think these rivalries that are starting early, we can say all these things about how the skill level and the talent is off the charts now. And, you know, players play with more fight and heart than ever before. But there is no doubt that the massive increase in viewership does have a lot to do with the personalities. I mean, we have a sensational rookie class, headlined by Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, and they're spicy, right? And people like spice. And there's no doubt that that rivalry, and by the way, there is an incredible pipeline of also high-star-power people coming up. And which is why I think this is sustainable. What we see is sustainable. But for sure it is that rivalry, those interesting matchups, you know, that really are driving people to watch. And the analogy is exactly Magic and Larry, because in 1979, Indiana State, Michigan State, they battled each other. It was, I did look it up. It still remains the most-watched collegiate, televised basketball game. And then Magic and Larry went to the NBA, and they played against each other in three championships.

BILLIE JEAN KING: It's perfect.

CLARA WU TSAI: Yeah, it's, and that really ushered in the, the, what I would say the golden age of fandom for the, for the NBA, And so I think we're poised to see exactly the same.

CHARLES BLOW: That analogy stretches off the court as well, because, you know, we also now see other issues being drawn into the sport of women's basketball, touching on the race of the players and whether or not they're being treated equitably or whether or not they're getting the same access to brand deals or whatever, whether or not a straight presenting person is treated differently as someone who is queer. How is this? How does this play out for you across the culture, how this impacts and kind of dredges up some of the ugliness of our sports.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Things are better than they've ever been. I mean, I'm gay, so I can tell you how it happened with me. I was outed and I lost everything in 24 hours, lost millions of dollars. I was finally near the end of my career, 37 or 8, and my publicist and my lawyer did not want me to say I was, or I was at least trying to figure myself out, my sexual identity. And I argued with them for 48 hours, and I said, "No, I must tell the truth." And they said, "No, you can't. You deny because you're going to lose all your money. You'll be nothing and you'll never have anything after this." And I said, "I don't care." My parents taught me about telling the truth. The reason I

didn't talk about it before, because sponsors told me if I discuss what I was feeling, that we wouldn't have a tour. So that made that real easy. That decision was easy. It wasn't just about me. I was going to retire. So I was having all these great contracts. I was finally going to make some money. I lost it all and had to start my life over. But it was one of my darkest moments. But it was one of my most honest moments, and you certainly find out who your real friends are, that is for sure. And that's worth a lot. Now, I mean, Jason Collins came out, the president calls him, says, "Fantastic." He gets a job with the NBA, which was great. So anyway, the men have been my allies through my life, and without male allies, I wouldn't be here. So it's true. Everybody counts. That's what I'm trying to tell you for different reasons. Especially in the 60s, if guys weren't on your side, you had no chance. In 1972, pro tennis had just started really. We're in our second year with the US Open. I won the US Open, Ilie Năstase wins the U.S. Open. In the press conference, remember, we had no social media in those days. We had four channels. PBS and three, you know, ABC, NBC, CBS.

CHARLES BLOW: Absolutely.

BILLIE JEAN KING: So I'm sitting there with the media, all men. I don't think there was a woman writer yet. And something inside of me, I had had it. And then I said, "I haven't talked to the other women, but I'm going to go for it." We're not, we the women probably aren't going to come back next year if we don't get equal prize money. And then I thought, "Oh, I haven't talked to the women." I'm like, "Oh, what have I said? I'm really in trouble here. Yikes-a-doodle." And I'm like "Okay." I stayed with it though. I said the heck with it, I'm going for it. Ilie Năstase made 25,000. I made ten, and I've had it when we're making not even half, I'm like crazy. So I also was part owner of tournaments. Business. So what do I have to do? I've got to go get some money. Relationships are everything. So I went to people that I had relationships in business and said, "Would you make up the prize money next year to make it equal for the women?" And I'm praying like crazy, right? And I went to different ones. I said, "Maybe together you could do it so you wouldn't have to spend as much or want." Bristol-Myers came up to me and goes, "We want to do all of it." Yes, but I went to the women. I said, "I really think I put my foot in my mouth. I think I ruined it." And they said, "No, we'll go with you on that." So anyway, Billy Talbert, who was the tournament director, a former player, former hero, he had type 1 diabetes. I really learned a lot about that from him. He announced that in 1973, in July, we're going to have equal prize money. But that's how that worked. So when they tell you, oh, we've had 50 years of equal prize money, I want you to know the backstory. It gets back to business again, and relationships, and men have been great allies to me.

CHARLES BLOW: Clara, when do you think women's basketball could get to a point of equal pay?

CLARA WU TSAI: What we want is to close that gap and I think we can get there. Yeah, I believe in ten years I want, I want the New York Liberty to be the first women's sports franchise that's worth \$1 billion.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Yes!

[applause]

CLARA WU TSAI: So right now, the way men's salaries in the NBA are calculated, they get 50% of basketball-related income that comes into the NBA. For the WNBA, the women are getting about nine. Okay, so if you just kind of think that we can get in that range, I think we can definitely move the needle. And I think what I'd like to see and what I think is possible in my lifetime, is to increase the salary cap to be a larger percent of revenues, but also on an absolute level, you know, it needs to go up, and it needs to go up so that women don't have to do more jobs. They don't have to have a side job in the off-season, or they don't have to go overseas and play in Russia or China and, you know, risk being injured.

CHARLES BLOW: Or imprisoned.

BILLIE JEAN KING: Imprisoned.

CLARA WU TSAI: Or imprisoned, exactly. So what you want to do is get somewhere in between. I think what happens with the NBA is, I mean, now the media contracts are for so many games, 80 games, but 80 games is really hard on a man's body, on anybody's body. So, but it's just, no one's going to dial back from that, you know? But then you have load-management issues. They don't want to play all those games. The season is too long. So we don't want to get there. If you get paid that much, look, look what the toll that it takes on your life. Right. So I don't think of equal pay, but I think of a salary that makes sense and that allows them to make a good living.

BILLIE JEAN KING: What you're doing is amazing. I try to tell the players, you know what, athletes think everybody's there for them. I said, "No, we are there for them, to entertain them, to make them go home happy." Or maybe it's not so happy if they lose, but they're in it and they love it and they want to do it again. And maybe they want to go play, or I don't know. But the point is, I think the players are performers. Our job is to make the audience happy.

CHARLES BLOW: Give us a round of applause for our two amazing guests tonight. Thank you so much.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: And thank you all for coming.

End of transcript.