Renee in California, Richard in New York

Tennis doctor's dilemma

Dr Renee Richards has entered for the Dewar Cup tennis tournament in London next week. The chances of her playing are remote. First, she is on the list of "alternates" for the qualifying competition. Beyond that is an even bigger obstacle, the imposition by the Women's Tennis Association, of which she is a member, of a chromosome test for all players. Dr Richards, who was once Dr Richard Raskind, has said she will refuse to take such a test, for reasons made clear in the following article by GLADYS HELDMAN, reproduced from the October issue of the American magazine "World Tennis".

On July 11, 1976, Renee Richards, MD, of Newport Beach, California, won the La Jolla women's singles championship, defeating Robin Harris in the final, 6—1, 6—1. Within a week, Dr Richards was receiving some 20 phone calls a day from newspapers, television and radio stations, and magazines. To each inquiry, she replied: "No comment."

Dr Renee Richards of California was formerly Dr Richard Raskind of New York, a successful ophthalmologist and a well-known and popular eastern tennis star. As Dr Raskind, he had reached the final of the National junior veterans' clay courts in 1972. As Renee Richards, she had won the La Jolla women's singles and had applied for entry in the United States open women's championship.

I had known her years before as Richard Raskind. As a matter of fact, I had seen Richard defeat my husband in the 1961 United States National Indoors, 8—6, 2—6, 9—7.

Although I now thought of her as a woman, I stuttered when Dr Richards's receptionist asked who was calling. I identified myself and added, "He knows me . . . she knows me". The personal-pronoun problem remained, although that evening it seemed natural to say to my husband, "She remembers when you played him in the National Indoors".

When Renee got on the phone, I heard a very friendly and warm voice. I asked her if she wanted to talk first or if she would prefer direct questions. Renee said to ask away, which I promptly did.

When did you first decide you wanted to be a woman?

It was something I had always been waiting for. I had been living my life as a lie, and I overcompensated in athletics. Ultimately, I had the surgery in August, 1975, but I had been preparing physically with hormones for five years.

Weren't you married?

Yes, I married Barbara in 1969. She knew about my problems, but we were both hopeful that marriage would turn me around. It was a futile attempt. The divorce was friendly. We are still very close, and I try to see her and my child regularly.

I understand you entered the La Jolla tournament as Renee Clark. Are you married now?

No. That was a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. However, I should have known that anyone would recognize my wind-up and left-handed forehand. Originally, when I moved to Newport Beach in February, I had planned to take up the game right-handed. I joined John Wayne Tennis Club, but forgot my old resolutions and played as a lefty. The members were extremely nice and very encouraging. None of them were aware of my past.

Why did you move to California?

I wanted a life of anonymity. I had been a professor at Cornell Medical School, where I had a very large practice, and my friends and family were located in the East. However, I felt I couldn't live the life of a normal woman if people knew my background.

What made you decide to play La Jolla?

For the first five months I refused to enter tournaments. Finally, through the pressure of my new friends and my old competitive urge, I decided to play.

Did you send in your entry for the National Clay Courts?

No. I wrote for an entry blank, but they never sent one. However, I did apply to enter the United States Open at Forest Hills as an amateur. I wrote a personal note to the referee, Mike Blanchard. I said he undoubtedly had heard about what had happened and that I had no wish to create any difficulties, but I am now a woman under the law. My driver's licence, my passport, and my doctor can attest to this. I also told Mike I couldn't play men's tournaments any more. In my last sentence I wrote that I recalled him from junior days.

Did you apply to join the Women's Tennis Association?

I sent in my application mainly because of Forest Hills. I didn't know the workings of the new system, and I thought I had to be a member in order to compete. All I wanted was the chance to play the top women in the world. The WTA replied that I would be eligible to play in their fall circuit.

Do you want to play the Virginia Slims tournaments?

No. I am an ophthalmologist first and a tennis player second. I love competition, but I am not about to tour on Virginia Slims as a pro. Your husband and I are probably the last of the true amateur players.

If the US Open asks you to take a chromosome test, would you qualify as a woman?

Legally and medically I am a woman, but I might fail the lab tests for chromosomes. I have never had a chromosome test. However, millions of women have chromosome abnormalities. I know the Olympics use the chromosome test for screening, but there is a physical test that follows. Even if I drew a negative on the chromosome test, I would pass the pelvic and blood tests. One must base diagnosis of sex on the total clinical picture. In medicine, a laboratory test is a small part of a total diagnosis, and you go by a physical examination for the definitive answer. A chromosome test tells whether a person has a male chromatin pattern, a female pattern, or an unusual abnormal pattern. It doesn't say whether someone is a man or a woman.

In your opinion, why did the Olympics institute a chromosome test?

The object was to uncover female impersonators from countries trying to disguise a male athlete so that he could compete in a womens' event. It wasn't designed to uncover people with abnormal chromosome patterns who were legitimate males or females.

Do you feel you would have an unfair advantage over women in a tennis tournament?

I think I have an advantage over many women because I am a good athlete and I am tall, but that's the same advantage Betty Stove has in tennis and Carol Mann in golf. Both of them are bigger and stronger than I. That's a physical advantage unrelated to sex because all three of us have the same degree of estrogen and the same lack of testosterone circulating in our blood. The advantage we have in being tall is neutralized by the agility and speed of smaller players, such as Billie Jean King and Evonne Goolagong.

Has your muscle configuration changed?

Definitely. My muscles are no longer the bulky, well-defined, testosteron-laden muscle mass. The biceps and triceps in my arms are no longer that of a man. I would have looked silly a few years ago in a sleeveless top; I don't any more. The subcutaneous fat has been redistributed to the areas where women have it and men don't.

Taking into account the normal decline in tennis ability you would have experienced with age, are you playing as well today as Dick Raskind would have played?

I think I am playing very well because I am playing every day and my timing is as good as ever, but I have to admit that when I say that to friends who knew Dick a few years ago, they reply, "Renee, you forget what a good player Dick was". It's frustrating to play against my present coach, Attillo Rosetti, a former Argentine Davis Cup player, and to be beaten, 6—0, 6—0, whenever he feels like it. I know damn well he could never have done that to Dick. I practise with Betty Ann Stewart, and we play close matches; she couldn't have done that well against Dick. The biggest differences are in the power of my serve and in my ability to produce sudden bursts of speed on the court.

What if another man who didn't have a high sex urge but had a strong tennis drive did what you did just so that he could play the Virginia Slims circuit?

That's a very sticky issue. One would have to individualize, as in my case. The physical suffering, the pain, and the anguish of the change are so great that not even a deranged man would willingly undergo it for such a reason.

Did you think your entry would be accepted by the United States Open?

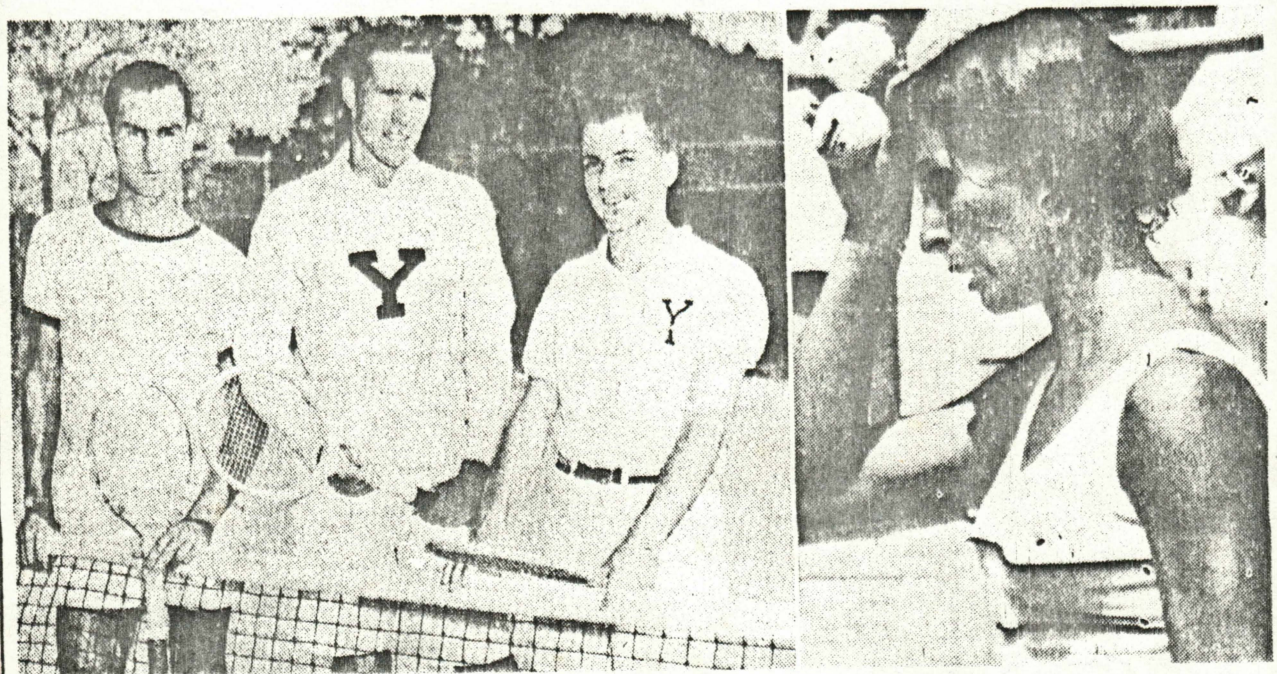
Some of my New York friends said Forest Hills would never accept the entry. My California friends said that they couldn't refuse me. New York sees me as Dick, but California only knows me as Renee. I was hopeful that Forest Hills would let me play. . . Maybe they were worrying about any nut who comes along. More likely, they were considering that my appearance would tarnish the event. I don't want that to happen any more than they do.

Do you think you would win the United States Open?

I am not absolutely sure. I am not undefeated as a woman. I have played in two mixed doubles where I lost to another woman. In one of them I teamed with Scott Carnahan, who played No 1 for the University of California at Irvine. We were beaten by Gail Hansen Glascow and Dennis Prout, 6—4, in the third. I also played in another local mixed doubles, and there I was beaten by Diane Desfor.

What has happened to you since you played La Jolla?

I have been swamped with calls from the members of the press, but I haven't talked to anyone. I didn't want a stranger intruding in my private life. You are the only one I would talk to.



Richard Raskind (extreme left) at Yale, Renee Richards (extreme right) at La Jolla.